

Heirs of Roman Persecution

Studies on a Christian and Para-Christian
Discourse in Late Antiquity

Edited by
Éric Fournier and Wendy Mayer

First published in 2020

ISBN: 978-0-8153-7512-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-08819-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-351-24069-7 (ebk)

Chapter 15

Persecution and apostasy: Christian identity during the crises of the seventh century

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DOI: 10.4324/9781351240697-15

Funder: Australian Lutheran College



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Introduction

The study of persecution in Late Antiquity is a subject fraught with difficulties. Our sources make it difficult to sort reality from rhetoric and reflect a worldview in which politics and religion were inseparably intertwined. Thus, it can be hard to determine whether “persecution,” if it occurred at all, was political or religious, or if such a distinction should even be made. This problem is evident in the study of persecution in seventh-century Byzantium. During this period the Christian Roman Empire was brought to its knees by two non-Christian forces: the Zoroastrian Sassanid Persian Empire and the newly ascendant Muslim Arabs. In both instances, evidence suggests that many communities who opposed invading forces faced torture or death for the sake of their religion, turning the century into what, at first glance, appears to be a period of significant persecution of Christians. However, when one scratches below the surface, the question becomes increasingly complicated. The treatment of religious minorities by the Persians and the Arabs varied significantly in different regions. Some communities saw high levels of persecution by a given regime while others continued their lives with little observable difference in their day-to-day lives.² Moreover, the Heraclian dynasty itself actively persecuted religious dissenters within the Roman Empire, including Jews as well as Christians who opposed imperial religious policy. Thus, while incidents of persecution likely occurred, it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of a wholesale persecution of – or by – Christians without the addition of modifiers or caveats.

This chapter asks whether the seventh century can be considered an age of persecution and discusses the role of persecution narratives in promoting community identity. To this end, we will consider the treatment of religious minorities by the three major forces operating in the Eastern Mediterranean in the seventh century: the Sassanid Persian Empire, the early Muslim Arab invaders, and the Heraclian dynasty of the Roman Empire, as shown through literary and archaeological evidence.

The rhetorical construction of persecution narratives by select Christian authors is of interest. How such narratives served to bolster Roman and Christian identity in a period of crisis and how the rhetoric of persecution influences our perception

of religious oppression in the seventh century requires special consideration. For this reason, we employ sociologist Margaret Somers's theories of narrativity and emplotment to a selection of representative seventh-century documents.³ This chapter concludes that persecution inflicted by Persians, Muslims, and Romans can only be understood in the context of war and as a means to prevent and punish challenges, both real and imaginary, to a so-called persecutor's hegemony. All three polities considered here were concerned with the smooth administration of communities under their control, not with the destruction of opposing religious groups.

Methodology

Themes

This chapter is divided into three major themes based on forces in the Eastern Mediterranean that have traditionally been considered persecutors. We begin with the Sassanid Persians, who conquered significant portions of Roman territory, including Jerusalem and the True Cross, in 614.⁴ The Persian invasions lasted from 602 until 628 when the emperor Heraclius secured victory and recovered Roman territory, along with the restoration of the True Cross.⁵

Second, we consider the persecution of religious minorities in the earliest decades of the Muslim invasions. Here we consider the incursions of Islamic forces through to the establishment of Arab hegemony over former Roman territories. The time covered during this period spans from the 640s until the construction of the Dome of the Rock in the 690s.

We will conclude by considering the persecution of religious minorities by the Heraclian dynasty itself. Here, we will focus primarily on the persecution of the Jews, initiated by the emperor Heraclius, and the treatment of Christian dissidents by the emperor Constans II, particularly Pope Martin II and Maximus the Confessor. This theme serves to demonstrate that Christians were not only persecuted but also served as persecutors, particularly at the imperial level.

Sources

This chapter examines sources spanning the chronological range of the seventh century. Witnesses to the Persian invasions include the *Life of Anastasius the Persian*, the *History of the Armenians* by pseudo-Sebeos, and the *Life of George of Choziba*.⁶ For the Arab invasions, we consider the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, the *Dialogue Between the Jews Papiscus and Philo with a Monk*, and the *Apocalypse* of pseudo-Methodius, composed at the end of the seventh century.⁷ Finally, our primary evidence for imperial persecution comes from a unique *adversus Judaeos* dialogue, the *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*, an account of the arrest and trial of Pope Martin I, and the record of Maximus the Confessor's first trial in Constantinople.⁸

Considering the polemical nature of our sources, some caveats are necessary. Each of the sources examined here are hostile toward the so-called persecutors

they address. Two exceptions include the *History of the Armenians*, which is written from an anti-Chalcedonian perspective and demonstrates an ambivalence toward the Persians, at times depicting them as liberators and at other times as persecutors, and the *Doctrina Jacobi*, a pro-imperial *adversus Judaeos* dialogue that records the empire's abuse of Jews in detail without apology. To contextualize the literary sources examined, we will also consider archaeological evidence.

Narrativity and social identity

In recent decades, sociologists have studied the role of narrativity in the formation of unique identities among heterogeneous social groups. Sociologist Margaret R. Somers has drawn attention to the fact that narrative, long considered the purview of historians, has traditionally been neglected in sociological research. However, as Somers observes, contemporary sociologists have recently begun to recognize the usefulness of narrativity as a category of inquiry. For Somers, not only is narrativity a worthy category of sociological inquiry, it is in fact the locus of identity formation. Individuals find meaning by locating themselves within social narratives that exist independent of themselves, and do so as a result of the inherent need to find one's unique identity. Fittingly, Somers uses the term "narrative identity" to describe the results of this social process.⁹

Expanding upon the theory of narrative, Somers identifies four dimensions of narrativity. They are ontological, public, conceptual, and metanarrativities.¹⁰ Of these four, ontological narrativity is most significant for our purposes. Ontological narratives provide the content of self-identity by making sense of the events within an individual's experience.¹¹ Individuals base their actions on their understanding of the ontological narratives as they have constructed them.

Somers's theory provides a useful apparatus with which we can study the literary strategies of identity formation employed in seventh-century apocalyptic discourse. Roman authors coped with the numerous crises of the Persian and Arab invasions by placing events into individual episodes, including in some cases discrete moments of sin, which in turn resulted in discrete events of divine wrath. In many ways, the narratives crafted by the authors under consideration can be considered ontological narratives. Authors were careful to define who the Romans were in relation to their neighbors and adversaries based on their understanding of divine causation in response to sin, and they thereby provided their audience with guidance on how to act.

Emplotment

Closely related to the category of narrativity is the concept of narrative emplotment. According to Somers, emplotment is the process by which meaning is provided within a given narrative. Emplotment is the function of narrativity that translates random events into episodes, independent of chronological considerations.¹² This is the process by which seemingly arbitrary events are given meaning and render the events comprehensible within a narrative.

For Somers, emplotment arises as a means of relieving tensions that result from the seeming randomness of an event. Thus, for Somers, emplotment is the mechanism by which otherwise unfamiliar events are rendered understandable by being placed within a comprehensible plot.¹³ It is a coping mechanism by which seemingly random events are set within a narrative context, and by which rationality is established.

Somers's theory of narrative emplotment is widely applicable in the study of late antique history. Thomas Sizgorich has successfully applied the concept to his study of early Islamic identity formation.¹⁴ Sizgorich's application has focused on late antique martyrologies and monastic hagiographies and their semiotic impact on early Islamic historiography. However, it is further applicable to the study of seventh-century persecution, and in particular the rhetorical construct of persecution as it relates to the formation of Christian identity. If we accept Somers's paradigm, the crises of the seventh century were incomprehensible within the standard late Roman narrative plot of imperial success and expansion as a demonstration of divine favor. To cope with instability, Roman authors emplotted themselves and their crises in an ontological narrative in which contemporary Christians were a persecuted people, not unlike the Christians of the pre-Constantinian era. The rhetorical construction of political reprisals against rebellion as persecution provided an example by which Christians could be inspired to remain steadfast in their convictions and resist pressure to convert.

Persecution under the Persians?

We begin with the Persian campaigns, which contemporary historians attributed to punishment for the overthrow of the emperor Maurice by his general Phocas in 602 CE.¹⁵ The disruption of the coup d'état was amplified when the Sassanid shah Chosroes II began a campaign against the Romans that lasted the better part of three decades.¹⁶ Heraclius, who overthrew Phocas in 610, spent much of his reign on a campaign against Persian forces. All told, the Sassanids captured significant portions of Roman territory, and inflicted a psychological blow by capturing Jerusalem and the True Cross in 614.¹⁷ Eventually, the Romans regained the upper hand, restoring their losses with a costly victory in 628.¹⁸

According to Clive Foss, the archaeological record shows that for some Roman communities, the Persian campaigns were devastating.¹⁹ Entire settlements in the Near East were reduced to rubble. The Christians of Jerusalem and Palestine suffered greatly, as evidence shows that the Persians seem to have restored leadership of the city to the Jews for a time, perhaps even allowing them to resume services at the temple mount, while the Christians of the city were slaughtered.²⁰ The Persian general Shahrbaraz was cruel in his campaigns in Egypt, where his armies looted monasteries and attacked large portions of the population.²¹ Andrea Gariboldi has shown, based on literary evidence and documentary papyri, that the Persian invaders were at times harsh toward the Coptic population, in some cases confiscating monastic property and using deceit to ambush and kill monks.²²

Many Romans saw the Persians as an instrument of divine wrath, as witnessed in apocalyptic discourse found in literature written in the aftermath. After the apostasy of the Cilician wrestler Epiphanius, the *Life of George of Choziba* recounts a speech in which the protagonist “laments the disasters which will befall the empire” as a result of “many Christians becoming magi and others seeking their help” (Ant. *Life of George* 18). For George’s hagiographer and disciple Antony, God was punishing the empire for its sins, especially Christians who had apostatized in response to Persian success.²³ Other sources depict examples of Christian persecution at the hands of the Persians. Perhaps the best example is the *Life of Anastasius the Persian*, a former Sassanid officer and magus who converted to Christianity and abandoned the army and his Zoroastrian religion to be baptized. Upon his capture, he was tortured in an attempt to force him to recant his Christian faith (*Life of Anast.* 57–75). After several opportunities to be released if he only renounced Christianity, he was martyred on the order of Chosroes II himself.

Relying on this evidence alone, one might conclude that the Persians maintained a policy of persecution against Christians, especially in war. Indeed, accounts such as these have led in part to what Richard Payne has referred to as “the myth of Zoroastrian intolerance” toward Christianity within Persian spheres of influence, based on isolated and exaggerated incidents of persecution, largely carried out by nonstate actors.²⁴ Such a position neglects the relative respect held toward the Church of the East by the Persian religious and political leadership, which “established legitimate positions for Christians” in the Persian court.²⁵ This “state of mixture,” as Payne calls it, did have its limits, especially when it came to questions of proselytization and apostasy. Zoroastrianism was still considered supreme – Christians could not evangelize, and apostasy from the “good religion” was considered to be a political and social evil.²⁶ It is in this atmosphere, along with the context of conflict and desertion, that the persecution and martyrdom of Anastasius must be understood. It was not Christianity per se, but Anastasius’s religious and political treason that led to his fate.

Even on campaign, the Persian treatment of Christians was not entirely persecutory. The same archaeological evidence that suggests widespread destruction in Palestine reveals that other areas thrived and even flourished under Persian control. New churches were built and appear to have even been financed by the Persian government.²⁷ The *Armenian History* attributed to Sebeos tells us that the anti-Chalcedonian population received special treatment and were heavily patronized by the Persian regime.²⁸ In Jerusalem, there is evidence of construction and restoration of churches under Persian control. Likewise, in Egypt, although the treatment of local Coptic populations was at times harsh, Persian policies appear to have eased over time.²⁹

Numismatic evidence reveals that Roman coinage, including gold solidi, were minted by the Persians with images of Justinian II, Tiberius, Maurice, Phocas, and Heraclius, with imperial mintmarks, though with imperfect dies and misspelled or with backward legends.³⁰ In some areas, Roman officials were permitted to retain their posts, and Roman administrative systems were maintained under Persian control.³¹ Taken as a whole, the Persians appear to have strived to maintain

continuity. Foss demonstrates that the Persians were intent on making administration as smooth and life as normal as possible for its conquered subjects.³² Patrick Sanger has shown, based on documentary papyri, that while the Persians did install governors and intermediaries, they permitted local Roman officials to remain in place, maintaining administrative continuity, including familiar forms of taxation.³³ Dramatic change or oppression would have risked rebellion, making it difficult to control distant territories.

Further, it is important to note that all the aforementioned examples of oppression were taken against populations who resisted Persian occupation. As Foss observes, the punishment of Jerusalem only occurred after a revolt of the Christian population, which resulted in riots.³⁴ Even Anastasius was only tried and tortured because he deserted the Persian army and rebelled, both of which were treasonous acts. His Christianity, while a point of contention in his trial, was secondary to his betrayal during a time of war. As Foss observes, it seems that the Persian military largely obeyed Chosroes II's command to Shahrbaraz depicted in pseudo-Sebeos, to "receive in a friendly way those who submit [...] but to put to the sword those who may offer resistance and make war."³⁵

I argue that Christian accounts of persecution by the Persians were not intended to reflect concrete numerical realities. Instead they served a higher purpose, namely, to promote the maintenance of Christian identity in the wake of defeat against a non-Christian adversary. Candid accounts of apostasy, as seen in the aforementioned *Life of George of Choziba*, suggest that some Christians, whether under threat of violence or of their own accord, abandoned their faith in favor of Zoroastrianism or at least embraced Zoroastrian rituals to the dismay of Christian purists. This may be the result of the perception that the Romans had lost divine favor, or simply pragmatic concerns. At any rate, the level of attrition among Christians alarmed contemporaries.

Using Somers's categories, Roman authors emplotted themselves and the military actions taken by the Persians against recalcitrant conquered subjects, into an ontological narrative of religious persecution. This served two major purposes: to provide meaning to the devastating military defeats faced by Romans and to encourage potential apostates from Christianity to remain loyal. For the author of the *Life of George of Choziba*, military conquest was framed as persecution and blamed upon apostates, serving as a dire warning to those tempted to waiver. Accounts of endurance, like that of Anastasius, encouraged potential apostates to remain loyal to the faith. Furthermore, by harkening back to the persecutions of ancient Christians, contemporary Roman Christians could find solidarity and consolation in their mutual endurance and eventual reward.

"Persecution" by the ascendant Muslims?

We now turn to one of the single most defining events of the seventh century: the Islamic conquests. As soon as Heraclius had achieved victory against the Persians he was forced to contend against a new foe united by the hitherto unknown religion of the prophet Muhammad. What began as small skirmishes ended in

devastating losses when the Muslims secured their first major victory at the Battle of Ajnadayn in 634.³⁶ The century closed with large portions of Roman territory securely in Muslim hands.³⁷

Our sources for the treatment of conquered populations in the earliest decades of the Islamic conquests are limited; however, some glimpses can be seen in the literary evidence. Many of our sources lament the widespread apostasy of Christians, a phenomenon observed under the Persian invasions that seems to have continued in force under the Arab conquests.³⁸ Some give accounts of severe persecution and martyrdom in different regions at the hand of Muslim armies. One contemporary *adversus Judaeos* dialogue, the *Dialogue Between the Jews Papius and Philo with a Monk*, is revealing.

The dialogue was composed in 650 in Syria by an unknown author with Roman loyalties after Islamic hegemony had been established in the region. Subtle hints throughout the text reveal the author's allegiance to the empire, and the author's commentary offers some clues about the treatment of Christians and Jews during the first decades of Islamic occupation. Although the author's perspective is bleak, his responses to his Jewish interlocutors betray a hope that his present circumstances will soon come to an end, and that the empire will recapture the territory and put an end to what the author considered to be a foreign occupation.³⁹

At one point in the dialogue, the discussion turns toward the ability of the characters' coreligionists to remain steadfast under the threat of persecution. The debate begins with questions about the legitimacy of icons in worship, but in the middle of his response, the protagonist steers the conversation toward a comparison of the plight of Jews and Christians under Islamic rule and their respective rates of apostasy. The monk addresses these concerns in the following passage:

While venerating the cross, I do not say, "Glory to you, O wood!" God forbid! Rather, I say, "Glory to you, O all powerful cross, you are a type of Christ." But you, while reverencing the calf say, "These gods are your gods, O Israel, who led you out of Egypt!" [cf. Ex. 32] I, although captured, beaten, tortured, and crushed exceedingly, did not deny my God; and if some Christians have denied him, still they are not as many as you, who deny God even though you are not killed due to lack of concern.

(*Dial. Pap. Phil. 75*)

This passage provides an interesting defense against the accusation of idolatry through the veneration of icons and the cross, a common trope in seventh-century *adversus Judaeos* literature. More important for our purposes, the monk counters Jewish objections by changing the subject to a discussion of apostasy, and a comparison of the faithfulness of the Jews and Christians under Muslim rule. The protagonist begins by providing a list of the hardships that he had personally endured. This list is likely serving as a stand-in for Christians more broadly as he claims to have been captured, imprisoned, and tortured at the hands of the occupying Arab forces, apparently to coerce him to renounce his faith. Despite enduring these hardships, the monk remained steadfast and he claims, moreover, that

some Christians had even been killed for not abandoning their faith and embracing Islam.

The monk candidly admits that not all Christians were able to endure that level of abuse, observing that “some Christians” had denied God rather than suffer mistreatment. Raising this subject is of no benefit to the monk’s position in the debate, unless Christian apostasy was an inescapable fact that the author thought required a defense. The author manages to turn weakness into an advantage by turning apostasy into a numbers game and comparing the “some” Christians with the “many more” Jews who denied God. Moreover, the monk asserts that Jews denied their faith willingly, without hardship and without the threat of death.

Even if we allow for polemical exaggeration, the text suggests that the Islamic invasions resulted in relatively high levels of attrition among both Jews and Christians. The author claims that Jews experienced a higher rate of apostasy than Christians, and with little to no coercion. It is impossible to ascertain the number of Jewish converts to Islam during this period, but the relatively light treatment of Jews, who were permitted to return to Jerusalem after the Islamic conquest, suggests that the author’s testimony has some truth. Further, the mixed nature of the early ‘*Umma*, and Islam’s focus on monotheism, lends credibility to the suggestion that many Jews willingly embraced Islam in some nascent form.

What concerns us here is the author’s testimony about Christian apostasy. The testimony provides evidence that Christians, particularly those loyal to the empire, offered enough resistance to Islamic rule to provoke a policy of persecution that, to some degree, was successful. The monk’s account tells us of three classes of persecuted Christians: those, like the monk himself, who resisted and survived; those who died as martyrs; and those who apostatized under pressure. It is worth noting that the author takes a surprisingly merciful view of this third class of persecuted Christians and offers some excuse for their apostasy, and stops short of condemning the apostate Christians or blaming them for the difficulties facing the empire.

It is worth considering this passage in the context of the threat posed to Christian identity by the specter of persecution and apostasy. The author goes to great lengths to establish the identity of the Christians as a persecuted people who, with a few exceptions, endure faithfully. Those among the Christian community who betrayed their faith only did so under extreme duress and were few. This testimony allows the author to both acknowledge and dismiss the significant threat of apostasy while maintaining Christian superiority despite dire circumstances.

Apocalyptic accounts also paint a grim picture. One example is a chilling *vaticinium ex eventu* found in the *Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon*. During a visit to Constantinople, the patriarch Thomas asks Theodore the meaning behind a dramatic miracle in which several processional crosses trembled. Theodore offered this reply:

[I]t signifies a taxing of our faith and apostasy, the invasion of many barbarous nations, the spilling of much blood, destruction and captivity on a global scale, the desolation of the holy churches, and the cessation of divine

worship, and the fall and collapse of the Empire, great poverty and difficult times for the state; and what is more, it foreshadows that the arrival of the Adversary is near.

(*Life of Theod.* 134)

Such dark speculation, including the “fall and collapse of the empire” is striking. It is worthwhile to pause for a moment to consider this passage’s temporal and literary context. There is little reason to doubt the 640 dating of the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, considering its detailed prediction of Heraclius’s death.⁴⁰ This date makes the *Life* contemporary with the Islamic conquests of the Levant. By this point, the effects of the Arab invasions were felt throughout the empire. According to the narrative, Theodore’s explanation takes place during the reign of Phocas, shortly after Theodore delivered a strong rebuke to the emperor. The placement of the passage, coupled with the historical dating of the *Life*, permits several interpretations about the events foretold in Theodore’s prophecy.

The prophecy, including the utter collapse of the empire, the desecration of churches, and mass apostasy, could be referring to the Persian and Avar invasions and their devastating effect on the region. However, since the *Life* was written well after the Roman defeat of these “barbarian nations,” it is unlikely that the author would include the collapse of the empire, which was averted, or the advent of the “Adversary” or antichrist, which did not come to pass, in a *vaticinium ex eventu*. The sins described are not associated with a specific emperor. Although Phocas and Heraclius each receive warnings throughout the *Life of Theodore*, no specific individual is blamed. Instead, the *Life* presents a domino effect, beginning with apostasy and concluding with the collapse of the empire.

I argue that the *Life of Theodore* is presenting a long view of history, which includes the trials of the Persian and Avar invasions, and incorporates the contemporary Arab conquests. The desecration of churches and cessation of services resembles the account given in the *Apocalypse* of pseudo-Methodius, which will be discussed momentarily, more than contemporary depictions of the Persian invasions. Thus, although the Arabs are not named directly, the author likely had the Islamic invasions in mind when composing this prophecy. Here, the advent of the Adversary could be an unfulfilled prophecy or perhaps could refer to the Islamic leadership.

The prominent place given to the theme of apostasy in the passage is in line with what we have seen so far and, I argue, provides insight into the reactions of many Christians in the face of defeat. The bloodshed described by Theodore coupled with the accounts given in the *Dialogue Between the Jews Papiscus and Philo with a Monk* suggest that the threat of physical harm may have contributed to higher than usual numbers of apostates as well.

In a similar fashion, the famous *Apocalypse* of pseudo-Methodius laments both widespread apostasy and persecution at the hands of Arabs and at the hands of the very apostates who had abandoned the church. The *Apocalypse*, attributed to the fourth-century martyr Methodius of Olympus, was composed in Syriac but was almost immediately translated into Greek.⁴¹ From Greek it was translated

into Latin in the early eighth century, and in the Latin it was swiftly disseminated throughout Europe. The text can be roughly divided into two sections: the fanciful genealogy mentioned earlier, in the style of a world chronicle, followed by a narrative that goes to the Arab invasions and beyond.

The pseudo-historical section is followed by a series of *vaticinia ex eventu* up until the taxation regime imposed upon the recently conquered Christian subjects. It describes in detail the invasions of the Sons of Ishmael, whom the author “predicts” will be permitted to be victorious over the Romans: “not because God loves them [the Ishmaelites] that He allows them to enter into the kingdom of the Christians, but because of the iniquity and the sin that is being wrought by the Christians,” iniquity that is described in great detail (Ps.-Method. *Apoc.* 11). The chastisement brought by the sons of Ishmael included primarily material deprivation and taxation as well as the defilement of churches and holy services.

The punishment brought upon the Christians through the Sons of Ishmael, acting as God’s rod of chastisement, is described as follows:

After these calamities and chastisements of the sons of Ishmael, at the end of that week, mankind will be lying in the peril of that chastisement. There will be no hope of their being saved from that hard servitude. They will be persecuted and oppressed, and will suffer indignities, hunger and thirst. They will be troubled with a hard chastisement. All the while, those tyrants will be enjoying food, drink and rest, and they will be boasting of their victories [...]. They will dress up like bridegrooms and adorn themselves as brides, and blaspheme by saying, “There is no Savior for the Christians.”

(Ps.-Method. *Apoc.* 13)

The situation described here is bleak. Christians languish in poverty as their captors live in luxury. Ishmaelite success leads them to boast of their superiority over the Christians.

Through *vaticinia ex eventu*, the *Apocalypse* of pseudo-Methodius laments both widespread apostasy and the destruction and desecration of churches. The *Apocalypse*, in grim detail, speaks of persecution both by the Arabs and the very apostates who abandoned the church. We could dismiss dramatic accounts of persecution as found in the *Apocalypse* and in *adversus Judaeos* literature as a product of generic excess. However, while persecution narratives are a relatively common feature of late antique Christian literature, candid admissions of Christian failures, particularly apostasy, are historically rare and run counter to the traditional narrative of Christian triumphalism.⁴² Taken with the institution of the *jizya* tax, and the construction of the Dome of the Rock on the temple mount, at first glance it seems that the earliest Islamic invaders were keen to oppress Christians and impose Islam where possible.⁴³

However, as with the Persian invasion, the story is not so simple. Treatment of non-Chalcedonian Christians in Syria and Egypt appears to have ranged from mild persecution to ambivalence, though scholars have rightly dismissed the idea that non-Chalcedonians largely embraced Muslims as liberators.⁴⁴ Little is known

about the earliest Muslim invasions; however, they appear to have included allied Christians and Jews to some degree. Recently, scholars such as Thomas Sizgorich and Arietta Papaconstantinou have questioned whether we can speak of a unique Islamic identity at all in the earliest ‘*Umma*.⁴⁵ Papaconstantinou has shown that the Umayyad caliphate, like the Persians, maintained the Roman administrative apparatus whenever possible and often permitted Christians to retain their former positions.⁴⁶

Returning to Somers’s categories, Christian accounts of persecution by the earliest Muslim invaders served a purpose beyond reporting realities on the ground. The Muslims represented a new and previously unknown threat, and their success against Roman forces was incomprehensible. By emplotting themselves in a narrative of persecution, Roman authors could provide some meaning to their circumstances and reinforce Christian identity, which had come under threat. The *Dialogue Between the Jews Papiscus and Philo with a Monk* accomplished this by comparing the faithful Christians to the supposedly apostate Jews. The *Life of Theodore* and the *Apocalypse* of pseudo-Methodius promoted Christian identity against that of Christian apostates. In each case, the audience could take comfort in the example of those who remained steadfast and find warning against those who abandoned God under threat or temptation.

Imperial “persecution”?

The sources thus far have presented Christians loyal to the empire as a uniquely persecuted group. However, the Heraclian dynasty launched its own campaigns of persecution of its own subjects. Perhaps the most infamous was Heraclius’s decree of forced baptism against the empire’s Jews, which was apparently enforced with great zeal in North Africa.⁴⁷

Among our best witnesses for the enforcement of the edict comes from the *Doctrina Jacobi nuper Baptizati*, a unique *adversus Judaeos* dialogue written from the perspective of a forcibly converted Jew. The dialogue was written circa 640 in Ptolemais in Palestine by an anonymous Christian author.⁴⁸ Ptolemais and Caesarea were cities known for their significant Jewish populations and, incidentally, receive extensive mention within the *Doctrina*.⁴⁹ The dialogue is narrated by the character of Joseph, a newly baptized Jew. The *mise en scène* is a secret meeting of Carthaginian Jews, lamenting the edict of forced baptism, and debating the best course of action in light of the edict’s enforcement. The title character, Jacob, is a Torah scholar who, while attempting to avoid detection as a Jew to avoid being baptized by force, mistakenly revealed his circumcision in a bathhouse, and was promptly seized by local Christians and taken to be baptized. Although Jacob initially resisted these efforts, while in captivity he received a vision from a heavenly messenger who revealed to him that Jesus was the true Messiah and urged him to embrace Christianity and accept baptism (*Doct. Jac.* 1.3).

Written from the perspective of a former Jew who was baptized as a result of Heraclius’s edict, the *Doctrina* is the closest we have to the perspective of an apostate, though in this case an apostate from Judaism to Christianity.⁵⁰ Unlike

the *Dialogue Between the Jews Papiscus and Philo with a Monk*, the nature of apostasy itself is a central theme in the *Doctrina*. This theme is explored most poignantly in a debate between Jacob and Justus the Jew in which Jacob recalls his former life as a Jew, his participation in actions against Christians, his initial arrest, mistreatment and resistance to baptism, and his eventual and sincere conversion.

Aside from the unique perspective of a Jewish convert to Christianity, several features distinguish the *Doctrina* from other *adversus Judaeos* dialogues of the period. Perhaps most surprising is the fact that the *Doctrina* is openly critical of Christians and their treatment of Jews. There is an awareness on the part of Jacob that Christians are flawed, despite his attempts to convert his interlocutor, and is illustrated in the vivid narration of Jacob's treatment by Christians prior to his baptism. During his ordeal, Jacob is forcibly abducted, and then stripped down and humiliated in front of a group of Christians who inspect his genitalia for circumcision. After his status as a Jew is confirmed, he is taken by force to be baptized, although in the end he sincerely converts and accepts his baptism. Considering that, as Christian Boudignon argues, the *Doctrina* was written as an *apologia* for Heraclius's policies to critics within the empire, there is no reason to doubt this depiction of imperial abuse toward the Jews.

The Jews were not the only group to face imperial coercion. To secure unity in the face of unprecedented military challenges, the Heraclian dynasty expended great efforts in uniting the Christians of the empire under the banner of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. This project sought unity under the banner of monenergism, the doctrine of one operation in Christ, and later monotheletism, the doctrine of one will, using force when necessary to coerce anti-Chalcedonians into unity, which saw its greatest success at the union of Alexandria of 638.⁵¹

Ironically, it was not the anti-Chalcedonians who presented the greatest threat to imperial policy, but rather pro-Chalcedonian opponents, such as Pope Martin and Maximus the Confessor, who actively resisted monenergism and monotheletism by writing letters and organizing the Lateran Synod of 649. Both were arrested and brought to Constantinople where they were subjected to persecution through harsh treatment and show trials before the senate. According to Martin's letters and his earliest *vitae*, the pope faced humiliation, depravation, and a death sentence, which was commuted at the last minute to exile, where he died in isolation and impoverishment in 655.⁵² As for Maximus, in 655 he was sentenced to exile, and at a second trial in 662 he was tried and convicted of heresy, at which point his right hand and tongue were amputated.⁵³ He died shortly thereafter.

Considering the treatment of Jews and Christian opponents by imperial authorities, one might argue that religious minorities faced as much persecution at the hands of the Romans themselves as they did by invading Persians or Arabs. Indeed, Arietta Papaconstantinou has suggested that the suffering endured due to inter-Christian conflict overshadowed difficulties faced by invading Arab forces.⁵⁴ This conclusion is not unreasonable, however, just as our previous examples, other factors must be taken into consideration.

The case of imperial anti-Jewish policy, a subject covered in detail by many capable scholars, must be considered in context.⁵⁵ As we have seen, Jews actively

supported the Sassanid invasion, and in Antioch, a riot among Jews and Christians along with the circus factions led to the murder of the Chalcedonian patriarch. There is reason to believe that the same Jews actively welcomed Arab invaders, actively critiqued Heraclius in their liturgical literature, and considered him an anti-Messiah in thinly veiled critiques found in apocalyptic literature such as the *Sefer Zerubbabel*.⁵⁶ Such actions undermined the empire and were tantamount to treason.

The same can be said for anti-Chalcedonians, who, while not actively rebelling, opposed the terms of unity proposed by the emperor during a time of crisis, as well as Pope Martin and Maximus the Confessor who actively resisted imperial religious policy. In the case of Pope Martin, he was not charged with heresy, but with treason by offering financial and literary support to the Arabs, and supporting Olympius, the rebel exarch of Ravenna (the same man who was initially tasked with Martin's arrest), a charge that he vigorously denied (*Theod. Narr.* 7). Indeed, the Pope was actively silenced when he attempted to discuss the theological reasons for his disobedience.⁵⁷ Maximus too, while eventually convicted of heresy, was initially charged with treason and lending support to the rebel Gregory, the exarch of North Africa, and for causing division by denying the priestly role of the emperor (*Rel. Mot.* 4). Interestingly, while there is no evidence beyond the trial accounts of these charges, Maximus did not deny aiding rebellion, though Martin vehemently denied aiding the Saracens. Moreover, we must remember that in Byzantium, even the act of opposing union in a time of national crisis was tantamount to treason, as religious unity was a strategic imperative.

Conclusions

Was the seventh century an age of persecution? Although the short answer may be yes, the reality is that it is far more complicated. We certainly cannot speak of a wholesale persecution of religious minorities by the Persians or the Arabs, nor can we speak of a program of persecution of Christians simply because they were Christians. Although it may be possible to speak of a policy of persecution against Jews and minority Christians by the Romans themselves, even this was applied unevenly and with greater or less severity depending on region. Instead what we find is that persecution was used as an act of retaliation, to use modern political speak, against enemy combatants.

Based on the evidence presented, we can come to some preliminary conclusions. Each of the three persecuting forces we have evaluated – the Persians, the Muslim Arabs, and the Heraclian dynasty – was concerned, first and foremost, with the smooth administration of the peoples under their hegemony and with success on the battlefield. In all three situations, obedience and loyalty were rewarded, while rebellion, opposition, and treason were punished through the harshest means possible. Evidence suggests that in all three situations, the majority of subjects who complied were free to live their lives unmolested.

However, in all three cases, there remained a vocal contingent who remained fiercely loyal to their positions and refused to compromise or, I suggest, viewed compromise as a threat to their very identity. Among those who suddenly found

themselves under Persian, or later Muslim, hegemony were Christians for whom a prosperous Roman empire was the full expression of God's favor for his chosen people. For those who resisted imperial religious policy, Christian identity was tied to an uncompromising conception of orthodoxy that could not be sacrificed for the sake of unity. Within this group could be found anti-Chalcedonians who had resisted the doctrine of two divine natures in Christ since the Council of Chalcedon, as well as Chalcedonians such as Maximus and Martin, who viewed monotheletism as a betrayal of the same council that the Heraclian dynasty claimed to uphold.

Concerning the strategies employed by these Christians it is useful to consider Margaret Somers's theory of "narrative emplotment," a concept applied successfully by the late Thomas Sizgorich to early Islamic identity formation. According to Somers, in establishing a unique identity within a heterogeneous society, cultural actors create a metanarrative in which they "emplot" themselves, establishing actors as characters in a larger story and granting identity through the creation of unique meaning.

We see this rhetorical strategy exhibited in the documents we have examined. For the authors of the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, the *Life of George of Choziba*, and the later *Apocalypse* of pseudo-Methodius, the empire, its Christians, and its invaders are part of a providential narrative of persecution, in which those who endure are pitted against those who apostatize. In all three documents, particularly through the use of apocalyptic discourse, the invasion of enemies and persecution of the community is a punishment for the sin of the empire. In some cases, the emperor was at fault, for others, the blame fell to apostates who faltered in the face of crisis. For the *Dialogue Between the Jews Papiscus and Philo with a Monk*, Christians who were loyal to the empire proved themselves as *verus Israel* for their perseverance where the Jews faltered. For Maximus and pope Martin, the empire is reaping the reward of the sinful Constans II who persecuted the servants of God and abandoned the true faith for heresy. In each case, the exalted state of the empire is maintained, and its deliverance depends on the repentance of the very sinners who brought the present state of divine wrath.

In conclusion, the seventh century can, to a degree, be considered a period of Christian persecution. However, this must be understood in the context of war. Leaders were interested in order and military success, rewarding the compliant and punishing the recalcitrant, namely, Christians for whom the very nature of Christian identity was at stake. The question of persecution does not fit well within popular perceptions of arbitrary targeting of a specific religious group but makes sense in a society in which religion was an integrated aspect of culture, and one which had a political and material impact on the field of battle.

Notes

- 1 The author thanks Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen for their input in the earliest stages of this chapter, as well as Éric Fournier and Wendy Mayer for their support throughout this process. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism, which significantly improved this final version.

- 2 Cf. Foss (2003), 149–70; Papaconstantinou (2008); 127–56; Foss (2009), 75–96.
- 3 Somers (1994), 605–49.
- 4 Haldon (1990), 42–3.
- 5 Kaegi (2003), 205–7. See also Drijvers (2002), 176–90; and Zuckerman (2013), 197–218.
- 6 *The Life of Anastasius the Persian*; Pseudo-Sebeos, *The History of the Armenians*; Antony of Choziba, *The Life of George of Choziba*.
- 7 George of Sykeon, *The Life of Theodore of Sykeon*; *Dialogue Between the Jews Papiscus and Philo with a Monk*; *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*; and Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse*.
- 8 Theodore Spoudaeus, *Narrationes de exilio Sancti Papae Martini*; *Relatio Motionis*.
- 9 Somers (1994), 605.
- 10 Somers (1994), 617.
- 11 Somers (1994), 618.
- 12 Somers (1994), 616.
- 13 Somers (1994), 617.
- 14 Sizgorich (2009), 1–20.
- 15 Whitby (1988), 24–7.
- 16 On the reign of Phocas, and the problems of legitimacy that followed his overthrow by Heraclius, see Meier (2014), 139–74; and Olster (1993).
- 17 Haldon (1990), 42–3.
- 18 Kaegi (2003), 205–7.
- 19 Foss (2003).
- 20 For the alliance between the Jews and the Sasanians, see Sivan (2000), 277–306.
- 21 Foss (2003), 149–70.
- 22 Giraboldi (2009), 321–7.
- 23 George, *Life of Theodore* 127 and 134; Antony, *The Life of George* 116–18.
- 24 Payne (2015), 23–58.
- 25 Payne (2015), 2–3.
- 26 Payne (2015), 34.
- 27 Foss (2003), 154–5.
- 28 Foss (2003), 155.
- 29 Giraboldi (2009), 328–51.
- 30 Foss (2003), 158. See also Giraboldi (2009), 340.
- 31 Foss (2003), 158.
- 32 Foss (2003), 158.
- 33 Sängler (2008), 191–201; and Sängler (2011), 653–65.
- 34 Foss (2003), 152.
- 35 Foss (2003), 169; Ps.-Sebeos, *Armenian History* 332.
- 36 Kaegi (1992), 67.
- 37 Kaegi (1992), 146.
- 38 Olster (1994), 7.
- 39 Olster (1994), 21.
- 40 Hoyland (1997), 54, n. 4, observes that the author claims that Theodore correctly predicted the number of years of Heraclius's reign. Cf. George, *Life of Theod.* 166.
- 41 Reinink (1992), 154–5.
- 42 For the continuity between triumphalism in late antique Christian Roman literature with ancient antecedents, and the rarity of admissions of apostasy, see Olster (2006), 45–71; and Olster (1994), 21.
- 43 Reinink (2001), 227–41. Reinink associates the composition of the *Apocalypse* of Ps.-Method. with these two events. Recently, Shoemaker (2014, 2015) has dated the *Apocalypse* earlier, associating it closely with the legend of the last Roman emperor, which Shoemaker argues was instrumental in early conceptions of Islamic identity. Bonura (2013, 2016) has defended the traditional dating.

- 44 On the Syriac response, see Moorhead (1981) and Van Ginkel, (2006). For the Coptic response, see Suermann (2006). For John of Ephesus's perspective in a similar, earlier context, see Shepardson, Chapter 14, in this volume.
- 45 Sizgorich (2004) and Papaconstantinou (2008).
- 46 Papaconstantinou (2008). See also Foss (2009).
- 47 Cf. Devreesse (1937); and Strickler (2016), 419–39.
- 48 Boudignon (2013), 239.
- 49 Van der Horst (2009), 4.
- 50 The author's familiarity with Jewish colloquial speech, including the word *mamzir* (μάμιζρος), or bastard, combined with the author's familiarity with Jewish social organisation, led Olster (1994), 160–1, to conclude that the *Doctrina* was composed by an actual baptised Jew. Most recent scholars follow Déroche's strong protest and assertion of a creative Christian author, based on the author's reliance on generic constructs of *adversus Judaeos* literature and the fact that μάμιζρος could have been known by a Christian through its appearance in the Septuagint. See Déroche (1999), 148, n. 30; van der Horst (2009), 2; and Gador-Whyte (2013), 212. If Déroche and others are correct, we must recognize that μάμιζρος is exceedingly rare in Christian literature, and its usage combined with other familiar features indicates that the author, if not a converted Jew, was uniquely familiar with the Jewish community beyond typical tropes associated with *adversus Judaeos* literature.
- 51 Hovorun (2008), 67.
- 52 Neil (2006), 94.
- 53 Allen (2015), 15.
- 54 Papaconstantinou (2008), 127–56.
- 55 Cf. Olster (1994); Déroche (1999), 141–61; Cameron (2002), 57–78.
- 56 Reeves (2013), 448–66.
- 57 Neil (2006), 117.

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