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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

# **The Development of the Coptic Perceptions of the Muslim Conquest of Egypt**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

By

**Walid Asfour**

Under the supervision of **Dr. Magdi Guirguis**

**May/2012**

The American University in Cairo

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## **Abstract**

The American University in Cairo

### **The Development of the Coptic Perceptions of the Muslim Conquest of Egypt**

By Walid Asfour

(Under the supervision of Dr. Magdi Guirguis)

This thesis examines some of the early Coptic perceptions of the Muslim conquest of Egypt that were mentioned in *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu*, written in the seventh century. It also compares it with the narratives in *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* which was collected in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This comparison is aiming at recognizing the factors that could be responsible for the development of the Coptic perceptions on the Muslim conquest over three centuries. The study also examines if these sources are the production of a religious institute, such as the Coptic Church, or the mere work of individuals.

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## Chapter one

### Introductory Remarks

The Muslim conquest of Egypt in the seventh century is considered a turning point in the history of Egypt. Since Egypt became part of the new emerging Muslim Empire, it acted as the catalyst of the rest of the Muslim conquests in Africa. There are three main approaches to discuss the Muslim conquest of Egypt in general: the conquest itself and all related events; the Coptic perceptions of Islam and the Muslim conquest of Egypt; and the relationship between the Copts and the new Muslim power in Egypt.

#### **Some of the western scholars who applied those approaches**

The work of J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion*, is one of the sources that represent the first approach mentioned above. Butler used some of the primary sources, which were available then, to create an image of the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Hugh Kennedy's *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* follows the same approach. It discusses the relationship between army and society in early Islamic period and the role of army in politics. Kennedy used some Arabic chronicles and documents, in addition to some archeological findings, to explain the expansion of the Muslim Empire at that period. *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, written by R. G. Hoyland, is a good representation of the second approach. The relationship between the Copts and Muslims in Egypt is the last approach that scholars use to look at the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Some historians used the Muslim conquest of Egypt as one of the sources to look at the perceptions of

Christians on Islam. In the same way the works of Samuel Robinson, Mark Swanson, and Sidney Griffith can be located

### **Modern Arabic scholarly works concerned with the Muslim conquest of Egypt**

It is important to examine the modern Arabic studies, whether Muslim or Christian, that discussed the Muslim conquest of Egypt and to study both the offensive and defensive ways they used. These works are divided into studies written by scholars and others written by clerics for religious purposes, such as evangelization. There are many scholarly works that were written by Muslim scholars to discuss and justify the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Some of the modern Muslim academic writings on the conquest could be described as defensive in nature. The works of Sayyidah Ismael El-Kashif is an example. Her books include, yet not limited to, *Miṣr al-Islāmīyah wa-ahl al-dhimmah*, *Miṣr fī fajr al-Islām: min al-faṭḥ al-‘Arabī ilá qīyyām al-Dawlahal-Ṭūlūnīyah*. Qasim Abdo Qasim’s *al-Muslimūn wa-Ūrubbā: al-taṭawwur al-tārīkhī li-ṣūrat al-ākhar* discusses the relationships between the Christians and the Muslims in the Muslim territories up to the time of the crusades. In addition to the works mentioned above, the work of Muhammad Salim al-Awwa *Muḥāḍarāt fī al-faṭḥ al-Islāmī li-Miṣr* could be placed within the same category. Salim started his book as a series of lectures in response to a declaration by a Coptic Church official, Anba Bīshūy Abd al-Masih from Damietta, in which he described the Muslims of Egypt as “*guests*”. This declaration, which took place in September 2010, provoked tension between the Muslims and the Christians of Egypt. Al-Awwa discusses the Muslim conquest of Egypt in his work in order to show the integration between the Copts and the Muslims since the time of the conquest. The

Muslim conquest of Egypt is used on an evangelist level by many Muslim religious persons, i.e. *imams*, to preach their audience about the ethics and principles of Islam.

On the other hand, many modern Arabic scholarly works talk about the Muslim conquest of Egypt from a Christian perspective. Yaqub Nakhlah Rūfilah's *Tārīkh al-ummah al-Qibṭīyah* could be considered an example of a neutral work that discusses the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Rūfilah does not take sides in his account of the conquest. Driven by a spirit of nationalism, he wrote his book in order to present to the Egyptians a neglected part of their history.

This thesis will use a combination of the three approaches mentioned in the introduction. It examines some of the early Coptic perceptions of the Muslim conquest of Egypt and traces its development from the time of the conquest in the seventh century until the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It also raises some questions such as: Did these Coptic perceptions remain the same over the years? Did the political and cultural factors over three centuries have an effect on these Coptic perceptions? How can these developments be traced through the study of the seventh century Coptic text of the conquest and the early Muslim rule and compare this text with the texts composed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century? Also, one of the important questions this thesis was keen to answer is: Do these writings represent the work of individuals or the Coptic Church? In order to trace the development of these texts over three centuries, this thesis will deconstruct those texts and isolate any additions or changes that were made in order to reach an image of the original perceptions of the conquest. It is vital to study the inter-faith relations between the Copts and the Muslims of Egypt in order to get a full view on how they both coexisted and interacted.



## **Methodology**

In tracing the development of the Coptic perception of the Muslim conquest of Egypt, or the Coptic-Muslim relationship in Egypt, this thesis compares two Coptic primary sources from two different periods. Furthermore, it compares the narratives in *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu*, which is contemporary to the conquest, with the narratives in *History of The Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, which was collected in the tenth century. It starts by examining some of the Christian writings on Islam and the Muslim conquests that were written during the seventh century and dividing their perceptions of the conquest into three categories: Supportive, refuting, and neutral. The aim here is to show that the Coptic perceptions on the Muslim conquest were not the first and only perception on the conquests. Meanwhile, this thesis aims at placing *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* and *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* within these three categories. Then this part is followed by an examination of both works in order to reveal some of their context problems and to decide if they represent the perceptions of the Coptic Church. Finally, the thesis compares between the narratives of the Muslim conquest of Egypt mentioned in both chronicles in order to trace their development over the years.

## **Introduction to the sources**

### **Primary sources**

The first primary source presented in this thesis is *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu*. John was an Egyptian Copt who lived in the seventh century at the time of the Muslim conquest of Egypt. His work was the cornerstone to later scholarly works that examined

the conquest. The usefulness of this text is that it is considered one of the early perceptions towards Islam and the Muslim conquest. However, this source could be problematic because its original manuscript was lost and what remained is a 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopic translation of another Arabic translated version of the manuscript. This Ethiopic version has a significant amount of bias caused by the changes that could have been made by the translator or someone else. The other primary source in this study is *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, which will be henceforth referred to as *HP*. It is a work that includes the biographies of the different patriarchs of the Coptic Church in Egypt since its creation by St. Mark. The different authors of this work wrote the history of the Church and each built up on what his predecessors wrote. The authors were keen to record all the events that are connected to the life of those patriarchs, whether it is political or social.

### **Other sources**

Many secondary sources were used in this thesis. Among them is the work of R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, which is a collection of different historical texts from manuscripts that could shed a light on the Muslim conquests and the vision of Islam in some of the Christian writings. Sydney Griffith's *The Church under the Shadow of the Mosque* was of great importance to this thesis in understanding the situation of the Christians under the Muslim rule. In addition, this thesis used the English and French translations of *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* by Charles and Zotenberg, respectively. Butler's work *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion* was of great importance to this thesis as it is one of the major works that talks about the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Though many manuscripts and documents were

revealed to scholars after Butler wrote his book, it is still an important source on the conquest.

### **Structure of the study**

This study is divided into four chapters. Chapter one is an introduction to the thesis, methodology, and the sources used, the structure, and finally the expectations and problems of this study. Chapter two examines the early Christian views and writings on Islam in the seventh century. The aim of this chapter is to show that the Coptic perception of the Muslim conquest was not the only Christian perceptions that exist. Also this chapter aims at placing *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* and *HP* within the large content of the Christian writings at that time. This chapter discusses the relationship between Byzantine and Persia and their quest to acquire allegiances from the Arab Christians. Then it talks in details about the different reactions to Islam and the Muslim conquests in the Christian writings of the seventh century. It also includes a brief discussion of some of these writings such as some Greek, West Syrian, Coptic and Armenian sources.

Chapter three focuses intensively on the comparison between the narratives mentioned in the two chronicles of the Muslim conquest of Egypt and the Muslim rule in general. The analysis of the chronicles will be divided into two parts: part one will be concerned with the context problems such as the history of the Chronicles manuscript, their original languages, the original time of writing the chronicles, and whether they are the product of the Coptic Church. Part two will be dedicated to the analysis of the contents. It will also include some of the contradictions found within the narratives of

*The Chronicle of John of Nikiu*. It will be then followed by the main comparison between the narratives concerning the Muslim conquest in both chronicles. Finally, Chapter four includes the general conclusions of the thesis.

### **Expectations, limitations and hopes**

Initially, I had some expectations on how the scope of my research would be. I thought I should include as many sources as I can that could cover a period of time up to our current time. Original manuscripts, oral traditions, perceptions of women on the Muslim conquest of Egypt, and the Muslim ruling system would have been part of my study. However, by the time I started my research, I had already encountered some problems that urged me to reconsider my expectations. I found out that the timeline I wanted to cover is huge and it would take years of research to cover, something more suitable for a PhD dissertation or a book, and not an M.A. thesis. The second problem I encountered was the lack of some sources needed to complete my research, such as in the case of layman's perceptions. Also, one of my future goals is to shed light on the contribution of the Copts to the Arab and Islamic civilizations as it was neglected over the years. It is important to mention the works and efforts of two of the pioneers who conducted many studies on that matter: Fr. Samir Khalil al- Yasoui, and Fr. George Shehata Qanawati. Fr. al- Yasoui studied a great bulk of the Coptic literature with many goals in his mind. He wanted to unify the Christian-Muslim thought by showing the common factors of civilization that all the Arabs share, regardless of their religion. He also had other social and cultural goals that have to do with showing the difference between the Arab civilization and the Islamic civilization. He wanted the Arab Christians of Arabia to be proud of their Arabian roots. Also, he wanted to show the integration

between the Christians and Muslims in creating the Arab civilization. *Essay on Monotheism* by Sheikh Yahya ibn 'Adi (d. 974 CE), a Jacobite Christian who lived in Iraq, is a ninth-century book that was edited by Fr. Al-Yasoui to shed light on the contribution of the Christian philosophers to the Arab civilization. Fr. Qanawati studied the Coptic and Christian literature in order to recreate the intellectual discourse between Arabic-speaking Muslims and Christians that existed in the mediaeval era. In his work *Christianity and the Arab Civilization*, he tried to show the impact that the Arab civilization had on the West and how the Christians participated in this impact. He also studied the Arabization and Islamization of Egypt in some of his works.

## Chapter two

### Early Christian views and writings on Islam in the seventh century

Many of the Christian writings of the seventh century such as the works of Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. ca. 639 CE); and Sebeos, Bishop of the Bagaratunis (d. ca 661 CE), included references to Islam and the Muslim conquests in the Middle East. The attitude and views of those chronicles towards the Muslim conquests varied: Some are against the conquest whereas in other support it, or at least have a neutral stance. The views of the authors of these chronicles, who lived outside the Muslim territories, such as Patriarch Germanos (715-730 CE), varied from those who lived within the Muslim territories, such as the Copts. In other words, the direct interaction with the Muslims played an important role in shaping the views of the Christian writings on Islam. The main aim of this chapter is to show that the Coptic perceptions on the Muslim conquest of Egypt are part of larger Christian perceptions on the Muslim conquests in general. My aim is also to place the narratives in *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* and *HP* within the large content of the Christian writings produced by different authors who lived inside and outside the Muslim territories in the seventh century.

In discussing how the different Christian groups, for example the Copts and the Armenians, saw Islam and the Muslim conquests, this chapter will depend primarily on the works of both R. G. Hoyland and Sydney Griffith. Hoyland collected different historical texts that focused on the Muslim conquests and the vision of Islam in Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings. He published his work in a book titled *Seeing Islam as*

*Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings On Early Islam.*<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Sydney Griffith elaborated on the work of Hoyland and discussed the situation of the Christians under the Muslim rule after the Muslim conquests. His book *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)* is considered one of the seminal references that addressed these matters.<sup>2</sup> This section discusses how Christian writings that were composed in different regions in the seventh century represented Islam. It will start first by giving a brief history of the events that initiated such writings. Then, it would be followed by examples from these texts and how they looked at Islam and the Muslim conquests.

### **Byzantine and Persia: A quest to acquire allegiances**

The land of the Middle East was a witness on the long war between the Byzantine and the Sasanians. The two empires sought to win over the local inhabitants to their side. Thus, the peoples of Ethiopia and Southern Arabia and the Arabs of the Syrian steppe and northern Arabia were all actively courted for their allegiance and support. The variation of religion and background between those allies led to a series of wars among them. As a result, religious specialists in those communities started playing an important role to strengthen the allegiance of those communities with the two empires. In addition, they promoted propaganda against the beliefs of all other groups.<sup>3</sup> On the Byzantine side, Cameron sees that stage as a development in religious intercourse resulting in choosing

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<sup>1</sup> R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey And Evaluation Of Christian, Jewish And Zoroastrian Writings On Early Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1997)

<sup>2</sup> S. H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Hoyland, 19.

the cross as a political and religious symbol that could be universally accepted.<sup>4</sup> This stage also witnessed the rise of bishops and monks and the increase of the role of the church to become the center of communal life. Secular writings were replaced by hagiographies and miracle stories.<sup>5</sup>

Those communities enjoyed some characteristics that strengthened the allegiance with each other and with the two empires and helped in shaping the identity of those communities. It included political, linguistic, geographical, ethnic, historical, cultural, and sectarian factors.<sup>6</sup> These various identities could explain the different reactions of those communities to the emergence of Islam.

### **The different reactions to Islam and the Muslim conquests in the Christian writings of the seventh century**

Hoyland assumes that the Monophysites of the Byzantine provinces, like in Syria, welcomed the Arabs in some measure as a reaction to the persecution of Heraclius.<sup>7</sup> In his examination of the Greek writings of the seventh century, Hoyland concludes that those writings showed Muslims only as enemies of God. He gives two reasons for this attitude: First, the image of the Arabs in the eyes of the average Byzantine was colored by prejudice. They saw the Arabs' style of life as culturally inferior to them. Moreover, the description of the Arabs in the Bible as descendants of the slave-woman Hagar showed them as religiously inferior to the Byzantines. Secondly, Islam drew on the same

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<sup>4</sup>. Averil Cameron, "Byzantium and the past in the Seventh Century: The Search for Redefinition," in *The Seventh century: Change and Continuity*, ed. J. Fontaine and J. N. Hillgarth (London: Wartburg Institute, 1992), 261-65.

<sup>5</sup>. Hoyland, 15.

<sup>6</sup>. Ibid., 20.

<sup>7</sup>. Ibid., 23.



religious heritage as Christianity. It recognized Moses and Jesus, the Torah and the Gospels, but demoted them in favor of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Qur'an, which represented a serious challenge to Christianity.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that much of the reasons for the presentation of Islam as a religion of Abraham by Christian writers were to emphasize that it was not a new religion.<sup>9</sup>

Fr. Demetrios J. Constantelos, who is a professor emeritus of history and religious studies at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, was misled by the hostility of Greek writers to the Muslims and he concludes that “the early Islamic conquests were accompanied by persecution, intolerance, massacres, havoc and enslavement.”<sup>10</sup> Another scholar, Moorhead, who concentrated on the comments of Eastern authors of the seventh century, was able to speak of “an erroneous response to Islam.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Hoyland sees that “it might be because the Arabs were, to them, political as well as religious enemies that Byzantines were so hostile.”<sup>12</sup>

The Christian writers of the seventh century reinterpreted earlier apocalyptic scenarios. Christians viewed Arab rule as the time of testing before the “final peace” when “the churches will be renewed, the cities rebuilt and the priests set free from tax.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>. Hoyland, 25.

<sup>9</sup>. Ibid., 536-537.

<sup>10</sup>. D.J. Constantelos, “The Moslem Conquests of the Near East as Revealed in the Greek sources of the seventh and the eighth centuries.” *Byzantion* 42 (1972): 356.

<sup>11</sup>. J. Moorhead, “The Earliest Christian Theological Response to Islam”, *Religion* 11 (1981):269.

<sup>12</sup>. Hoyland, 26.

<sup>13</sup>. Ibid., 27.

## **The encounters of the Arab Christians in different contexts**

The political existence of the Muslim state became one of the greatest facts of the eighth century. From the first half of the seventh century to the middle of the eighth century, the borders of “Dar al- Islam” spread from China in the east to Gibraltar and the Atlantic Ocean in the west and from the steppes and the Mediterranean sea in the north all the way down to India in Asia and the Sahara desert in Africa in the south. Those conquests were done peacefully or through treaties most of the time.<sup>14</sup> But Hoyland sees the success of those Muslim conquests without struggle “is not necessarily a welcome of the Arabs, but often a sad recognition that no help was coming.”<sup>15</sup>

Griffith argues that some of the Christian groups, such as the Nestorians and the Jacobites, were themselves already speaking and praying in Arabic though they did not yet have their scripture and liturgies in written Arabic texts.<sup>16</sup> The Christians who lived in the Muslim territories and accepted the Byzantine orthodoxy during the time of the Islamic conquest were called ‘Melkites’ (‘imperialists,’ ‘royalists’) by their ‘Jacobite’ and ‘Nestorian’ adversaries. On the other hand, the Copts in Egypt and the Armenians in the Caucasus did not accept the “Byzantine” imperial orthodoxy of the first six ecumenical councils. By the middle of the seventh century, already three of the five patriarchates of the Roman Christians, plus the Persian seat of the ‘Church of the East,’ had come under the rule of the Muslims.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>. Hoyland, 9.

<sup>15</sup>. Ibid., 23.

<sup>16</sup>. Griffith, 9.

<sup>17</sup>. Ibid., 24.

Hoyland suggests that one of the reasons to explain the observations of non-Muslims of the seventh century on the rise of Islam is that they saw “a new religious-political entity had unexpectedly risen and achieved dazzling military successes and promoted itself as favored by God and in possession of His latest dispensation.”<sup>18</sup> However, there is a variety of opinions about what exactly had provoked it. The religious and political allegiances tend to color each party’s perceptions.<sup>19</sup>

### **Some notes on the Christian historical writings on Islam and the Muslim conquests in the seventh century**

The writings of the Christians chroniclers, who wrote about Islam and the Muslim conquest in the seventh century, were just a reflection of how the Christian world was at that time. It is worth noting that all the writers were religious men of the church, (i.e. priests, bishops, monks, etc.). Therefore, their writings reflected their own religious loss because of the increasing conversion of their followers to Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>20</sup> It also reflected their loss of control over the lands and the peasants.

Almost all these writings agreed on explaining the defeat of the Byzantine Empire by the Muslims as a punishment from God for the sins committed by other groups of Christians (i.e. the Nestorians). Some chroniclers blamed Hercules and his religious reforms and military agendas and considered them the main reasons for those defeats. They saw the Muslims as God’s tool to punish those Christian sinners.<sup>21</sup> Other people

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<sup>18</sup>. Hoyland, 523.

<sup>19</sup>. Ibid., 524.

<sup>20</sup>. Qāsim ‘Abdo Qāsim, *al-Muslimūn wa-Ūrubbā :al-taṭawwur al-tārīkhī-ṣūrat al-ākhar* (Al-Haram, Giza: ‘Aynlil-Dirāsātwa-al-Buḥūth al-Insānīyahwa-al-Ijtimā’īyah, 2008), 20.

<sup>21</sup>. Qāsim, 21, Hoyland, 524.

argued that the only sin meriting such punishment was the spread of idolatry among Christians.<sup>22</sup>

A close examination of the first texts from the Roman and Persian chroniclers of the seventh century shows that the authors of those texts did not see the raids on their land by the Muslims as part of larger Islamic conquest. The Christian writings of the 630s showed some warning about the approach of the Arabs/Muslims and that the authors were aware of the fact that those invaders were religiously motivated and inspired.<sup>23</sup> The first texts included negative themes, which reappeared constantly in later Christian texts that evaluated Islam from a Christian point of view. These included themes like blood shedding, Antichrist beliefs and the sensual nature of paradise.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Christian response to Islam was colored by intra-Christian theme and the Christians of other communities, such as the Monophysites who regarded the Muslims conquest as a disaster caused by the sins and heresies of their Christian adversaries.<sup>25</sup> Griffith points out that those Christian writers, by the end of the seventh century, started to pay attention to the religious ideas of the Muslims.<sup>26</sup>

### **Incidental references to Islam**

This part will provide some examples of the Christian writings on Islam and the Muslim conquests during the seventh century. It includes some Greek, West Syrian, Coptic, and Armenian sources. The main aim of this part is to show the reactions of the

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<sup>22</sup>. Peter Brown, "A Dark Age crisis: aspects of the Iconoclastic controversy", *The English historical review*, Vol. 88, No. 346 (Jan., 1973): p 24.

<sup>23</sup>. Griffith, 24.

<sup>24</sup>. Ibid., 25.

<sup>25</sup>. Ibid., 28.

<sup>26</sup>. Ibid., 28.

Christians in different areas in the Middle East to the Muslim conquests and the rise of Islam.

## **Greek sources**

### **Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. ca. 639)**

One of the first Christian-Muslim encounters between religious figures of both sides took place in Jerusalem in February 638 CE. Sophronius Patriarch of Jerusalem (634-8 CE) met with the caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644 CE) to hand over the city of Jerusalem to the caliph. This meeting also included the covenant given by the caliph to the Christians of the city to recognize their ownership of the holy sites.<sup>27</sup>

Sophronius grew up in the city of Damascus and obtained a classical education, attaining the title of “Sophist” for his proficiency in rhetoric. Sophronius set out for Palestine in order to pursue his studies further where he met John Moschus at the monastery of S.Theodosius near Jerusalem. In Alexandria, Sophronius delved deeper into Greek wisdom (ca. 578 – 83 CE). He returned to Palestine to become a monk at S. Theodosius. He and John then continued their travels throughout the Near East until the Persian invasion forced them to seek refuge in Rome in 615 CE. It seems that Sophronius’ decision to hand over Jerusalem to the Muslims was made out of a sense of realism, not fear. This could be a result of the lack of Byzantine support for the city.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>. Daniel J. Sahas, “The Face to Face Encounter between Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem and the Caliph ‘Umar Ibn Al-Khattab: Friend or Foes?,” in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, eds. Emmanouel Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, and David Thomas (Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 2006), 33.

<sup>28</sup>. Sahas, 36.

The narratives below are attributed to Sophronius and they show his hostility towards Islam. They also show his explanation of the Muslim conquests as punishment from God to the Christians as a result of their sins.

a strong and vigorous scepter to break the pride of all the barbarians, and especially of the Saracens who, on account of our sins, have now risen up against us unexpectedly and ravage all with cruel and feral design, with impious and godless audacity. More than ever, therefore, we entreat your Holiness to make urgent petitions to Christ so that he, receiving these favorably from you, may quickly quell their mad insolence and deliver these vile creatures, as before, to be the footstool of our God-given emperors.<sup>29</sup>

We, however, because of our innumerable sins and serious misdemeanors, are unable to see these things, and are prevented from entering Bethlehem by way of the road. Unwillingly, indeed, contrary to our wishes, we are required to stay at home, not bound closely by bodily bonds, but bound by fear of the Saracens.<sup>30</sup>

But the present circumstances are forcing me to think differently about our way of life, for why are [so many] wars being fought among us? Why do barbarian raids abound? Why are the troops of the Saracens attacking us? Why has there been so much destruction and plunder? Why are there incessant outpourings of human blood? Why are the birds of the sky devouring human bodies? Why have churches been pulled down? Why is the cross mocked? Why is Christ, who is the dispenser of all good things and the provider of this joyousness of ours, blasphemed by pagan mouths (*ethnikois tois stomasi*) so that he justly cries out to us: "Because of you my name is blasphemed among the pagans," and this is the worst of all the terrible things that are happening to us. That is why the vengeful and God-hating Saracens, the abomination of desolation clearly foretold to us by the prophets, overrun the places which are not allowed to them, plunder cities, devastate fields, burn down villages, set on fire the holy churches, overturn the sacred monasteries, oppose the Byzantine armies arrayed against them, and in fighting raise up the trophies [of war] and add victory to victory. Moreover, they are raised up more and more against us and increase their blasphemy of Christ and the church, and utter wicked blasphemies against God. Those God-fighters boast of prevailing over all, assiduously and unrestrainedly imitating their leader, who is the devil, and emulating his vanity because of which he has been expelled from heaven and been assigned to the gloomy shades. Yet these vile ones would not have accomplished this nor seized such a degree of power as to do and utter lawlessly all these things, unless we had first insulted the gift [of baptism] and first defiled the purification, and in this way grieved Christ, the giver of gifts, and prompted him to be angry with us, good though he is and though he takes no pleasure in evil, being the fount of kindness and not wishing to behold the ruin and destruction of men. We are ourselves, in truth, responsible for all these things and no word will be found for our defense. What word or place will be given us for our defense when we have taken all these gifts from him, befouled them and defiled everything with our vile actions?<sup>31</sup>

The godless Saracens entered the holy city of Christ our Lord, Jerusalem, with the permission of God and in punishment for our negligence, which is considerable, and immediately proceeded in haste to the place which is called the Capitol. They took with them men, some by force, others by

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<sup>29</sup>. Hoyland, 69.

<sup>30</sup>. Ibid., 70.

<sup>31</sup>. Ibid., 72-73.

their own will, in order to clean that place and to build that cursed thing, intended for their prayer and which they call a mosque.<sup>32</sup>

## West Syrian, Coptic and Armenian sources

### 1- The life of Gabriel of Qartmin (d. 648 CE)

Gabriel of Qartmin was an abbot in the Qartmin monastery. He was born in the sixth century and died in 648 CE in the village of Bet Qusran in Tur Abdin, located in nowadays Turkey. *The life of Gabriel of Qartmin* was written in the ninth century by an anonymous monk of the monastery of Qartmin. The anonymous monk who wrote this biography considered Gabriel to be one of the founders of the monastery of Qartmin and he mentioned that Gabriel met with ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb who welcomed him and later gave Gabriel a signed letter that had some privileges for the Christians of his town.<sup>33</sup> The narrative goes as follows:

This lord Gabriel went to the ruler (*ahid shultana*) of the sons of Hagar, who was Umar bar Khattab, in the city of Gezirta. He (Umar) received him with great joy, and after a few days the blessed man petitioned this ruler and received his signature to the statutes and laws, orders and prohibitions, judgements and precepts pertaining to the Christians, to churches and monasteries, and to priests and deacons that they do not give the poll tax, and to monks that they be freed from any tax (*madatta*). Also that the wooden gong should not be banned and that they might chant hymns before the bier when it comes out from the house to be buried, together with many [other] customs. This governor (*shallita*) was pleased at the coming to him of the blessed man and this holy one returned to the monastery with great joy.<sup>34</sup>

According to Hoyland, this account is a later fabrication and belongs to the genre of documents which sought to delineate the ideal Muslim-Christian treaty and endow it with authority by attributing it to famous Muslim figures.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>. Hoyland, 63.

<sup>33</sup>. Andrew Palmer, "The Life of Gabriel of Qartmīn", in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History. Volume 1 (600–900)*, ed. D. Thomas and B. Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 892-97.

<sup>34</sup>. Hoyland, 123.

<sup>35</sup>. *Ibid.*, 123-24.

## **2- Ishoʿyahb III of Adiabene (d. 659 CE)**

Ishoʿyahb III of Adiabene (580-659 CE) was born in Quplānā (in Adiabene, between Kirkuh and Mosul). He studied theology at the theological school of Nisibis then he left school and became a monk in the monastery of BētʿAbē. He was elected bishop of Niniveh-Mosul in 628 CE, then a metropolitan of Ebril before 637 CE, and finally he was elected patriarch of the Church of the East in 649 CE. Ishoʿyahb was an eyewitness to the Muslim conquest of Adiabene region. He was respected by the Muslim leaders in his region and was granted some fiscal concessions for his community. He composed several hagiographic and ascetic writings.<sup>36</sup>

In his letter to Simeon of Rev Ardashir, which was composed after 649 CE, Ishoʿyahb talks about the good treatment of Christians under the rule of the Muslims.<sup>37</sup> Ishoʿyahb III says, “As for the Arabs, to whom God has at this time given rule over the world, you know well how they act towards us. Not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honor the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the Churches and monasteries.”<sup>38</sup>

## **3- A Record of the Arab Conquest of Syria, 637 CE / 15-16 AH**

One of the early mentions of the Arab conquest of Syria is to be found in a small codex containing the Gospel according to Matthew and the Gospel according to Mark.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>. Herman G.B. Teule, "Ishoʿyahb III of Adiabene", in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History. Volume 1 (600–900)*, ed. D. Thomas and B. Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 133.

<sup>37</sup>. Ibid., 135.

<sup>38</sup>. Hoyland, 181.

<sup>39</sup>. W. Wright, *Catalogue Of Syriac Manuscripts In The British Museum Acquired Since The Year 1838, 1870, Part I, No. XCIV*, (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 1870), 65-66.



It seems that this note was written shortly after the battle of Gabitha (636 CE) in which the Arabs crushed the armies of Byzantine.

The note says:

In January {the people of} Hims took the word for their lives and many villages were ravaged by the killing of {the Arabs of} Muhammad and many people were slain and {taken} prisoner from Galilee as far as Beth. . . .

On the tenth {of August} the Romans fled from the vicinity of Damascus {and there were killed} many {people}, some ten thousand. And at the turn {of the ye}ar the Romans came. On the twentieth of August in the year n{ine hundred and forty-}seven there gathered in Gabitha {a multitude of} the Romans, and many people {of the R}omans were kil{led}, {s}ome fifty thousand.<sup>40</sup>

Wright was the first to draw attention to this fragment and he wrote that “it seems to be a nearby contemporary notice”.<sup>41</sup> However, he never produced evidence to corroborate his assertion. Hoyland sees that the occurrence of the words “we saw” is in favor of Wright’s assumption about its date as it was a common practice to write down notice for commemorative purposes on the blank pages of a Gospel.<sup>42</sup> Some scholars, such as Donner, suggest caution about this fragment given the unknown provenance and illegibility of the text.<sup>43</sup> But Hoyland sees that the date given in the fragment, 20 August 947 CE, gives significance to the fragment because it accords with the date given in the Arabic sources for the battle of Gabitha, 20 August 947 CE/12 Rajab AH 15.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>. Hoyland, 116.

<sup>41</sup>. Wright, 65.

<sup>42</sup>. Hoyland, 117.

<sup>43</sup>. F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, (Princeton. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 144.

<sup>44</sup>. Hoyland, 117.

#### 4- John bar Penkaye (writing 687 CE / 67-68 AH)

There is little information about John bar Penkaye. He was a monk of the East Syriac church. His family is from Fenek, a town on the river Tigris in Iraq in north-western Mesopotamia, and a resident of the monastery of John Kamul. He must have been born early in the seventh century, as he recalls the last great Persian monarch, Chosroes II; and he must have died before 693 CE as he shows no knowledge of the patriarch then elected. While he was in the monastery of John Kamul, John wrote *Ktābā d-rīš mellē* ("Book of the Salient Points") and dedicated it to a person called Sabrisho', the abbot of this convent. This work, written in fifteen short books, is considered the most important of his works. It is a summary of the history of the world, which talks about the conditions in the late seventh century within the first century of Islamic rule. He is considered to be a valuable non-Muslim eyewitness to this period.<sup>45</sup>

In his book, John wrote the history of the world from its creation to his present day, which he called the "severe chastisement of today".<sup>46</sup> He mentioned the Arab conquests in books number fourteen and fifteen of his work. He also saw the Muslim conquest as part of the divine work and his first impression was that God prepared the Muslims to hold Christians in honor. His explanation of the defeat of the Persians by the Muslims was that the children of Hagar were supported by God to bring down the sinful kingdom of the Persians.

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<sup>45</sup>. G. J. Reinink, "East Syrian Historiography In Response To The Rise Of Islam: A Case Of John Bar Penkaye's *Ktābā D-RīshMellē*" in *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction In The Middle East Since The Rise Of Islam*, eds. J. J. Van Ginkel and H. L. Murre-Van Den Berg, (Peeters Publishers, 2006), 77-89.

<sup>46</sup>. Hoyland, 195.

John narrates:

We should not think of the advent (of the children of Hagar) as something ordinary, but as due to divine working. Before calling them, (God) had prepared them beforehand to hold Christians in honour, thus they also had a special commandment from God concerning our monastic station, that they should hold it in honour. Now when these people came, at God's command, and took over as it were both kingdoms, not with any war or battle, but in a menial fashion, such as when a brand is rescued out of the fire; not using weapons of war or human means. God put victory into their hands in such a way that the words written concerning them might be fulfilled, namely, 'One man chased a thousand and two men routed ten thousand!' How, otherwise, could naked men, riding without armour or shield, have been able to win, apart from divine aid, God having called them from the ends of the earth so as to destroy, by them, a sinful kingdom, and to bring low, through them. the proud spirit of the Persians.<sup>47</sup>

It seems, from his writings, that John knew about Islam and its teachings as in one part of his book he talked about Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān (d. 680 CE) and he described how justice flourished under his rule. Then, he said that he ruled according to the traditions of Prophet Muhamed (PBUH), which indicates his previous knowledge of those traditions and teachings.

John narrates:

Having let their dispute run its course, after much fighting had taken place between them, the Westerners, whom they call the sons of ‘Ammāyē, gained the victory, and one of their number, a man called M‘awyā [i.e., Mu‘awiya], became king controlling the two kingdoms, of the Persians and of the Byzantines. Justice flourished in his time, and there was great peace in the regions under his control; he allowed everyone to live as they wanted. For they held, as I have said above, an ordinance, stemming from the man who was their guide (*mhaddyānā*), concerning the people of the Christians and concerning the monastic station. Also as a result of this man's guidance (*mhaddyānūtā*) they held to the worship of One God, in accordance with the customs of ancient law. At the beginnings they kept to the traditions (*mašlmānūtā*) of Muḥammad, who was their instructor (*tā‘rā*), to such an extent that they inflicted the death penalty on anyone who was seen to act brazenly against his laws.<sup>48</sup>

A closer inspection of the previous passage will show us that John bar Penkaye presented Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the ‘guide’ and ‘instructor’ whose ‘traditions’ and ‘laws’ the Muslims fiercely upheld. Also, his description of Mu‘āwiyah, the caliph,

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<sup>47</sup>. S. P. Brock, “North Mesopotamia In The Late Seventh Century Book XV Of John Bar Penkāyē’s RišMillē”, *Jerusalem Studies In Arabic And Islam* V. 9, (1987): 51-75.

<sup>48</sup>. *Ibid.*, 61.

shows that the Muslims were keen to follow the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).<sup>49</sup>

### **5- Sebeos, Bishop of the Bagratunis (Writing in 660s CE / 40s AH)**

One of the most interesting accounts of the early seventh century comes from Sebeos who was a bishop of the House of Bagratunis. He was born probably near the beginning of the seventh century and died after 661CE. From this chronicle, there are indications that he lived through many of the events he related except for the accounts of the Arab conquests which came from the fugitives who had been eyewitnesses thereof. He concluded with Mu‘āwiyah’s ascendancy in the Arab civil war (656-61 CE), which suggests that he was writing soon after this date.

Sebeos was writing the chronicle at a time when memories of sudden eruption of the Arabs were fresh. He knew Prophet Muhammad's name and that he was a merchant by profession. He hinted that his life was suddenly changed by a divinely inspired revelation.<sup>50</sup> He presented a good summary of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) preaching, such as, the belief in one God, and Abraham as a common ancestor of Jews and Arabs. He picked out some of the rules of behavior imposed on the *umma*; the four prohibitions which were mentioned in the Qur'an. Much of what he said about the origins of Islam conforms to the Muslim tradition.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>. W. B. Hallaq, “The Origins And Evolution Of Islamic Law”, *Themes In Islam Law - I*, (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 50.

<sup>50</sup>. R. W. Thomson, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos: Translation and notes Part - II: Historical Commentary, Translated Texts For Historians*, (London: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 238.

<sup>51</sup>. Hoyland, 132.

## 6- John of Nikiu

John of Nikiu was an important figure in the body of the Egyptian Church in the late seventh century during the time of the patriarchs John III of Samannûd (677 – 686 CE), Isaac (686 – 689 CE), and Simon I (689-701 CE). John was the Coptic bishop of Nikiu and the rector of the bishops of Upper Egypt. His work *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* is considered one of the important works that talk about the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Unlike some of the sources discussed previously, the chronicle of John does not include any reference to the rise of Islam. The overall description of the Muslims in the chronicle is hostile. The image of the Muslims in the chronicle is linked to cruelty and blood-shed. This part of the chronicle includes many obvious changes that could have been made by the translator in the 17<sup>th</sup> century who could have been driven by his hostility towards the Muslims that was caused by the struggle between the Muslims and the Christians of Ethiopia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Towards the end of the chronicle, there is a passage that talks about Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) and describes him as a “beast”.<sup>52</sup>

## 7- Jirja (George) the Archdeacon

*History of The Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* talks about the Muslim conquest of Egypt as part of the *sira* of Benjamin I (d. 662 CE), the 38<sup>th</sup> Coptic patriarch. The author of this *sira* is Jirja (George) the Archdeacon. He was the spiritual son of the 40<sup>th</sup> patriarch John III (677-686 CE), scribe of the 42<sup>nd</sup>, Simon I (689-701 CE), and the spiritual father of Cosmos, who became the 44<sup>th</sup> patriarch (730-731 CE).<sup>53</sup> Jirja wrote the *sira* of Abba Benjamin in Coptic and it was translated later into Arabic in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. His writings were collected in *HP*. Though his account of the conquest is

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<sup>52</sup>. John of Nikiu, 202.

<sup>53</sup>. The Coptic Encyclopedia, s.v. “History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria.”

brief, it provides information on the relationship between the new power that rules Egypt, the Muslims, and the Coptic Church. Unlike John of Nikiu, Jirja gives a chronological account of the conquest. He starts with how the Muslims entered the land of Egypt and reached the Fort of Babylon and their battles with the Byzantines until they took over the fort.<sup>54</sup> He did not include many details about the conquest as his main concern was writing the *sira* of Benjamin. His views and writings on the Muslim conquest of Egypt and the Muslim rule are not hostile compared to some of the previously mentioned writers.

## **Conclusion**

The non-Muslim sources on the Muslim conquest show how the different Christian groups viewed Islam and the Muslim conquest. These points of view varied from one Christian group to another. The variation took the form of either being against the Muslim conquest or being supportive to it. Those writings showed how Islam and the Muslim conquests were seen by those authors. In other words, the writings of the authors who lived outside the Muslim territories differ from those who lived within the Muslim territories and under the Muslim rules, such as John of Nikiu. However, most of the Christian writings on Islam at that time hold many exaggerations and show lack in recognizing the rationale the Muslim conquests. The work of John of Nikiu holds much hostility towards the Muslims and makes the researcher wonder: Is it the original phrasing of John, or was it added later by the translator? On the other hand, Jirja's writings on the Muslim conquest of Egypt are not hostile comparing to those of John's of

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<sup>54</sup>. 'Abd al-'Azīz Jamāl al-Dīn, *Tārīkh Miṣr: min bidāyāt al-qarn al-awwal al-Milādī ḥattā nihāyat al-qarn al-'ishrīn: min khilāl makḥṭūṭat Tārīkh al-baṭārikah li-Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffa'* (al-Qāhirah: Maktabat Madbūlī, 2006), 1:577-79.

Nikiu. In order to get a full view of what happened actually during those Muslim conquests, different sources need to be examined.

## Chapter three

### The Muslim conquest of Egypt in *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* and *HP*

This chapter aims at comparing the narratives on the Muslim conquest of Egypt mentioned in *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* with the ones mentioned in *HP*. This comparison will show the development in the Coptic perceptions of the conquest over three centuries, i.e. from the time of composing *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* in the seventh century up to the time of collecting the materials of *HP* in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter starts by providing some information on the authors of those chronicles then it will be followed by an analysis of the narratives in both chronicles.

### Background information on the authors of the two chronicles

#### 1- The life of John of Nikiu

Unfortunately, little information of the life of John of Nikiu is available. Our information is based mainly on what came down to us in *History of The Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*. John was an Egyptian chronicler and a Monophysite bishop of Nikiu. Nikiu lies in the Delta, about eight miles northwest of Minūf/Manūf,<sup>55</sup> and in its day was a flourishing town of great significance, strategically sited, and a strong and well-defended fortress. It was one of the resistance centers to both Persians and Arabs (though not with great success), and was a stronghold of Monophysites in the days of the persecution done by Cyrus.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>. Muḥammad Ramzī, *al-Qāmūs al-juḡhrāfī lil-bilād al-Misrīyah: min ‘ahd qudamā’ al-Misrīyīn ilā sanat 1945*, vol. 1, (Al-Qāhirah: Matba‘at Dār al-Kutub al-Misrīyah, 1953-1968.), 532.

<sup>56</sup>. Alfred J. Butler, *The Arab conquest of Egypt and the last thirty years of the Roman dominion*, (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1978), 16-17.



There is no available information on when John was born exactly. According to some old traditions of the church, the bishops are appointed in their positions when they are in their middle age, i.e. at least after their thirties, and because he was appointed bishop during the time of John of Samannûd (677 – 686 CE) then it could be concluded that he was born between 632 and 637. Zotenberg suggested that John was born in the second half of the seventh century.<sup>57</sup>

Being the Coptic bishop of Nikiu and the rector of the bishops of Upper Egypt, John of Nikiu took part in the election of the successor of John III of Samannûd in 686 CE and in 696 CE he was appointed by Simon I as an administrator of the monasteries of Egypt. Yet, he did not last in this position for long and he was deposed from these offices on the ground that he had abused his powers. According to *HP*, John is considered one of the three important bishops of Egypt in the time of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Marwān (d. 704 CE).<sup>58</sup>

## **2- The biographies of some of the authors of *HP***

*The History of The Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* should not be treated as one book with structural unity but as a tradition of historical writings. It is written by Coptic authors who wrote the history of the Coptic Church and each one of those authors built up on what his predecessors wrote. The early historians wrote this book in Coptic until the 11<sup>th</sup> century then from that date their successors wrote mainly in Arabic. The work covers the history of the first to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and it covers more

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<sup>57</sup>. Jean de Nikiou ,*Chronique de Jean, évêque de Nikiou*, trans. H. Zotenberg (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1883), 2.

<sup>58</sup>. Jamāl al-Dīn, 2: 43-4.

than the biographies of the patriarchs of that period. The authors were keen to record all the social and political events that are connected to the lives of those patriarchs.<sup>59</sup>

The focus of the study is the authors who wrote the chronicles from the time of the Muslim conquest until almost the end of the eighth century. The first author who is concerned with this period is Jirja (George) the Archdeacon, who was mentioned in the previous chapter.

The second author is John I, a native of Giza, a monk, and a deacon. He was also the spiritual son of Moses, bishop of Awsim, and a close companion of Kha'il I (744-767 CE). John I wrote the lives of the patriarchs numbers 43 to 46, covering the period from 705 to 768 CE. There is no available information on when John I died.<sup>60</sup>

### **Analysis of the two chronicles**

This section is dedicated to the analysis of the two above-mentioned chronicles. The first part will be concerned with the context problems such as the history of their manuscript, the original language of the manuscripts, and the original time of composing both chronicles. A special section will be dedicated to the history of translating books from Coptic and Arabic into Ge'ez as it may have an effect on the analysis of *The Chronicle of John*. The second part will be dedicated to analyzing the contents of the chronicle and it will focus mainly on the Muslim conquest of Egypt. This part will also discuss the nature of both chronicles: Are they religious works or common history ones? Are they the production of individuals or a religious institute, i.e. the Coptic Church?

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<sup>59</sup>. The Coptic Encyclopedia, s.v. "History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria."

<sup>60</sup>. Ibid.

Finally, the last part will include a comparison between the narratives in the two chronicles concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt and the Muslim rule.

## **Part I: Context problems**

### **i. The original language of the manuscripts**

#### **a. The original language of *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu***

The original manuscript of *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* is missing and what is available is an Ethiopic version of it, which was translated from an Arabic version of the manuscript. Gabriel the Egyptian, who translated the Arabic version of the manuscript into Ge'ez in 1602 CE, never declares in his introductory note of the translation if Arabic was the original language of the manuscript.

There is no consensus among scholars on the original language that John used to write his Chronicle. According to Zotenberg, the text was originally written in Greek except the parts that deal with Egyptian affairs, which he assumes was written in Coptic. Zotenberg explains that the alternative use of two different languages in one book is explained by the origin of the stories in this chronicle; some of them are drawn from Greek sources and the others are indigenous traditions.<sup>61</sup> Charles suggests that the original language is Greek and the text was translated from Greek into Arabic and from Arabic into Ethiopic in the year 1602 CE.<sup>62</sup> Butler assumes that parts of it were written in Coptic and other parts in Greek.<sup>63</sup>

In 1999, Umar Abd al-Jalil published a new Arabic translation of the Ethiopic text of the Chronicle. He chose only the parts that talk particularly about Egypt and made

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<sup>61</sup>. Jean de Nikiou, 6-7.

<sup>62</sup>. John of Nikiu, IV.

<sup>63</sup>. Butler, viii.

a thorough translation and editing of the Ethiopic text. He has a theory that the original language of the Chronicle of John was Arabic.<sup>64</sup> He supports his theory by giving examples of old Arab-Egyptian relations and that Arabic was a well-known language to the Egyptian people at the time of the conquest of Egypt by the Muslims. He also gives some examples of some of the Arabic linguistic types that show clearly in the Ethiopic version.<sup>65</sup>

### **The original language of *HP***

As mentioned before, the *HP* could be defined as a tradition of historical writings. The early Coptic authors of this book wrote in Coptic and as of the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Coptic authors started to write mainly in Arabic. Hence, the book consists mainly of Arabic translations of the Coptic originals in addition to some parts that were written originally in Arabic.<sup>66</sup>

#### **ii. The original time of composing both chronicles**

##### **a. The original time of composing *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu***

There is a problem concerning this part because it includes three dates of composition; the first one is when John wrote his book, the second date is when it was translated into Arabic, and the last date is when it was translated from Arabic to Ge'ez. As for the first date, there is no indication on when John of Nikiu wrote his chronicle. Neither Zotenberg, nor Charles mentioned any dates of composing the work. Butler suggests that it was written in the late seventh century without giving a specific time.

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<sup>64</sup>. 'Umar S. 'Abd al-Jalīl, *Tārīkh Miṣr li-Yūḥannā al-Niqyūsī: ru'yah Qibtīyah lil-faṭḥ al-Islāmī* (Al-Haram, Giza: 'Ayn lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Buḥūth al-Insānīyah wa-al-Ijtimā'īyah, 2003), 5.

<sup>65</sup>. Ibid., 229-270.

<sup>66</sup> The Coptic Encyclopedia, s.v. "History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria."

Abd al-Jalil argues that it could be written in the second half of the seventh century or towards the beginning of the eighth century. My assumption is that his work was written during or right after the second ruling period of ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās (d. 664 CE) over Egypt, i.e. 657–664 CE. This assumption is based on the fact that John never included any other Muslim rulers after ibn al-‘Ās in his chronicle. His work was translated into Arabic at an unknown date. The translation into another language could cause some problems to the content of the work as it depends on the honesty of the translator.

The main problem here is that the last translation was composed in 1602 CE by Gabriel the Egyptian, son of John of Kaljûb. It was translated from Arabic to Ge’ez. There are many additions and changes that were made to this translation. These additions will be discussed in detail in the part concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Since the one who made the changes is not known, it could be assumed that, perhaps, Gabriel, or someone else, could have made those changes to the parts concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt to serve a purpose. The idea of changing facts of history to serve certain purposes was used many times in history. One of the examples is the work of Flavius Josephus, *History of the Jewish War*. Flavius was a devoted Jew but in the previous work there is a passage that praises Jesus and accuses Jews of betraying him. It is impossible that Flavius would include such passage in his work. This passage could have been added by some Christian priests to show that Jews blame themselves for betraying Jesus.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>. "Christianity and the old historians," last modified October 27, 2008, [http://www.dr-z-abdelaziz.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=70:2008-10-27-18-14-34&catid=38:2008-10-18-13-35-59&Itemid=89](http://www.dr-z-abdelaziz.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=70:2008-10-27-18-14-34&catid=38:2008-10-18-13-35-59&Itemid=89).

Because the changes made to the original manuscript of John is a problem, it is important to this study to discuss the history of translating books from Arabic and Coptic into Ge'ez over the years up to the time of Gabril the Egyptian. Also, a further search in the history of the relationship between the Kingdom of Ethiopia and the Muslims of the Horn of Africa is needed to shed some light on the reasons behind composing such translation. Between the years 1529 CE and 1543 CE, the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia was under the attack by one of the most powerful Muslim warriors known as Ahmed ibn Ibrahim el Ghâzî (d. 1543 CE), generally known as Ahmed Gragn. He was the Emir of Harar and he united many of the Muslims of the Horn of Africa and assembled an army to attack King Lebna Dengel, King of Ethiopia at that time. Ahmed was aided by some Ottoman commanders in Arabia and succeeded in conquering King Lebna and invading his land. Lebna Dengel was succeeded by his son, Galâudêwos, and he sought the help of the Portuguese and the Pope, Paul III. Finally, a Portuguese fleet arrived at Massowa on the Red Sea and engaged with the Muslims and in 1543 CE; Ahmed Gragan was killed in one of the battles.<sup>68</sup> His chronicle and invasion of Ethiopia is described in detail in *Futih al-Habaša*, composed in Arabic by Sihab ad-Din Ahmad ibn 'Abd-al-Qadir. The memory of these attacks and destruction of the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia had an effect on the image of the Muslims in the eye of the Ethiopian people. It also created a legacy of suspicion and fear of Muslims and demonization of Islam to a point that it was called 'Ahmed Gragan Syndrome' by Haggai Erlich.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>. J. M. Harden, *An introduction to Ethiopic Christian literature* (New York and Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1926), 17.

<sup>69</sup>. Haggai Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2010), 3.

The long relationship between the Church of Egypt and the Church of Ethiopia resulted in translating many books from Coptic to Ge'ez, and later from Arabic to Ge'ez, since the early days of the spread of Christianity in Ethiopia. An example of such reproduction is *The Homily of the Rock* that was written in Coptic by Patriarch Timothee (d. 477 CE). The homily tells the story of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt and the miracles that took place during their stay there. This work was translated into Geez in an unknown period of time then it was translated into Arabic between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>70</sup> This work is important in this research because it shows how the reproduction of texts and the translation from one language to another could have an effect on the meaning of the original text. For example, the final Arabic version of this homily, which was translated from Ge'ez, includes an Ethiopic boy who accompanies the king in his visit to the island where the rock lies.<sup>71</sup>

The wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, along with the 'Ahmed Gragan Syndrome', helped the revival of writing *Chronicles* that contain brief accounts of the reign of the kings of Ethiopia and also the translation of some important historical chronicles, like *The Chronicle of John of Nikiû*.

### **b. The original time of composing *HP***

*HP* could be considered a tradition of historical writings. The first series of biographies, those of Anianus to Cyril I (numbers 2-24) is considered to be written by Timothy II (458-480). The second series of biographies, those of Cyril I (412-444) to Simon I (692-700) is believed to be written by Jirja (George) the Archdeacon, who lived

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<sup>70</sup>. Timothée Ælure, *L'homélie sur l'église du rocher*, trans. Ramez Boutros et al. *Patrologia orientalis* (Turnhout :Brepols, 2001), 457-60.

<sup>71</sup>. *Ibid.*, 97.

in the seventh century up to early eighth century. The third series that includes the lives 43 to 46 and covers the period from 705 to 768 was written by John I, who was a close companion of Khaiil I (744-767). The fourth author who wrote the lives 47 to 55 that covers the period from 767 to 880 is John (d. the second half of ninth century). The fifth series that covers the lives 56-65 is written by Michael, bishop of Tennis, in the year 1051 or 1058. The last series, which was written mainly in Arabic, is composed by Mawhub ibn Mansur Mufarrij between 1088 and 1094.<sup>72</sup>

### **iii. The style of writing of the two chronicles and its similarity to both Jewish and Christian historical writings of Late Antiquity**

The aim of this part is to show the similarity between the styles of writing of both chronicles on the hand and Jewish and Christian historical writings of Late Antiquity on the other. It is worth noting that all religions held historical materials in their holy books and they had their own perspective on history and the way it is interpreted. These religious readings of history differed from one religion to another. This difference spurred mainly as a result of how each religion saw man and his role in the universe and his interaction with the rest of mankind. The religious reading/view of history also differed in its purpose from one religion to another.<sup>73</sup>

Both chronicles followed mainly the Christian style of writing of Late Antiquity and to a point the Jewish one too. The main similarity between their style of writing and the Jewish one is the belief that the disasters that fall upon mankind are a result of abandoning their faith and religion. This theme appeared in many Jewish historical

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<sup>72</sup>. The Coptic Encyclopedia, s.v. "History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria."

<sup>73</sup>. Qāsim 'Abduh Qāsim, *I'adat qirā'at al-tārīkh* (Kuwait: Ministry of Information, 2009), 38.



books, such as the works of Flavius Josephus (d. 100 CE)<sup>74</sup>, to support the idea of true faith and the good reward for the true believers. The same theme continued to appear in the Christian historical writings.

Christianity saw man as the holder of the *Original Sin* in his earthly life and saw the pre-Jesus history of mankind as an introductory to the coming of Jesus. Then after Jesus, the history of mankind was just a way of seeking salvation and waiting for Jesus to return to Earth. It also regards history as a book that God wrote its chapters and in which man has a negative role and is just waiting to see what God's Will will decide of him.<sup>75</sup> The story of human race also includes the role of saints in guiding and protecting the believers.<sup>76</sup> The Bible was the first source of information that the Christian writers used in their chronicles. Those writers imitated its style of storytelling.<sup>77</sup> John of Nikiu used this style in composing his chronicle. He starts it with the story of Adam and Eve, which is the same way the Bible starts. Whenever possible he includes stories of Christian saints to give live examples for the reader to follow. The latter kind of historical writing is called hagiography and was taken from Jewish historical writings.<sup>78</sup> *HP* is a good example on such type of historical writings. The Orthodox Church developed the hagiography genre and created its own version of the lives of saints called *Synaxarion*. It is a collection of the lives of saints intended for reading in the context of public worship,

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<sup>74</sup>. Flavius Josephus: (37 – c.100 AD) was a Jewish priest and historian who wrote some valuable books on Jewish history such as *History of the Jewish War* (75–79), and *The Antiquities of the Jews* (93)

<sup>75</sup>. Qāsim, *I'adat*, 40.

<sup>76</sup>. Beryl Smalley, *al-Mu'arrikhūn fī al-'usūr al-wuṣṭ'a*, trans. Qāsim 'Abduh Qāsim (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1978), 55, 235-36.

<sup>77</sup>. *Ibid.*, 78, 39 – 40.

<sup>78</sup>. Hagiography is “the body of literature describing the lives and veneration of the Christian saints. The literature of hagiography embraces acts of the martyrs (i.e., accounts of their trials and deaths); biographies of saintly monks, bishops, princes, or virgins; and accounts of miracles connected with saints' tombs, relics, icons, or statues”. It has been written from the second century C.E. to instruct and edify readers and glorify the saints.

and to nourish the personal prayer life of the faithful. One of the characters of the *Synaxarion* is its continuity to be written by adding new saints and martyrs in every generation.<sup>79</sup>

It is important to mention that John of Nikiu was affected greatly by Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339 CE).<sup>80</sup> Eusebius composed a book titled *Ecclesiastical History*, which is a historical book about the history of the church. This work is important because it is the first complete historical work about the history of the church. The first series of biographies in *HP* is believed to be based on Eusebius work *Ecclesiastical History*. Also, Eusebius used some historical sources that were available at his time but unfortunately were lost after his time. It was only through his work that we knew about those sources.<sup>81</sup>

**iv. The nature of the two chronicles: are they religious history or general ones? Are they the work of an individual or the production of a religious institute, i.e. the Coptic Church?**

It is easy to conclude that the Christian view of history is religious in its nature. In the first place it is based, like any other religion, on the relationship between man and God. Also, this view has an ethical side that revolves around good virtues of mankind as main component of social unity.<sup>82</sup> But does this mean that John's work is a religious one? This thesis argues that the answer is no. Although John followed the steps of the

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<sup>79</sup>. "Introduction to The Synaxarion: The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church," [http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/synaxarion\\_intro.aspx](http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/synaxarion_intro.aspx)

<sup>80</sup>. Eusebius of Caesarea (C.E. 263-339) was the first one to write a history of the church in the fourth century C.E. He established an approach for writing the Christian history that worked as a guide for Christian chroniclers who followed him. His work includes *Ecclesiastical History*, the life of Constantine, *On the Life of Pamphilus*, the *Chronicle* and *On the Martyrs*.

<sup>81</sup>. Eusebius of Caesarea, *tārīkh al-kanīṣah*, trans. Fr. Murqus Dāwūd (al-Qāhirah: Maktaba al-Maḥabba, 1960), 11.

<sup>82</sup>. John of Nikiu, 178.

Christian writings of his time, his work was a general one. In his work, John does not tell the story of the Coptic Church or includes stories about the lineage of the Coptic patriarchs, or their biographies. Moreover, his work does not include any theological debates, or an explanation to Christological matters. His main aim was to write a general history. As mentioned before, John was an important figure in the body of the Coptic Church of his time before he was removed from his position after being accused of abusing his powers. This fact, in addition to the changes and additions to the original text over the years, makes one wonder: Is John's work the product of the Coptic Church? Or does it reflect only John's views as an individual?

On the other hand, *HP* was composed over centuries by different Coptic clergy men who held positions in the hierarchy of the Coptic Church. It tells the official history of the Coptic Church over centuries and hence it is considered a religious history work. Despite the fact that the book was not composed by direct orders from the Church, the Coptic Church welcomed the book and adopted it. It is considered the official history of the Coptic Church, which indicates somehow that it represents the official views of the Coptic Church. In that sense, the book could be considered the work of a religious institute, i.e. the Coptic Church.

## **Part II: Analyzing the contents of both chronicles concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt**

This part compares the narratives concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt in both *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* and *HP*. The aim of this comparison is to point out how the authors of these two chronicles looked at the Muslim conquest of Egypt. In order

to draw the comparison, this part will divide the Muslim conquest of Egypt into themes. The themes will take the form of the following questions: How did the authors of the two chronicles explain the defeat of the Byzantines by the Muslims? Did the authors welcome the conquest? How did the authors look at the Muslim rulers? Each of the previously mentioned questions will be answered by quotes from the two chronicles followed by an analysis of these quotes. Before discussing those themes, a brief historical background of the situation in Egypt prior to the Muslim conquest will be given. It would be followed by a section dedicated especially to the changes that I believe were added to *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* over the years.

**a. Brief historical background of the situation in Egypt prior to the Muslim conquest**

Egypt witnessed the revolt of Heraclius (d. 641 CE) against Emperor Phocas (d. 610 CE), which ended by placing Heraclius on the throne of Byzantium. Most of the battles were fought on the Egyptian land. Not long enough after this struggle; Egypt was invaded by the Persians led by Chosroes II in 619 CE. The inhabitants of Alexandria and most of Egypt were under religious persecution by the Persians for almost ten years. Heraclius started a campaign in 628 CE to restore the Egyptian province from the Persians. He restored Egypt to the realm of Byzantium in 629 CE. The Persian invasion had an effect on the life of Egypt, and Alexandria in particular. It resulted in the creation of garrisons and Persian religious centers in the area. Also, there was an everlasting religious incompatibility between the Chalcedonians and the followers of the Coptic Church. Things became worse when Heraclius appointed Cyrus, the Melichate and foe of the Coptic Church, to the combined general and religious leadership of the area. Cyrus

persecuted the Copts in Egypt and already by the time of the Muslim conquest of Egypt the relationship between the two churches of Egypt was tense.<sup>83</sup>

**b. Changes that were done to the original manuscript of *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu***

The story of the Muslim conquest of Egypt in John's chronicle is incomplete. It was preceded by an historical gap concerning the Persian conquest of Egypt. It is worth noting that John did not mention the early events of the Muslim conquest and how they entered Egypt. He refers to the Muslims as Ishmaelites. He is using the same term used by the Old Testament in describing the descendants of Abraham, i.e. the Arabs.<sup>84</sup> All through the story of the conquest the reader will find many references to the cruelty of the Muslims in dealing with the Christians of Egypt. In more than one part in the chronicle, John talks about the massacres done by the Muslims.<sup>85</sup> It is important to note that some of the narratives concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the chronicle contradict each other. Some examples from the chronicle will be given to indicate such contradictions that might be caused by the changes made to the original text.

The coming narratives from *The Chronicle of John* show how the Muslim dealt with the cities they conquered in their conquest of Egypt:

And these Ishmaelites came and slew without mercy the commander of the troops and all his companions. And forthwith they compelled the city to open its gates, and they put to the sword all that surrendered, and they spared none, whether old men, babe, or woman.<sup>86</sup>

But 'Amr was not satisfied with what he had already done, and so he had the Roman magistrates arrested, and their hands and feet confined in iron and wooden bonds. And he forcibly despoiled

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<sup>83</sup>. The Coptic encyclopedia, s.v. "Arab conquest of Egypt."

<sup>84</sup>. Genesis 25:12-18.

<sup>85</sup>. John of Nikiu, 180.

<sup>86</sup>. Ibid., 181.

(them) of much of (their) possession, and he doubled the taxes on the peasants and forced them to carry fodder for their horses, and he perpetrated innumerable acts of violence.<sup>87</sup>

And the Moslem burned that city with fire. But the inhabitants of that city came by night and extinguished the fire. And the Moslem marched against other cities to war against them, and they despoiled the Egyptians of their possessions and dealt cruelly with them.<sup>88</sup>

And thereupon the Moslem made their entry into Nakius, and took possession, and finding no soldiers (to offer resistance), they proceeded to put to the sword all whom they found in the streets and in the churches, men, women, and infants, and they showed mercy to none. And after they had captured (this) city, they marched against other localities and sacked them and put all they found to the sword.<sup>89</sup>

And when he (Amr) seized the city of Alexandria, he had the canal drained in accordance with the instructions given by the apostate Theodore. And he increased the taxes to the extent of twenty-two bars of gold till all the people hid themselves owing to the greatness of the tribulation, and could not find the wherewithal to pay.<sup>90</sup>

The previous passages from the chronicle show the Muslims as cruel men who had no mercy on the surrenders, whether old men, babies, or women. The passages say that the Muslims despoiled the Egyptians of their possessions and they did not respect the holiness of the churches. ‘Amr, in the previously mentioned narratives, had no mercy on the prisoners of war. He also increased the taxes on the Egyptians. All these above-mentioned narratives contradict completely with the coming two narratives that show how ‘Amr treated the surrenders well and how he was keen not to commit any act of plunder:

And ‘Amr the chief of the Moslem forces encamped before the citadel of Babylon and besieged the troops that garrisoned it. Now the latter received his promise that they should not be put to the sword, and on their side undertook to deliver up to him all the munitions of war—now these were considerable. And thereupon he ordered them to evacuate the citadel. And they took a small quantity of gold and set out.<sup>91</sup>

And ‘Amr became stronger every day in every field of his activity. And he exacted the taxes which had been determined upon, but he took none of the property of the Churches, and he committed no act of spoliation or plunder, and he preserved them throughout all his days.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>. John of Nikiu., 183.

<sup>88</sup>. Ibid., 184.

<sup>89</sup>. Ibid., 189.

<sup>90</sup>. Ibid., 201.

<sup>91</sup>. Ibid., 187-88.

<sup>92</sup>. Ibid., 201.

Abd al-Jalil points out that there is also some confusion about the order of the events related to the conquest as the chronicle places the capture of Al Fayoum by the Muslims after the battle of Heliopolis.<sup>93</sup> This confusion in the narrative could be another proof that the original text has been modified over time.

### **c. The Muslim conquest of Egypt in both chronicles**

This section will try to answer some questions related to the narratives on the Muslim conquest of Egypt mentioned in both chronicles. Those questions are: How did the authors of the two chronicles explain the defeat of the Byzantines by the Muslims? Did the authors of the two chronicles welcome the Muslim conquest of Egypt? How did the authors of the two chronicles look at the Muslim rulers?

#### **1. How did the authors of the two chronicles explain the defeat of the Byzantines by the Muslims?**

As discussed in chapter two, some religious persons of the seventh century saw Muslims as God's tool for punishing Christians who were overwhelmed by their sins. For example, Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, narrates:

The Saracens who, *on account of our sins*, have now risen up against us unexpectedly and ravage all with cruel and feral design, with impious and godless audacity.<sup>94</sup>

John of Nikiu uses the same concept in his chronicle to explain both the rise of the Muslims and also the defeat of the Byzantines by the Muslims. *The Chronicle of John* narrates:

At one time the earth quaked *on account of the denial (of the faith)*, and the great city of Nicaea was destroyed. At another it rained fire from heaven: at another the sun was darkened from the hour of dawn till evening. On a certain occasion the rivers rose and overwhelmed many cities;

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<sup>93</sup>. Jamāl al-Dīn, 194-95.

<sup>94</sup>. Hoyland, 69.

while on another houses were overthrown and many men perished and went down to the depths of the earth. And all these things fell out because they divided Christ into two natures, whilst some of them made Him (merely) a created being. Also the Roman emperors lost the imperial crown, and the Ishmaelites and Chuzaeans won the mastery over them, *because they did not walk in the orthodox faith of our Lord Jesus Christ*, but divided the indivisible.<sup>95</sup>

John explains that the Byzantines were defeated because of their ill faith. As a Monophysite religious person, John here refers to the Christological debate over the nature of Jesus discussed in the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE and resulted in the separation of the church of the Eastern Roman Empire in the fifth century. John perceives the Byzantines as people who did not walk in the orthodox faith of Jesus and hence they were defeated by the Muslims.

The same concept was used in *HP* to explain the defeat of the Byzantines. Jirja narrates:

And the Lord abandoned the army of the Romans before him (Muhammad), as a punishment for their corrupt faith and because of the anathemas uttered against them, on account of the council of Chalcedon, by the ancient fathers.<sup>96</sup>

Jirja uses the same interpretation used by John of Nikiu that is ill faith causes defeat. That means that the two chronicles share the same point of view concerning the defeat of the Byzantines by the Muslims. Though the comparison here is concerned mainly with the conquest of Egypt by the Muslims, it is important to look at how the idea of ill faith has been developed in *HP* in the middle of eighth century. John I<sup>97</sup>, the author who covered the period from 705 CE to 768 CE in *HP*, uses the same concept of ill faith to explain the defeat of the Umayyad by the Abbasids. The Copts suffered under the rule

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<sup>95</sup>. John of Nikiu, 203.

<sup>96</sup>. Jamāl al-Dīn, 1: 576.

<sup>97</sup>. John I: Was a monk and a deacon from Giza. He was the spiritual son of Moses, bishop of Awsim, and a close companion of Kha'il I (744-767). He wrote the lives of the patriarchs from 705 to 768.



of Marwân II (d. 750 CE) and they revolted against him. John I describes how Abu

Muslim al-Khurasani (d. 755 CE) revolted against the Umayyad rule. John I narrates:

And Abu Muslim saw the angel of the Lord, with a golden rod in his hand, on the top of which was a Cross, putting his enemies to flight; for, wherever the Cross approached, he saw them fall dead before it.<sup>98</sup>

So the old man Abu Muslim bade his soldiers make crosses of every kind, and place them on their breasts, saying to them: «By means of this sign God has given us the victory, and it has conquered the empire for us.»<sup>99</sup>

The author here affirms that the ill faith of the Umayyad was the reason for their defeat against the Abbasids. On the other hand, John I metaphorically affirms that *the cross* is the right path, and therefore the Abbasids used it in their battles. However, when the Copts interacted with the Abbasids and saw how they increased the *jizya* on them, John I's perception of the Abbasids changed and he saw them away from the right path, neglecting the cross that gave them victory. He narrates:

And in the third year of the rule of the Khorassanians they doubled the taxes, and exacted them from the Christians, and would not fulfill their promises to them. For the two secretaries aforesaid find the Khorassanians forgot that it was God who had given them the government, and neglected the holy Cross which had gained them the victory.<sup>100</sup>

The changes in the fiscal policies of the Abbasids had an impact on the Copts where John I considers the Abbasids being away from the right path of God. The Coptic dissatisfaction with the Abbasid's rule resulted in revolts. The most famous among those revolts is the Bashmourts one in 861 CE.

## **2. Did the authors of the two chronicles welcome the Muslim conquest of Egypt?**

How the authors of *The Chronicle of John* and *HP* looked at the Muslim conquest of Egypt is central in the discussion of this study. This part will look first at the way John

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<sup>98</sup>. Jamāl al-Dīn, 2: 279:381.

<sup>99</sup>. Ibid., 2:456.

<sup>100</sup>. Ibid., 1:464.

of Nikiu looked at the help given to the Muslims by the Copts during the conquest. The examination of his narratives concerning the help given to the Muslims by the Copts will show if John of Nikiu welcomed the conquest or was against it. There are some narratives in *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* that indicate some help was given to the Muslims during the conquest of Egypt. One of the narratives shows that some local Egyptians helped the Muslims in their conquest. John narrates:

And after the capture of Fajûm with all its territory by the Moslem, ‘Amr sent Abâkirî of the city of Dalas requesting him to bring the ships of Rîf in order to transport to the east bank of the river the Ishmaelites who were upon the west. And he mustered all his troops about him in order to carry on a vigorous warfare, and he sent orders to the prefect George to construct for him a bridge on the river of the city Qaljûb with a view to the capture of all the cities of Misr, and likewise of Athrîb and Kuerdîs. And people began to help the Moslem.<sup>101</sup>

And in another part, he narrates that the Green and the Blue factions caused some troubles to the Byzantines in Egypt at the time of the conquest:

And Menas, who was chief of the Green Faction, and Cosmas the son of Samuel, the leader of the Blues, besieged the city of Misr and harassed the Romans during the days of the Moslem.<sup>102</sup>

What is important here is how John looked at the Egyptians who helped the Muslim in the conquest. John’s narrative on that matter shows his perception of the conquest in general. John curses anyone who helped the Muslims during the time of the conquest. He narrates:

And when those Moslem, accompanied by the Egyptians who had apostatized from the Christian faith and embraced the faith of the beast, had come up, the Moslem took as a booty all the possessions of the Christians who had fled, and they designated the servants of Christ enemies of God.<sup>103</sup>

And now many of the Egyptians who had been false Christians denied the holy orthodox faith and life-giving baptism, and embraced the religion of the Moslem, the enemies of God, and accepted the detestable doctrine of the beast, this is, Mohammed, and they erred together with those idolaters, and took arms in their hands and fought against the Christians. And one of them, named John, the Chalcedonian of the Convent of Sinai, embraced the faith of Islam, and quitting his

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<sup>101</sup>. John of Nikiu, 182.

<sup>102</sup>. Ibid., 188-89.

<sup>103</sup>. Ibid., 183.

monk's habit he took up the sword, and persecuted the Christians who were faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>104</sup>

It is clear from the previous narratives that *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* saw the Muslim conquest as a new occupation of Egypt. Therefore, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the conquest and his refusal to it.

On the other hand, there is no narrative mentioned in the *HP* that talks about the help given to the Muslims by the Copts. Therefore, I will look at the encounter between 'Amr ibn al-'Ās and Abba Benjamin that was mentioned in *HP*.

But Sanutius, the believing dux, made known to Amr the circumstances of that militant father, the patriarch Benjamin, and how he was a fugitive from the Romans, through fear of them. Then Amr, son of Al-Asi, wrote to the provinces of Egypt a letter, in which he said: "There is protection and security for the place where Benjamin, the patriarch of the Coptic Christians is, and peace from God; therefore let him come forth secure and tranquil, and administer the affairs of his Church, and the government of his nation." Therefore when the holy Benjamin heard this, he returned to Alexandria with great joy, clothed with the crown of patience and sore conflict which had befallen the orthodox people through their persecution by the heretics, after having been absent during thirteen years, ten of which were years of Heraclius, the misbelieving Roman, with the three years before the Muslims conquered Alexandria. When Benjamin appeared, the people and the whole city rejoiced, and made his arrival known to Sanutius, the dux who believed in Christ, who had settled with the commander Amr that the patriarch should return, and had received a safe-conduct from Amr for him. Thereupon Sanutius went to the commander and announced that the patriarch had arrived, and Amr gave orders that Benjamin should be brought before him with honour and veneration and love. And Amr, when he saw the patriarch, received him with respect, and said to his companions and private friends: "Verily in all the lands of which we have taken possession hitherto I have never seen a man of God like this man." For the Father Benjamin was beautiful of countenance, excellent in speech, discoursing with calmness and dignity.

Then Amr turned to him, and said to him: "Resume the government of all your churches and of your people, and administer their affairs. And if you will pray for me, that I may go to the West and to Pentapolis, and take possession of them, as I have of Egypt, and return to you in safety and speedily, I will do for you all that you shall ask of me." Then the holy Benjamin prayed for Amr, and pronounced an eloquent discourse, which made Amr and those present with him marvel, and which contained words of exhortation and much profit for those that heard him; and he revealed certain matters to Amr, and departed from his presence honoured and revered. And all that the blessed father said to the commander Amr, son of Al-Asi, he found true and not a letter of it was unfulfilled.<sup>105</sup>

This encounter is important as it represents the first meeting between the new Muslim power ruling Egypt and the Coptic patriarch. The Copts suffered long history of

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<sup>104</sup>. John of Nikiu.,202.

<sup>105</sup>. Jamāl al-Dīn, 1:582-86.

persecution under the rule of the Byzantines and naturally they would wonder how the Muslim rule would be. The Coptic Church is recognized as the official Church in Egypt after many centuries of being neglected and persecuted by the several rulers of Egypt. The blessings that were given by Benjamin to the Muslim conquests in Africa indicate acceptance and welcoming of the Coptic Church to the Muslim conquest of Egypt and what follows of the Muslim conquests in Africa. It could also show the Coptic Church as partner in the rest of the conquests through the blessings given by the patriarch. On the political level, it is a way of establishing and cementing the position of the Coptic Church in the new Muslim empire. However, Mark N. Swanson in his work, *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641-1517)*, sees this encounter from a different angle. Swanson argues that Jirja wanted to make clear to his audience that the meeting between the Muslim governor of Egypt and Benjamin held much respect. He also suggests that this meeting is being idealized by Jirja as it shows ‘Amr as a Christian prince who asks for blessings and prayers from the Coptic patriarch.<sup>106</sup> He adds that this meeting was recorded by Jirja at least fifteen years after the event and that could be an indication that he wanted “to remind his readers of what governor-patriarch relations *ought* to be like.”<sup>107</sup>

Jirja mentions in the previous narrative that the return of Benjamin and his encounter with ‘Amr was followed immediately by the retrieval of the head of St. Mark and how Benjamin managed to get funds to rebuild the Church of St. Mark that was destroyed during the Muslim-Romans war in Alexandria. Davis argues that this story represents an attempt by Benjamin to cement his position as the Coptic patriarch in Alexandria by “laying claim to the apostolic legacy of Saint Mark through the promotion

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<sup>106</sup>. Mark Swanson, *The Coptic papacy in Islamic Egypt (641-1517)* (Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo press, 2010), 7.

<sup>107</sup>. Ibid.

of his relics.”<sup>108</sup> It is part of Davis’ argument on how the Coptic Church sought legitimacy and historical authentication by linking its history to the life of an apostolic figure like St. Mark.<sup>109</sup>

To sum up, the narratives mentioned in *The Chronicle of John* concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt show an unwelcoming tone and dissatisfaction with the conquest. The narratives perceive the Muslim conquest as a new occupation of Egypt. On the other hand, the narratives mentioned in *HP* concerning this conquest show the welcoming and approval of the Coptic Church to the Muslim conquest of Egypt, and later in Africa. The difference in perception between *The Chronicle of John* and *HP* could be understood at a political level. *HP* represents the official point of view of the Coptic Church and on the political level; the Muslim conquest of Egypt represented salvation for the Copts from the control and repression of the Chalcedonians. It also gave the Coptic patriarch a chance to freely exercise his powers. In this context, it could be understood that the first Coptic narratives and perceptions of the Muslim conquest hold comfort and cautious welcome to the conquest on a political level.

### **3. How did the authors of the two chronicles look at the Muslim rulers?**

This section will examine how the two chronicles looked at some of the Muslim governors of Egypt and the Muslim rule in order to trace the development in their perceptions of the Muslim rule. *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* mentions only a few names of Muslim leaders. On the contrary, *HP* contains many narratives concerning the Muslim rulers and the Muslim ruling system in general. The first comparison is concerned with the narratives on Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) in both chronicles. *The*

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<sup>108</sup>. Davis, 126.

<sup>109</sup>. Ibid., 1-20.

*Chronicle of John of Nikiu* holds aggressive and insulting words towards the Prophet (PBUH). The following excerpt on the Prophet (PBUH) appeared in *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu*:

And now many of the Egyptians who had been false Christians denied the holy orthodox faith and life-giving baptism, and embraced the religion of the Moslem, the enemies of God, and accepted the detestable doctrine of the beast, this is, Mohammed, and they erred together with those idolaters, and took arms in their hands and fought against the Christians.<sup>110</sup>

As discussed before, those words might be a later addition caused by the several translations to the original text and it does not necessarily voice John's view on Islam. On the other hand, Jirja gives a brief history of Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) in the *sira* of Benjamin I. He narrates:

But after a few days there appeared a man of the Arabs, from the southern districts, that is to say, from Mecca or its neighborhood, whose name was Muhammad; and he brought back the worshippers of idols to the knowledge of the One God, and bade them declare that Muhammad was his apostle; and his nation were circumcised in the Hesh, not by the law, and prayed towards the South, turning towards a place which they called the Kaabah.<sup>111</sup>

Unlike the narratives of John of Nikiu, Jirja's description of the Prophet (PBUH) is neutral and it shows knowledge of Islam and its teachings through this narrative. He is aware of the *Qibla* direction, the *shahada*, and the circumcision process. The *HP* represents the views of the Coptic Church. This early narrative reflects how the Coptic Church was keen to establish good relations with the new Muslim rule in Egypt and hence the good words about Prophet Mohamed (PBUH).

#### ▪ Amr ibn al-'As (d. 664 CE)

In the part concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt, John of Nikiu mentions the Muslim ruler 'Amr ibn al-'Ās in more than one place and he calls him the *Chief of the Muslims*. The part concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt in John's chronicle holds

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<sup>110</sup>. John of Nikiu, 202.

<sup>111</sup>. Jamāl al-Dīn, 1:575.

contradictory narratives concerning ‘Amr. The narratives portray ‘Amr as cruel, seeking revenge from the Christians and so keen to increase taxes on them. One of the narratives states that ‘Amr doubled the taxes on the peasants and forced them to give food to the horses of the army. The narrative goes as follows:

and he (‘Amr) doubled the taxes on the peasants and forced them to carry fodder for their horses, and he perpetrated innumerable acts of violence.<sup>112</sup>

Then in another part the narrative says:

‘Amr had no mercy on the Egyptians, and did not observe the covenant they had made with him, for he was of a barbaric race.<sup>113</sup>

The previous two narratives contradict with a later passage in which John talks about the rule of ‘Amr in general:

He (‘Amr) took none of the property of the Churches, and he committed no act of spoliation or plunder, and he preserved them throughout all his days.<sup>114</sup>

This contradiction in the narratives makes it hard to conclude John’s perception of ‘Amr. As stated before, these contradictions in the narratives might be caused by the translator. John maintains a stable view on the different characters he included in his chronicle therefore it is hard to conclude if this perception of ‘Amr represents John’s view or caused by the addition done by the translator.

Jirja gives a good image of ‘Amr. He describes him as *Prince ‘Amr*. Jirja describes how ‘Amr assured the safety of the Copts through the treaty he had with the head of Babylon.

After fighting three battles with the Romans, the Muslims conquered them. So when the chief men of the city saw these things, they went to Amr, and received a certificate of security for the

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<sup>112</sup>. John of Nikiu, 183.

<sup>113</sup>. Ibid., 196.

<sup>114</sup>. Ibid., 201.

city, that it might not be plundered. This kind of treaty which Muhammad, the chief of the Arabs, taught them, they called the Law; and he says with regard to it: "As for the province of Egypt and any city that agrees with its inhabitants to pay the land-tax to you and to submit to your authority, make a treaty with them, and do them no injury. But plunder and take as prisoners those that will not consent to this and resist you." For this reason the Muslims kept their hands off the province and its inhabitants, but destroyed the nation of the Romans, and their general who was named Marianus.<sup>115</sup>

Then he gave a detailed description of the encounter between ‘Amr and Benjamin, which was discussed before. I assume that Jirja’s good image of ‘Amr reflects how the Coptic Church looked at ‘Amr as the one who helped the Church establishing a new position within the new Muslim realm in Egypt. ‘Amr supported of the Coptic Church through the reception of Benjamin and the orders he gave to the patriarch to take responsibility in administrating the Copts’ matters in Egypt. Moreover, it is more like a diplomatic representation of ‘Amr that suits the new political situation of the Copts under the Muslim rule.

After the Muslim ruling system became strong in Egypt, the Copts saw deep religious and cultural differences between them and the conquerors, especially during the time of the Umayyads that witnessed the Arabization and Islamization of Egypt. The Copts revolted against the Muslim authorities between 693 CE and 832 CE. These revolts were a reflection of the heavy taxes placed on the Copts and deterioration of their social status under Muslim rule. Consequently, the later Coptic chroniclers wrote their perception of the Muslim rule from a new perspective that takes in account the outcome of the decades followed the conquest. At that point the perceptions mixed and overlapped between the Muslim rule and Islam. This could be demonstrated through the narratives mentioned in *HP* concerning some of the Muslim governors in Egypt such as Qurrah ibn Sharik (d. 715 CE) and ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 720 CE).

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<sup>115</sup>. Jamāl al-Dīn, 1:579.



▪ **Qurrah ibn Sharik (d. 715 CE )**

Qurrah ibn Sharik was the governor of Egypt in 708 CE until 715 CE. He was appointed by the caliph El Walid ibn Abd al-Malik (d.715 CE). His story was mentioned in *HP* as part of the *sira* of Alexandros, the 43<sup>rd</sup> patriarch. The author of this *sira* is John I, and he was the spiritual son of Moses, bishop of Aswan.<sup>116</sup> John I describes Qurrah as a cruel and greedy governor whose main interest was collecting money. He doubled the *Jizya* on the Copts and John I gives detailed stories on how the Copts suffered at the hands of Qurrah until Egypt was infected by a plague that killed many people, mostly Muslims, and Qurrah and his whole family died because of this plague.<sup>117</sup> John evaluates Qurrah based on his wrong fiscal policies and his increase of *Jizya*. It is important to note that some Muslim historians, such as Sibṭ ibn al Jawzī in his work *mir'at al-zaman fi tarikh al- a'yān*, had the same image of Qurrah as a cruel governor. That contradicts with the letters sent from Qurrah to his deputies in towns ordering them to be just in collecting the *jizya* from the Copts and never to increase the *jizya* on them. He threatens his deputies that he would punish them if he knew they increased the *jizya* or mistreated the Copts.<sup>118</sup>

▪ **‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 720 CE)**

‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d.720 CE) was one of the prominent Muslim figures in the history of Islam as described by most of the Muslim historians. He was the eighth Umayyad caliph and ruled from 717 CE to 720 CE. Ibn Abd al-Hakam wrote a whole book called *Sirat ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz* in which he talks about the good traits of

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<sup>116</sup>. The Coptic Encyclopedia, s.v. “History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria.”

<sup>117</sup>. Jamāl al-Dīn, 2:119-145.

<sup>118</sup>. Adolf Grohmann, *Arabic papyri in the Egyptian Library, volume 1* (Al-Qāhira: Matba’at Dār al-Kutub al-Misrīyah, 1934), 14, 27.

‘Umar, how pious and just he was.<sup>119</sup> On the contrary, John I describes ‘Umar as a hypocrite who “makes good in front of the people and commits sins in front of God.”<sup>120</sup> He explains how ‘Umar first starts by exempting the lands of the monasteries and farms from paying *kharaj*, which is considered a good action, but then he gave orders to his workers that only Muslim scribes should work in *Diwans*.<sup>121</sup> That led many Copts to leave their positions and became out of work. Moreover, he gave orders to his deputies to take *jizya* from everyone in Egypt, even the ones who were exempted before.<sup>122</sup> It is known that the fiscal policies of ‘Umar were disastrous in nature and affected the Copts badly. Regardless of the good image the Muslim historians portrayed for ‘Umar, John I evaluated ‘Umar’s fiscal and administrative policies and therefore he sees him as an unjust ruler. John I, being a Copt who lived in Egypt, was affected directly by ‘Umar’s policies and hence his writings might have been a reflection of how the Copts of Egypt felt towards ‘Umar. John I describes Hishām ibn Abd al-Malik (d.743 CE), whose story comes in *HP* after ‘Umar and Yazīd ibn Abd al-Malik (d.724 CE), as “someone who fears God and follows the right path of Islam.”<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

*The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* is an important source in studying the Muslim conquest of Egypt. It represents one of the early Coptic perceptions of the Muslim conquest. Though little about his life is known, John was a significant figure in the body of the Coptic Church. Regardless of this fact, it is hard to figure out if his work represents an official point of view of the Coptic Church. The narratives included in the

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<sup>119</sup>. Ibn Abd al-Hakam, *Sirat ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz* (Damascus: al Maktabah al Arabiya, 1966), 45-52.

<sup>120</sup>. Jamāl al-Dīn, 2:162.

<sup>121</sup>. Ibid., 2:163.

<sup>122</sup>. Ibid., 2:164.

<sup>123</sup>. Ibid., 2:165.

chronicle on the conquest were somehow hostile. This could be a reflection of John's views of the conquest, or it could be a result of later additions that might have been added by the different translators of his work. The last point is important as it shows us how an historical text can be translated, edited, and changed in order to serve another purpose. John's aim was to write a common history to provide the Copts of Egypt with a connection to their ancestors. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, his work was translated into Amharic language. At that time, Ethiopia suffered from several attacks by the Muslims. The work of John was edited and changed in order to support resistance against the Muslim attacks.

John shared the same view of history of both Judaism and Christianity. Both religions saw history as a long story that starts with the creation of Adam. They both believed that God directs history in favor of them and that only the true believers will survive in this life and afterlife as well. Judaism and Christianity shared the same view of sins and that man suffers because of his own sins. Both also believed that all disasters that afflicted them were a result of their sins and for being away from God's way. John followed the same view of Judaism and Christianity that God will punish the enemies and persecutors of believers. Therefore, in this regard, his sympathy "sometimes" with the Muslims in this context could be understood.

*The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* sheds light on the Muslim conquest of Egypt regardless of the contradictions in some parts. John followed the traditional Christian explanation that the defeat and disasters that befell the Byzantines were a punishment by God for their sins. He affirms that some help was given to the Muslims by the Copts and at the same time he curses those who gave help to the Muslims which indicates that he did not support the conquest and in fact was against it.

*History of The Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* is an important source in studying the history of Egypt since the first days of Christianity in Egypt. This book represents the official view of the Coptic Church. The context concerning the conquest of Egypt by the Muslims shows that the Coptic Church welcomed the Muslim conquest of Egypt. On the political level, the Muslim conquest of Egypt represented salvation for the Copts from the control and repression of the Chalacedonians. It also gave the Coptic patriarch a chance to freely exercise his powers. The notion that ill faith causes defeat was used by the different authors of the book to explain the defeat of the Byzantines and was used three centuries after the conquest to explain the fall of the Umayyad Empire. It is a proof that the Christian writings, in its explanation to the defeat of the Byzantines, did not change over three centuries after the conquest. Moreover, it was used to explain the defeat of any party regardless of its religion, like the case of the Umayyads. Jirja's writings are considered neutral when compared of that of John of Nikiu on the conquest.

Jirja's viewpoint of the encounter between Anba Benjamin and 'Amr is important to this study as it shows how the relationship between the new Muslim power ruling Egypt and the Coptic Church ought to be. Each of the authors of the book explained his point of view on the different Muslim rulers of Egypt. However, after years of Muslim rule, the Coptic perception of the Muslim conquest started to change as the Coptic chroniclers realized the deep religious and cultural differences between them and the conquerors. Their new perspective took in account the outcome of the decades that followed the conquest. However, we have to notice that these views mixed and overlapped between the Muslim rule and Islam.

## Chapter four

### Conclusions

This study looks at some of the early Coptic perceptions of the Muslim conquest of Egypt and compares it with later texts in order to trace their developments over the years and the political and cultural factors that could have affected their reform. Practically, these developments can be traced either through the comparison of different narratives within one work, or through comparing different narratives of different works. As for comparing different narratives within one work, *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* was the case used in this thesis. On the other hand, this study compared the narratives mentioned in *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu* concerning the Muslim conquest of Egypt with the narratives mentioned in *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*. On another level, one of the important questions this thesis raised when dealing with such narratives was if these narratives represent the work of individuals or a religious institute, i.e. the Coptic Church.

The seventh century non-Muslim sources on the Muslim conquest varied and were either supportive, against, or neutral towards the conquest. Those writings showed only how Islam and the Muslim conquests were perceived by those authors. In other words, it depends on the direct interaction of the author with the Muslim authority, or whether he lived within or outside of the Muslim territories. However, most of the Christian writings on Islam at that time showed muddled ideas about Islam and the conquests. While placing the work of John of Nikiu within the three mentioned categories, much hostility towards the Muslims can be found and make the researcher wonder: Is it the original phrasing of John, or could it be a later addition by the different

translators? On the other hand, Jirja's writings on the Muslim conquest were somehow supportive of the conquest and not hostile, unlike the narratives in John of Nikiu's work.

In general, this thesis reached the conclusion that the first Coptic perceptions of the Muslim conquest of Egypt varied and evolved over time. On the political level, the Muslim conquest of Egypt represented salvation for the Copts from the control and repression of the Chalcedonians. It also gave the Coptic patriarch a chance to freely exercise his powers. In this context it can be understood how the first Coptic narratives and perceptions of the Muslim conquest hold comfort and cautious welcome to the conquest on a political level. This approach is represented in *History of The Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*. As for *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu*, the changes and distortions that were done to the original version of the chronicle urge the researcher to conclude that John of Nikiu, or whoever later edited and changed the text; saw the Muslim conquest as a new occupation to Egypt. Therefore, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the conquest and his refusal to it.

When the conquest period was over and the Muslim ruling system became strong in Egypt, the Copts saw deep religious and cultural differences between them and the conquerors, especially at the time of the Umayyads that witnessed the Arabization and Islamization of Egypt. Consequently, the Coptic perceptions of the Muslim conquest started to change and the later chroniclers, starting from the eighth century, rewrote the accounts of the conquests and the general perceptions of the Muslim rule from a new perspective that takes in account the outcome of the decades followed the conquest. At that point, the perceptions mixed and overlapped between the Muslim rule and Islam. It

is worth noting that all these perceptions represent point of views of clergy men and do not necessarily represent the common man's perception of the Muslim conquest.

While collecting and reading sources to be used in this study, the researcher found out that the study of the process of translating and transferring the Coptic heritage still needs excessive efforts to track and explain the mechanism and the methods used to translate and transfer the Coptic heritage. The efforts in this matter are little compared to the huge amount of the literature. Also, the studies in this field are limited to research in linguistics. This is not to undermine the efforts made by these researchers and the importance of applying the linguistic studies in that field. However, this framework is rather inadequate and the results, consequently, are limited. The studies of the Coptic texts were limited to this framework. I argue that it needs the integration of more than one field of knowledge to allow for the interpretation of how these texts were produced and what the circumstances surrounding this process were like. Then, these texts could be used as historical sources without tension. This aspect specifically reveals how Coptology fails to absorb other important fields of study. Also, this aspect reveals the negligence of the study of the medieval period and the Arabic production of the Copts.

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