

The primitive Islamic *Shahâdah*

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with excerpts from *Le messie et son prophète* (in English)

Islamic scholars know that the Islamic profession of faith as we know it was not substantiated before the 8th century. The version that preceded it did not include the second segment of the current wording: “Muhammad is God’s messenger” (*Muḥammad rasûl^u Llah*). This second segment of the *Shahâdah*^h appears at best to the very end of the 7th century, but as a third segment added to what was clearly the profession of primitive faith: “There is no god but God, no associate to Him” (*Lâ ilah^a illâ Llah, lâ šarik^a lahu*). Clearly, that is, because we know it by epigraphy, which is further witnessed on Islamic coins – including in North Africa, as shown by a study by Prof. Michael L. Bates (1995) recently [posted on the web](#).

The question that then arises is: what was such a primitive *Šahâdah* contending against with each of its two segments beginning with a negation? Negation of what?

In proclaiming God, is it not enough to say that He is simple and one in Himself – and Creator? If we say He is *unique*, what is facing Him as other Gods do not exist? Precisely, He really suffers no comparison with the gods-idols that are always associated with a complex and multifaceted history fantasied by men. To say that God is *unique* is useless and even harmful: it would actually downgrade Him to somehow be comparable to idols competing for supremacy, whereas they, as the Bible already makes very clear, are in fact nothing. Or, the context of the affirmation of the divine uniqueness is quite different from that of ancient paganisms. This is made even more apparent when we consider the second negation: “There is to Him no associate.” Who is accused of *associating* with God?

Clearly the pagan cults could not “associate with God” since they were not aware of a Creator God to “associate” with. In contrast, this criticism is found well before the rise of Islam in the polemic launched against the Christian faith, as evidenced by various writings of Rabbinic Judaism – and then in the Qur’an: Christians are accused of being “associators”, i.e. of associating God with what is not God, namely their Lord and the Holy Spirit. Could this betray a misunderstanding? Christians are obviously not tri-theists (they do not worship three gods). God for them is One indeed. What they fundamentally say is that there is a Life in God, and that this Life has three poles. This Life, the Creator has desired to share with the summit of His creatures, namely human beings. Wherefore the respective missions both of the Incarnate Word and the Spirit Who connects. Of himself, man cannot be in relationship with the Creator. This is precisely what has been caricatured in the imputation of tri-theism and the accusation of conceiving of God as one giving birth to a child, both found in the Qur’an.¹

In addition to these data, one must ask how the controversy of the primitive Islamic *šahâdah* could be intended against a paganism that would have had to mysteriously survive in Mecca for six centuries (far from any Jewish or Christian influence), while the city is supposed to have been a very important commercial center (i.e. a passageway). Thus both

¹ See for example Sura 2:116: “And they said: *God has given Himself a son!* Glory to Him! No!”; 4:171b: “He is too glorious to have a child”; etc.

Notice that the Qur’an systematically uses the term *walad* (*born-child*) instead of *ibn* (*son* in a broader sense) used by Christians. See also 4:171b and 5:116 regarding the explicit accusation of tri-theism.

documentary analysis and logic seem to point us in another direction: that of a contention directed at Christians.

There remains a minor issue: was the primitive *šahâda*^h biliteral (comprising two segments) or trilateral – but starting in the same way: “I bear witness that there is no god but God, nor any associate to Him, *and that ...* (see below)”? However, we should not exclude that these two formulas might have co-existed.

Here are some excerpts translated from [*Le messie et son prophète*](#) (tome I, 2005, p. 484-490) putting forward the main body of data pertaining to these very questions. The paragraph numbers have been retained and the words in Arabic or Greek were transliterated.

• 2.6.1.2 *The Anti-Trinitarian Šahâda^h from the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*

In rabbinic literature as in the *Memar Marqab* of Samaria-based Samaritans, we find these polemical formulas; the target clearly is the Christian faith accused of “associating” (x, y, z) to the *one God*. Such criticism is intended to present Christianity as a new paganism making up Christ into a “second God,” and likewise the Holy Spirit into a “third God” – these two additional “Gods” being accordingly *associated* to God.

This distinctive anti-Trinitarian theme is also reflected in the *pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, which are the most important text we have from the Judeo-Gnostic movement in the 2nd century. One of the ways in which the Christian faith is caricatured in the form of “associationism” deserves mention: in s.16.15 to 16, the text has Jesus say, according to Peter, that there is no God but the Creator and that “son of God” is but a simple title. However, the process consisting in portraying Jesus as denying the Trinitarian Christian faith is identically found, four centuries later, in the Qur’an itself (s.4:171 – see 2.6.2.3). What is even more surprising is to find in the *Homilies* a formula that happens to exactly be the first segment of the current Muslim *šahâda*^h and which, just as the latter, is preceded by the introduction: “I bear witness ² that...

God is one and there is no god but He.” ³

This formula reads virtually unchanged in the Qur’an, for instance in s.6:102 following a verse directed against the Christian faith, which is hardly surprising:

“There is no god but He (*lâ ilâh^a illâ Huw^a*).”

[...]

² The formula: “I bear witness that...” will consist in the introduction of the Muslim *šahâda*^h.

Crone and Cook explain: “It is very common in pre-Islamic Samaritan texts. As is the case with Islam, it is considered a testimony.”

A later contamination of these many “Samaritan” texts by Muslim influence is very unlikely (Patricia CRONE & Michael COOK, [*Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World*](#), 1977, p. 170-171 / refers to BEN-HAYYIM, *The Literary and Oral Tradition of Hebrew and Aramaic amongst the Samaritans*, vol. III, 2, Jerusalem, 1967).

Let us point out that the “Samaritan literature” qualification is too broad and should therefore be specified.

³ “Eis estin o Theos kai plên autou ouk estin Theos”, *Hom. pseudoclem.*, 16, 7.9: This *šahâda*^h is put in Peter’s mouth; Christian apologists accusing Gnosticism to have as their father Simon the Magician, the latter retaliated (as seen here) by presenting Peter as denying the apostolic faith and assigning to Simon Pauline positions.

• 2.6.1.3 *The Christian Response: “God is One and Christ is God”*

This sheds light on that to which the complement provided by the Syrian Christians to the affirmation of the unity of God (*kai o Khristos* – and Christ also [is God]) stood against: the ancient and simple formula *Eis Theos* engraved on the lintels had grown too ambiguous. Indeed it became necessary to set the expression of faith in the *One God* apart from the anti-Christian polemical affirmation of His *uniqueness* (*There is no god but God*). With the addition of “*and Christ also*” or “*Christ is God*”, all ambiguity disappeared – such concern is still present today.⁴

Such carvings, Father Jullien had seen in Syria several years before Peterson; he left the following descriptions:

“Between Aleppo, Antioch, and Hamah... ruins rise without number... The traveler surprised finds himself in the midst of a destroyed civilization... Most of these houses bear the monogram of Christ engraved on the façade right above the main entrance... Below the sacred monogram, one can often read a pious motto sometimes drawn from Holy Books and always in Greek. The owner of a house in El-Barah wrote on his door: “*Christ always triumphs*” (*Khristos aei nika*). Another in Roueilha carved on the lintel of his door a profession of faith aimed at the pagans and heretics of the time: “*There is only one God and Christ is God*” (*Eis Theos kai Khristos Theos*).”⁵

The latter symmetrically built formula – **God is One and Christ is God** – is quite remarkable. In its conciseness and structure, it seems to respond to a dual formula, something like the two segments of the Islamic *šahâda*^h. Of the latter, we have thus far only come across the first segment; the second mentions Muḥammad. But, originally, was that what this second segment mentioned?

[...]

If there ever was an early Muslim *šahâda*^h, it is not the version we have today, but the one which has been highlighted quite recently, especially through the work of Solange Ory focusing on the first unofficial Arab epigraphs⁶ (we will later take look at another source); here is the most likely formulation:

“There is no divinity but God, **no associate to Him**” (*Lâ ilah^a illâ Llah, lâ šarîk^a lahu*).

[...]

• 2.6.2.1 *Muḥammad’s Prophetism Missing (Including His Name)*

[In the testimonies of the primitive Islamic *šahâda*^h the] second segment is unusual: there the only concern is of an anti-Trinitarian nature. Indeed Solange Ory has showed that before 735, the “popular” epigraphs (epitaph, graffito, or other types of inscriptions) never actually bear the *šahâdah* with the following formula: *Muḥammad is the Messenger [rasûl] of God* (not even with an equivalent formula). There at best are a few allusions to the name Muḥammad, including sometimes under the guise of the *rasûl* title. As for what is found to actually pertain to the *šahâda*^h, it is directed against the “idolaters”. In official inscriptions, the current *šahâda*^h is, as we will see, scarcely found sooner, i.e. not before the late 7th century.

[...]

⁴ Middle Eastern Christians always add to the formula recited with the sign of the Cross the mention *One God*, by which they respond to Muslim accusations of associating with God a creature other than God.

⁵ JULLIEN M., *Sinai et Syrie*, Lille, DDB, 1893, p. 215-216.

⁶ This study, too little known, focuses on graffiti: ORY Solange, *Aspects religieux des textes épigraphiques du début de l’Islam* in *REMMM*, Aix-en-Provence, n° 58, Edisud, 1990 /4, p. 32.

• 2.6.2.2 *Two Occurrences of a Triliteral Islamic Šahâda^h*

What interests us here is the fact that the reception of Muḥammad's prophetic status was not immediately passed down into popular milieus. Logically speaking, it would have at least required the time span of one full generation, or 40 years⁷. This precisely amounts to the time difference obtaining between the first occurrences found to mention "*Muḥammad rasûl*" on coins used by opponents to the Caliph and the estimate given by Solange Ory. In official circles also, the specific time at which 'Abd al-Malik finally seizes upon the reference to Muḥammad's prophetic status seems to be remote from the time this idea eventually materializes on official inscriptions found outside Damascus. In any event, the time factor plays a definite role in how this claim of prophetism was eventually received: in its new formulation, the *šahâda^h* does not appear to have diffused without resistance.

Indeed the new formulation (bearing: *Muḥammad is God's Messenger*) was supposed to replace the old one (bearing: *No associate to God*). Some seem to have accepted it grudgingly—this is the first explanation that comes to mind when one considers a triliteral *šahâda^h* combining its primitive *šahâda^h* formula to the formulation we have today:

There is no god but God, He, the One (*Lâ ilah^a illâ Llah waḥd-hu*)
[and] there is no associate to Him (*lâ šarîk^a la-hu*)
[and] Muḥammad is God's Messenger (*Muḥammad rasûl^u Llah*)

Such triliteral *šahâda^h* is precisely authenticated by two official entries:

- it is listed twice and exclusively in that form around the perimeter of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which dates it from around 695 (the inscriptions of this perimeter will be studied in 3.1.4.1.1), and
- the one that was recently discovered in Bet Shean, of even greater interest because it is of a much later period: it consists in a mosaic made of two parts⁸, explicitly dated from years 738-739, and built under the responsibility of the local Muslim authorities.

In other words, by the first part of the 8th century, the current *šahâda^h* has not yet imposed itself, not even on roundly official inscriptions.

Let us now analyze the triliteral aspect. The formula: "*Muḥammad is God's messenger*" appears in the third position, standing as an addition to the first two members of the profession of faith. That is, this triliteral *šahâda^h* reflects the gradual transition from the former *šahâda^h* (consisting of two segments) to the new one (consisting of two segments as well).

[...]

• 2.6.2.3 *"Believe in God and in His Messiah". A Judeo-Nazarene Šahâda^h?*

[...]

Furthermore, we can consider that the transition is easier from a triliteral "profession of faith" formulated as:

"There is no divinity but God; there is no associate to Him; 'Yšw is God's Messiah",
to the one, also triliteral, from Beth Shean:

"There is no divinity but God...; there is no associate to Him; Muḥammad is God's messenger",

⁷ A similar phenomenon of delayed reception will occur at each subsequent development of the story of the "Revelation", and likewise with any alteration of the Qur'an (see 3.2.2.3).

⁸ This mosaic came to light from excavations at Beit Shean in Israel in 1996-1997. Cf. KHAMIS Elias, *Two wall mosaic inscriptions from the Umayyad market place in Bet Shean/ Baysân*, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Univ. of London, Cambridge Univ. Press, vol. 64 /2, 2001, p. 159-163.

than one obtained from a formulation consisting of the first two segments only. However, we would need to know what the local Muslim authorities had in mind in 738-739: were they offering any resistance at all to the novelties from Damascus, or did they perhaps remember some trilateral formula, or perhaps both together?

This point will have to be specifically addressed in the future, but the hypothesis of a trilateral Judeo-Nazarene “profession of faith” merits consideration. As for the Arabs swayed by Judeo-Nazarenism, it is very likely that the two-segment formula always was the only one: “*There is no divinity but God; there is no associate to Him*”. This was so firstly because such a formulaic statement stood in sharp opposition to the Christian faith of Arabs needing strong indoctrination. But also because the Arabs were not themselves directly concerned about quarrels with Rabbanite Jews. Moreover, binary language fits both the Arab turn of phrase and mind.

[...]

• 2.6.2.4 *The New Šahâda^h and Reformulation of the Dialectic*

The Muslim *šahâda^h* was accompanied by a reformulation of the dialectic. It is first of all noteworthy that the assertion about Muḥammad’s prophetic status rendered the second segment still seen on the inscription from Bet Shean (“*no associate to Him*”) quite useless. Everything is said within just two sentences: “*There is no divinity but God, Muḥammad is God’s Messenger*”. That indeed encompasses it all, that is, both the opposition to the Christian faith and to the Rabbinites – the latter, if they can in fact accept the first segment of the profession, certainly do reject the idea of a prophet other than the one to precede the Messiah, let alone an Arabic prophet.

[...]

In conclusion [of section 2.6], it appears that the usual biography of Muḥammad deserves to be fully reconsidered, which will be carried out in Part 3. In the words of Alfred Louis de Prémare :

“They [the Muslim biographers], to a large extent, built this biography in order to explain various passages of the Qur’an. It is difficult to take it in consideration today.”⁹

End of extracts

⁹ PRÉMARE A.-L. de, *Les fondations de l’Islam. Entre écriture et histoire*, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 10.