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THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

الجامعة الأمريكية بالقاهرة

Graduate Studies

***Interpretatio Islamica* and the Unraveling of
the Ancient Sabian Mysteries**

A Thesis Submitted by

Maurice Lee Hines

to the

Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations

Graduate Program

2 February 2023

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis makes some bold claims about the identity of the Qur’anic Sabians (*Ṣābi’ūn*) and their symbiotic relationship with various Near Eastern religions including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Thrice mentioned in the Qur’an, they clung to an ancient religion - or perhaps the most ancient – that spanned the entire Eastern hemisphere and provided not only the structural foundations of human civilizations, but also their religious, philosophical, and intellectual foundations. However, their creed had undergone a variety of changes over time including a shift in the conception of God from a personal to a transcendent deity, the worship of angels, celestial bodies, and idols as intercessors between God and man, a reconceptualization of prophethood, and the preference of some prophets and rejection of others. In turn, various prophets, sages, and reformers strove to correct these beliefs and turn people back to the original religion. This was the mission of the three prominent Abrahamic traditions, but Sabianism persisted as their strongest antagonist. These claims are supported by early classical Arabic texts, a cadre of interdisciplinary scholars across regions, as well as a variety of contemporary non-academic esoterists.

While the grain of contemporary scholarship, represented by the likes of D. Chwolsohn, Sarah Stroumsa, François de Blois, Kevin van Bladel, and Khaz’al al-Mājidī, has been to disconnect those sects of the Ḥarrānians in Asia Minor and the Mandaeans of Iraq who have historically been called Sabians from those intended in the Qur’an, I offer a different solution to understanding their identity. In this thesis, I revisit a selection of the oft-cited primary Arabic

texts like al-Ṭabarī and other exegetical works, Ibn al-Nadīm's *al-Fihrist*, al-Andalusī's *Ṭabaqāt al-Umam*, and al-Shahrastānī's *Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* to make novel revelations about the purpose of these texts with regards to Sabianism. These works will be examined within the framework of *interpretatio*, an ancient civilizational phenomenon in which one civilization integrates its religion, culture, and practices into another for purposes of enrichment, reform, and coexistence. I will show how Muslim scholars and Sabians employed the concept of *interpretatio islamica*. According to these texts, I will argue that not only were the Ḥarrānians and the Mandaeans considered Sabians, but some scholars believed that the ancient Egyptians and Pre-Islamic Arabs also represented iterations of Sabianism, a perspective worthy of investigation. Based on these perspectives, I will demonstrate how the Qur'an engages Sabian beliefs about prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mary polemically. This will allow us to conclude that the Qur'an was performing *interpretatio islamica vis-a-vis* the Sabians from the beginning and is thus a viable framework to discuss other religions in Arabic texts.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans [before Prophet Muḥammad] - those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve. (Surat al-Baqarah:62)

— Saheeh International

Indeed, those who have believed [in Prophet Muḥammad] and those [before him] who were Jews or Sabeans or Christians - those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve. (Surat al-Mā'idah: 69)

— Saheeh International

Indeed, those who have believed and those who were Jews and the Sabeans and the Christians and the Magians and those who associated with Allah - Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed Allah is, over all things, Witness. (Surat al-Ḥajj:17)

— Saheeh International

Speculation about the religious sects mentioned in the Qur'an has been the source of much debate since the inception of Islamic scholarship. Perhaps the most mysterious has been the identity of the Sabians alluded to in the three above-mentioned verses. They are not to be confused with the ancient Sabaeans of Yemen, which is transliterated *saba'* denoting the Arabic

letter *sīn* rather than *ṣād*.¹ Many scholars, in their quest to unravel this mystery, have sought to identify one community or another in Arabia, Iraq, or the Levant or even to reject these claims altogether. Western scholarship has overall dismissed claims that the Sabians belonged to any of the known groups commonly identified as Sabians, such as those of Ḥarrān and the Mandaeans of Southern Iraq. This contrasts with much Arabic scholarship, both classical and contemporary, which appears to positively identify these groups as such. Does Western scholarship represent the final word on the topic because its scholars have critically surveyed a broad array of source materials from the region to arrive at their conclusions, even if they are not definitive? Or do the Arabic authors, by virtue of their temporal and spatial proximity to these groups, constitute a more authoritative voice? Or is there a way to reconcile these contradictions? This thesis posits a new way of thinking about the identity of the Sabians by drawing on histories and definitions of ancient Near Eastern religions and placing them in the Paleo-Islamic context and examining them vis-a-vis modern esoterism.

As we will see, Muslim historians generally referred to the custodians of ancient empirical and metaphysical knowledge as Sabians (*Ṣābi'ah* or *Ṣābi'ūn*). However, they referred to various iterations and reformations within Sabianism by different Qur'anic terms such as *Ḥunafā'*, *Yahūd*, *Naṣārā*, or *Majūs*. Sabian cults took various forms and traversed regions, ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. Yet their common denominator seems to be their deep studies of the sciences (especially astrology) and the cosmology they deduced from those studies.

¹ Throughout this thesis, I will spell the Sabians of the Qur'an as such.

David Pingree characterizes the Sabians of Ḥarrān as custodians of an ancient religion that not only outdated the world's known religions, but one that brought civilization to mankind through its various empirical and esoteric sciences. They saw their prophet as Hermes and his loyal disciples as the likes of Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. As such, the Ḥarrānian Sabians see themselves as the rightful heirs to the ancient knowledge and wisdom of China, India, Greece, Iran, Babylon, and Egypt.² Strangely enough, ‘Abdullah Samak describes the Mandaeans in a similar way. They see themselves as inheritors of the original religion of Adam, which was passed to his son Seth (known to them as *al-Mandā’ī* from which the religion takes its name) and on to a secession of descendants that arrives to Idrīs (known to them as *Huwārā Māzādā*). The religion was then passed to his son, Mathuselah, and eventually to Noah.³ Fritz Graf, in his chapter, “What Is Ancient Mediterranean Religion?” he affirms the similarities between religions of the ancient Mediterranean. He states, “despite different local names and different local rituals, all people worship the same divinity.” He goes on to say that religions in the Roman Empire, which encompassed Europe, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Arabia, constituted a “homogeneity of broad outlines, not of details.”⁴

These statements appear to be different takes on a single narrative that posits the unity of the original religion and the dispersal of metaphysical and empirical knowledge to peoples

² David Pingree, “The Sābians of Ḥarrān and the Classical Tradition,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 9, no. 1 (June 1, 2002): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02901729>.

³ The name for Idrīs was later pronounced *Hurmuz*, *Hirmis* in Egyptian, *Ukhnūkh* in Hebrew, and *Iṭarmasīn* in Greek. ‘Abdullah ‘Alī Samak, *Al-Ṣābi ‘ūn*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1995), 37.

⁴ Sarah Iles Johnston, ed., *Ancient Religions* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3-7.

throughout the world. To date, scholars have failed to see that Sabianism, as discussed in Arabic sources, is the same as the united ancient religion concept discussed in esoteric sources. Sarah Stroumsa would call such a view “the modern Sabian myth,” which is based on an “uncritical reading of medieval sources” and a gullible acceptance of mythical information about Sabianism. She states as a matter of fact:

*Any attempt to reconcile and harmonize all the fragments of information in our possession, to unite them into an overarching picture in which the Sabians would be presented as a single people with a single religion, and to set this rigid rendering in a Muslim context, is doomed to fail.*⁵

In this thesis, I will argue that not only is the so-called “modern Sabian myth” a fact, but the only way to make a link between Sabianism and this single Near Eastern religion is through a Muslim context and performing a critical reading of Arabic texts. My contention is that Western scholarship has had too narrow a scope, because it often focuses on identifying a specific community as Sabians in isolation and prematurely dismisses the contents of classical Arabic texts. Contemporary Arabic scholarship has not had a broad enough view, because it rarely does a proper critique of classical sources and rarely does it go beyond sources in the Islamic canon. Yet, I see all these thought-currents as vital to the discourse on Sabianism and religion in the ancient world. Western scholarship represents a critical exploration of the sources, while Arabic

⁵ Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*, Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 90.

scholarship represents fundamental understandings of the concepts and the people who have applied or adopted the term, Sabian.

In this thesis, I will argue the following points:

1. Early and classical Muslim scholars conceptualized Sabianism as any religion of the ancient world that claimed to worship angelic beings as intercessors between God and man, which was a common belief in the ancient world.
2. The Translation Movement of the Abbasids was a cultural and intellectual phenomenon patterned on the civilizational practice of *interpretatio* from the ancient world and previous Abrahamic faiths to bring the empirical sciences, occult arts, and conquered peoples into an Islamic worldview.
3. The current western scholarship on Sabianism does not have a wide enough framework when they confine their research to particular communities such as the Harrānians and Mandaeans, only to ascertain that they were not the Sabians of the Qur'an. This approach misses *why* these groups were called or called themselves Sabians, which was to assume a label recognized in an Islamic paradigm.
4. We can better understand Sabianism by examining the religion of the ancient world through the framework espoused in classical Arabic works. These works are still valuable because their authors possessed intimate intellectual and familial genealogies to the ancient world and were sometimes former adherents to a form of Sabianism.

The implications of the above-mentioned points are, first, that researchers will give a deeper, more critical reading of Arabic texts with regards to how they viewed the Sabians. Secondly, scholars will examine the broader context of religion in the ancient Near East when

studying Sabianism, rather than focusing on isolated communities of those once labeled as Sabians. Furthermore, scholars will consider interdisciplinary, multinational, and eclectic perspectives to inform their research on the Sabians such as the voices of Arab and esoteric scholars. To reach this goal this research seeks to answer the following sets of questions:

1. Who are the ancient Sabians according to current academic literature in the West and the Arab world? What did they believe and practice? How did Muslim leaders and scholars react to what they knew of their beliefs? What was their contribution to Islamicate knowledge and civilization?
2. How can the concept of *interpretatio* aid in reading Arabic sources on the topic of Sabianism? How did classical Muslim scholars interpret information about Sabianism in Islamic terms? And how did so-called Sabians interpret their religion in Islamic terms? What were the implications of this cross-cultural interpretation?

This research will provide a detailed analysis of the various theories around Sabianism in the academic literature to summarize our current knowledge of the topic. I will then examine several of the primary Arabic sources commonly cited in academic literature to evaluate the extent to which these theories hold up and to posit an alternative method of reading the primary sources through the lens of *interpretatio*. The scope of this study is limited to works in English and Arabic that speak to the topic of Sabianism and ancient religions. In looking at these works, I will focus largely on Islamicate perspectives on Sabianism and not a deep investigation into the veracity of every claim made in these sources. Indeed, there are many academic explorations that do just that. Rather, my interest lies in how scholars and writers from the early Muslim world perceived Sabianism, the various recorded interactions that illustrate those perceptions, and the subtler world of acuties and functions of texts.

In Chapter 2, I will revisit the major bodies of literature that discuss Sabianism arranged by their general context. I will first present the range of scholarly opinions that will inform my study from the Western academic context, as well as the contemporary Arabic and esoteric contexts. I will also introduce the selection of core primary sources from the Islamic tradition that were published within the earliest three centuries of Islamic writing. I will examine these sources in more detail in Chapter 4. Chapter 2's presentation will reveal the major differences in opinions about Sabian identity across these contexts as well as their approaches to interpreting Sabianism and ancient religion. In Chapter 3, I will follow this with an explanation of how I believe the classical sources functioned in their time by explaining the concept of *interpretatio islamica*, in order to show that Muslim authors were engaged in a grander project of translating the beliefs, practices, and sciences of the ancients. Not only that, but this was a bidirectional translation project by which a subordinate religion like that termed Sabianism also participated. This point will be demonstrated subsequently in Chapter 4 by examining classical understandings of Sabianism in select literature: 1) Qur'anic exegesis and legal texts and 2) historical and theological texts. I will argue that al-Ṭabarī, through his transmissions of earlier identifications and rulings on Sabians, is actually putting forth a coherent understanding of Sabianism that many exegetes and legal scholars would adapt thereafter. In doing so, I will conclude that these scholars were not interested in identifying the Sabians of the Qur'an, rather they aimed to provide contemporaneous rulings on people who fit the description of what they understood as Sabians based on the linguistic meaning and prior rulings.

In Chapter 5, I will propose a novel reading of Qur'anic verses pertaining to the prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mary, who are given inverted interpretations in Sabian literature. This will primarily be based on the efforts of Stroumsa, de Blois, and van Bladel

concerning the connections between the *Ḥanīfs*, *Naṣārā*, and *Ṣābi'ūn*, who present a clearer view of Sabian identity in the Near East if read in tandem and considering the views of medieval scholars. In Chapter 6, I will summarize my reading of Sabianism in classical Islamic sources by highlighting the salient themes that must be included in any discussion of Sabianism. These are common themes of primordial religion, angelology, prophethood, and the role of the occult sciences. I will follow this with a discussion on Sabianism and modern-day esoterism. I will discuss the implications of my research, with hopes to enrich the discourse on ancient religions and make them relevant to the contemporary religious landscape.

Chapter 2: Sabianism in the Literature

2.1 Western Scholarship

A small but significant cohort of Western scholars have attempted to answer the question: Who were the ancient Sabians mentioned in the Qur'an? What did they believe and what became of them under Islamic rule and beyond? Some scholars have addressed these questions directly while others have addressed them indirectly. In this section, I will attempt to summarize this literature to ultimately illuminate some blind spots and points of confusion.

François de Blois' entry in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* is a good starting point for understanding the academic discourse on Sabians. He defines the Sabians as a religious community that should not be confused with the "Sabeans" of South Arabia, which is associated with the Biblical figure, Queen of Sheba. De Blois turns to classical Muslim exegetes to provide most of the information about this community since the Qur'an offers no details about who they were or what they believed. Scholars like al-Ṭabarī, al-Shahrastānī, and Ibn al-Nadīm differ on their identity and beliefs, with some identifying the Sabians as the polytheists of Harrān or the South Iraqi Elchasaites that were called the "Sabians of the Swamps." In play here is also legal and theological classifications of the Sabians as "People of the Book" as opposed to believers or

disbelievers.⁶ Muhammad Azizan Sabjan published two important articles that summarize these debates in classical Islamic scholarship. “The Al-Sābi’ūn (the Sabians) in the Quran: An Overview from the Quranic Commentators, Theologians, and Jurists” discusses perceptions of Sabians from the works of Muslim Qur’an commentators like al-Ṭabarī, al-Tūsī, and al-Zamakhsharī, theologians like al-Bīrūnī, Ibn Ḥazm, and al-Shahrastānī, and jurists, like Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik, and al-Shāfi’ī.⁷ Sabjan’s second article, “Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionwissenschaft: A Study of Muhammad ‘Abd Al-Karīm Al-Shahrastānī’s On the Concept of the People of a Dubious Book (Ahl Shubhat Kitāb),” examines al-Shahrastānī’s unique classification of this group.⁸ Bruce Lawrence, in his book *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, challenges al-Shahrastānī’s characterization of the Brahmins of India as Sabians.⁹

Other contemporary scholars have opted to study this topic with a critical eye on communities that have been identified as Sabians or self-identified as such. Jacques Waardenburg gathered the many instances in which early Muslims encountered religious groups

⁶ François de Blois, “Sabians,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/sabians-EQSIM_00362?s.num=0&s.rows=20&s.mode=DEFAULT&s.f.s2_parent=encyclopaedia-of-the-quran&s.start=0&s.q=sabians.

⁷ Muhammad Azizan Sabjan, “The Al-Sābi’ūn (the Sabians) in the Quran: An Overview from the Quranic Commentators, Theologians, and Jurists,” *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 13, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2014): 79–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2014.963465>. Also see Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Exegetical Identification of the Sābi’ūn,” *The Muslim World* 72 (1982): 95–106.

⁸ Muhammad Azizan Sabjan, “Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionwissenschaft: A Study of Muhammad ‘Abd Al-Karīm Al-Shahrastānī’s On the Concept of the People of a Dubious Book (Ahl Shubhat Kitāb),” *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 14, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2015): 79–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2015.1085787>.

⁹ Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, Religion and Society (Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 1976), 63–91. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aucegypt/detail.action?docID=3044576>.

outside Arabia in his chapter featured in the book, *Islam, Past Influence and Present Challenge*.¹⁰ Christopher Buck then used this list as a framework to reexamine some of the sources and make a determination on the extent those communities could be the ancient Sabians of the Qur'an.¹¹ David Pingree analyzes the Harrānian community, its ideas, development and relationships to determine that it has mixed concepts from various regions of thought to claim that it has preserved the ancient religion of mankind.¹² Alexandre Roberts looks into the writings of al-Tha'labī who describes the self-proclaimed Harrānian Sabian, Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābī as a sincere and pious man despite his commitment to Sabianism. Roberts thus argues that the Sabian identity gave him a distinct advantage in the Abbasid court.¹³

In the case of the Mandeans, de Blois cites the 19th century Russian scholar, Daniel Chwolsohn, who discovered that Ibn al-Nadīm's association of the Elchasaites with the Mandeans is problematic on the grounds that this group was quite small and distant from the Arabs of Mecca and could have just as well been classified with the *Naṣārā* mentioned in the Qur'an. This notion is also challenged by Kevin van Bladel in his book, *From Sasanian Mandeans to Ṣābians of the Marshes*, in which he argues that the Mandaean religion has its

¹⁰ Jacques Waardenburg, "World Religions as Seen in the Light of Islam," in *Islam, Past Influence and Present Challenge*, ed. Alford T. Welch, Pierre Cachia, and W. Montgomery Watt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 245–75.

¹¹ Christopher Buck, "The Identity of the Sabi'un: An Historical Quest," *The Muslim World* 74, no. 3–4 (1984): 172–86, https://www.bahai-library.com/buck_identity_sabiuns.

¹² David Pingree, "The Ṣābians of Harrān and the Classical Tradition," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 9, no. 1 (June 1, 2002): 8–35, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02901729>.

¹³ Alexandre M. Roberts, "Being a Sabian at Court in Tenth-Century Baghdad," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137, no. 2 (2017): 253–77, <https://doi.org/10.7817/jameroriesoci.137.2.0253>.

origins in the late 5th century C.E. in Sasanid-ruled Iraq.¹⁴ De Blois then proposed that the Sabians of the Qur'an was most likely the Manichaeans, which Muslim writers used to refer to as *zanādiqa* among the Quraysh. In stating this, he mentions the semantic range of the Arabic word for Sabian (*ṣābi'*), which can allude to baptism or religious conversion.¹⁵ Other works on Mandaeism that will be useful to this study include E.S. Drower's works *The Secret Adam. A study of Nasoraean Gnosis* and her work with Jorunn Buckley, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran Their Cults, Customs, Magic Legends, and Folklore*. They feature detailed information about the texts and perspectives of extant Sabians, although their Sabian status is contested.

Works that are somewhat outside the field of Islamic studies, but inform the topic immensely include Jonathan Elukin's article, "Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians: Explaining Mosaic Laws and the Limits of Scholarship, which, along with Sarah Stroumsa's *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*," offers key insights about Sabians and Sabianism from the perspective of the Medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides. This perspective constitutes a rethinking of Sabians as a singular religious community. These two works pull on Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed (Dalālāt al-Ḥā'irīn)* in which he describes Sabianism, not as a distinct religious sect, but as the general phenomenon of paganism

¹⁴ Kevin Thomas Van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans to Ṣābiāns of the Marshes*, vol. 6, Leiden Studies in Islam and Society (Boston: Brill, 2017).

¹⁵ François de Blois, "Sabians," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/sabians-EQSIM_00362?s.num=0&s.rows=20&s.mode=DEFAULT&s.f.s2_parent=encyclopaedia-of-the-quran&s.start=0&s.q=sabians.

that encompasses the worship of astronomical and natural personified deities.¹⁶ Van Bladel's, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science*, is also a seminal work that tracks the dissemination of Hermetica literature from ancient cultures into Arabic.¹⁷ Hermes was understood to be the prophet of the Harrānian Sabians and is thus necessary to understand where Muslim authors acquired their ideas about Sabianism.

Similarly, de Blois also published an article titled, “Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and Ḥanīf (ἑθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” that will be crucial to our unraveling the mystery of the Sabians, although it touches on the topic tangentially. As we will see, conversations around the understanding of the terms *Naṣārā* and *Ḥanīf* will appear as we discuss religion in Paleo-Islamic Arabia. De Blois shows that the Syriac word *hanpa* (the cognate of *hanīf*) was used as an epithet meaning pagan among the Syrian Christians and Nazoraean (the cognate of *Naṣārā*), was used to designate any Christian sect with Jewish practices.¹⁸

When reading classical sources, I deem it important to read them in light of *interpretatio*, the act of “translating” or “interpreting” deities, beliefs, and practices from one culture to

¹⁶ Jonathan Elukin, “Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians: Explaining Mosaic Laws and the Limits of Scholarship,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 4 (2002): 619–37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3654163>; Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*, Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Kevin Thomas Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science*, Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ François de Blois, “Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and Ḥanīf (ἑθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 65, no. 1 (2002): 1–30, <https://www.jstor.org/libproxy.aucegypt.edu/2048/stable/4145899>.

another. Just as authors define *interpretatio graeco*,¹⁹ *interpretatio romana*,²⁰ *interpretatio iranica*,²¹ *interpretatio judaica*, and *interpretatio christiana*,²² it is necessary for us to give a functional definition to *interpretatio islamica*. El Daly establishes a framework in the chapter titled, “The Making of an *Interpretatio Arabica* of Ancient Egypt” from his 2005 publication, *Egyptology: the Missing Millennium, Ancient Egypt in Medieval Arabic Writings*. This framework is one that amplifies the voices of Arab historians throughout the centuries in their encounters with other civilizations and how these civilizations fit into the Qur’an and hadith literature. Then this framework investigates the sources available to Arab historians in terms of direct observations, the folktales they heard, their discussions with learned people of those civilizations, in addition to classical written works in those languages, Arabic, and Judaica.²³ The limitation to El Daly’s framework is that he is employing it specifically for “Arab” encounters with ancient Egypt. It, however, overlooks the fact that many of these historians were not Arab, they only wrote in Arabic and many of their works have a farther reach than Egypt. Yet, I feel that these gaps are addressed through scholarship on the Abbasid-era Translation Movement,

¹⁹ John Dillery, “Hecataeus of Abdera: Hyperboreans, Egypt, and the ‘Interpretatio Graeca,’” *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 47, no. 3 (1998): 255–75, <https://www.jstor.org.libproxy.aucegypt.edu/2048/stable/4436508>.

²⁰ Clifford Ando, “Interpretatio Romana,” *Classical Philology* 100, no. 1 (2005): 41–51, <https://doi.org/10.1086/431429>.

²¹ Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, v. 133 (New York: Brill, 1997).

²² Johann Konrad (Munich) Eberlein, “Interpretatio Christiana,” *Brill’s New Pauly*, October 1, 2006, <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-new-pauly/interpretatio-christiana-ct-e1406540>.

²³ Okasha El-Daly, *Egyptology: The Missing Millennium, Ancient Egypt in Medieval Arabic Writings* (London: UCL Press, 2005), 9-29.

such as Dimitri Gutas' *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society*, which demonstrates that Muslim rulers and scholars of various backgrounds were interested in this civilizational transfer and were keen on fitting the religious and philosophical thought of other civilizations into the Islamic worldview.²⁴

In summary, we find that much of the academic research into the topic has revolved around affirming or negating a community's potential to be adequately called Sabians. Most of these scholars have cautioned against taking Muslim authors at face value when it comes to identifying the Sabians, while the works of Sabjan suggest that the perspectives of Muslim scholars has not yet been exhausted. My major point of departure from de Blois and van Bladel's notions of Sabianism is that I do not believe the early Muslim writers confused the Sabians with the myriad of Near Eastern Jewish-Christian sects or the Manichaeans, many of whom Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Andalusī, and al-Shahrastānī wrote about in detail in addition to their writings on the Sabians.

Finally, the reader should notice that al-Shahrastānī has borne the brunt of criticism from Western scholars on this matter due to his introduction of the concept of "People of a Dubious Book" (which was not widely accepted by subsequent Islamic scholars), his defining of Sabians as prophet-deniers when it appears they believe in prophets, his assertion that some Indian sects followed Abraham, among other things.²⁵ While he and other Islamicate authors were definitely

²⁴ Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)*, (New York: Routledge, 1998).

²⁵ Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, 91. According to my reading of al-Shahrastānī's exposé on Hinduism, I believe Lawrence misunderstood what al-Shahrastānī intended to say. Al-Shahrastānī stated an opinion of some scholars that the Hindu Brahmins followed Abraham but rejected it on the grounds that the historical figure "Brahman" was said to have denied the concept of prophecy. Furthermore, his references to Sabians and Ḥanīfs in the context of Hinduism is his attempt at *interpretatio*, in which he uses more familiar language to explain a less familiar belief system.

capable of making mistakes, al-Shahrastānī proposes the most compelling framework for understanding Sabian thought, as I will demonstrate in section 4.2.3. Additionally, I believe their time, location, and socio-linguistic contexts gave them insights into the ancient world that we can continue to learn from today and their perspectives should not be dismissed on the grounds that they belong to a different religion and civilization than their predecessors. I am therefore advocating a new reading of their texts that will allow us to better appreciate their perspective on ancient religions he is putting forth by looking at their function in Islamic thought.

2.2 Contemporary Arabic Scholarship

Contemporary studies of Sabianism in Arabic are few but have largely centered around the Mandaeans of Iraq, their beliefs, practices, and social status in the past and present. In addition, they have all been written for Muslim perspectives and only feature Mandaean voices in as much as they cite their scriptures or provide descriptions of their practices. Whereas virtually all Western scholars have ignored this slim body of literature, I think it is important to acknowledge it because, like classical authors, it can offer some intimate insights into Muslim beliefs about Sabians and Sabianism.

The ten volume *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Tārīkh al-'Arab Qabl al-Islām* by the renown Iraqi scholar, ‘Alī Jawād is an encyclopedic work on pre-Islamic history. His passage about the Sabians is uncharacteristically brief, but it supplies us with the basic understanding that Arabs have of the

Sabians. They are of two types: the *Hanīfs* and the polytheists.²⁶ Though his direct discussion on Sabians is brief, he offers a detailed study of Paleo-Islamic Arab life, including their religious beliefs and practices pieced together from Arabic and non-Arabic sources.

Ḥayah Bā'akhḍar from Umm al-Qurā University in Saudi Arabia, has authored works of a semi-polemical nature; one that discusses the history of *mustashriqūn*'s (orientalists') interest in the Mandaeans and another that compares Muslim and Mandaean beliefs about the Biblical and Qur'anic prophet, Yaḥyā (John the Baptist). In her first article, Bā'akhḍar focuses on the intentions of 19th and early 20th century European translators of the Mandaean holy book, *Ginzā Rabbā*. Despite her reliance on Arabic-language websites for information about modern-day Mandaeans, she makes a few good points concerning these translations and Mandaeans reception of them. She notes that a member of the Mandaean community read the translations of the book in European languages and Arabic and said that they might give the reader an introduction to Mandaeanism, but are otherwise inaccurate.²⁷ Furthermore, she believes that any translation project requires a sound knowledge of a plethora of Near Eastern languages including modern Mandaean among others, as well as knowledge of English and German, in which previous translations were published. Above this, one must be able to understand the context and symbolism buried within these texts, which the high priests keep secret and only share with

²⁶ Jawwad Ali, *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Tārīkh al-'Arab Qabl al-Islām*, 3rd ed., vol. 6. (Baghdad: University of Baghdad, 1947), 701-2.

²⁷ Ḥayah bint Sa'īd Bā'akhḍar, "Al-Mustashriqūn wa Diyānat al-Ṣābi'ah al-Mandā'iyyah min Khilāl Mawāqi' al-Ṣābi'ah al-Mandā'iyyīn," *Majallat al-Andalus li al-'Ulūm al-Insāniyyah wa al-Ijtimā'iyyah* 3, no. 8 (2014): 124, <https://doi.org/10.12816/0009162>.

others in the priesthood.²⁸ However, at least two projects of this nature have been published to date; editors Carlos Gelbert and Mark Lofts published a translation based on a Mandaean-approved Iranian version and Qais and Hamed al-Saadi, two educated members of the Mandaean community, published an English translation in 2012.

As for Bā'akhḍar's other article comparing Mandaean and Muslim beliefs concerning Yaḥyā, it does not offer much more than what we currently know about these beliefs. However, she does offer a clear and concise explanation of the meaning of prophethood to the Mandaeans. According to Bā'akhḍar, prophethood is not by God's decree per se, rather it is through individual efforts to purify themselves, perfect their ethics, and train their souls through worship that they arrive to gnosis. The likes of Adam, Seth, and Enoch subdued their desires to the point that they attained gnosis and taught others their wisdom.²⁹ Therefore, their idea of prophethood is someone who acquired wisdom and taught it to others as opposed to divine intercession in lives of human beings or an establishment of divine laws.

One valuable work on Sabianism written in Arabic is 'Abdullah Samak's *al-Ṣābi'ūn*. It paints a thorough picture of Sabianism in Islamic sources and offers a detailed look into the essential narratives of the Mandaeans, which allows the reader to get a wholistic view into the religious world of the Mandaeans. In addition to compiling a wealth of sourced information, his analysis has been critical to helping me understand how classical Muslim scholars like al-

²⁸ Bā'akhḍar, "Al-Mustashriqūn," 114-7.

²⁹ Ḥayah bint Sa'īd Bā'akhḍar, "A Critical Study of the Creed of the Mandaean Sabians Regarding Yaḥyā 'Alayhi al-Salām (John)," *Majallat Umm al-Qurā li 'Ulūm al-Sharī'ah wa al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmīyah*, no. 64 (2014): 16-7, <https://doi.org/10.12816/0022199>.

Shahrastānī might have perceived Sabianism. An example of this is where Samak provides the historical phases by which Sabianism transformed from monotheism to polytheism.³⁰ Samak's presentation of Mandaean narratives of the prophets will be essential to my discussion of Qur'anic polemics against Sabian beliefs about the prophets in Chapter 5.

Another valuable work was published in 2010 by the prolific Iraqi scholar Khaz'al al-Mājidī titled *Al-Mithūljīyah al-Mandā'īyah*. This book contains a detailed analysis of the Mandaean religion from their sources and his personal field work with the Iraqi Mandaean community. Al-Mājidī's presentation of the Mandaeans differs from that of Samak in that he is slightly more objective in his analysis. He only mentions Islamic perspectives on events when they increase understanding of the topic at hand while also not accepting them uncritically. However, the work is not without its contradictions. For instance, he asserts that there was no relation between the *Ṣābi'ūn* of Ḥarrān and the Mandaeans, but in his recording of their history from Mandaean sources he clearly establishes a relationship between them in their narratives of Biblical patriarchs like Abraham and Moses.³¹ Overall, *Al-Mithūljīyah* represents one of the most detailed and well-researched works on the Mandaeans in the Arabic language.

The Arabic sources appear to unanimously affirm that the Mandaeans are the historical Sabians, or at least a surviving branch. The obsession with who the Sabians were or were not that pervades the works of de Blois, van Bladel, and others is not considered in these sources. This

³⁰ 'Abdullah 'Alī Samak, *Al-Ṣābi'ūn*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1995), 64-76.

³¹ Khaz'al al-Mājidī, *Al-Mithūljīyah al-Mandā'īyah* (Damascus: Dār al-Nīnawā, 2010), 20 and 38-41. Al-Mājidī mentions that Abraham had a brother named Ḥarrān, that Ḥarrān, the city, was home to 60,000 Mandaean scholars by the time of Moses, and that the Jews had driven them out of the land of Ḥarrān into Babylon.

could be because they operate under two assumptions: 1) that the Mandaean self-identification as Sabians is sufficient and they are more aware of their history than outsiders and 2) Muslim authors apply a broad definition of what it means to be a Sabian, one that encompasses people of previous traditions who hold beliefs in monotheism and prophethood that are not compatible with mainstream Islamic conceptualizations.

2.3 Classical Arabic Scholarship

There is no lack of published classical sources written in Arabic that discuss religion in the ancient world, but there are a few sources that recur in nearly all the above-mentioned explorations. In this study, I will revisit these pivotal Arabic texts from the fourth to seventh Islamic centuries that interpret for Muslim audiences perspectives on the identity and practices of Sabians, namely Ibn al-Nadim's *al-Fihrist*, al-Shahrastānī's *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, and Ṣā'īd al-Andalusī's *Al-Ta'rif fi Ṭabaqāt al-Umam*. With aims of illuminating *interpretatio islamica*, I will primarily focus on how these authors frame Sabians and Sabianism into an Islamic worldview. While each work takes a different approach, but there is also much agreement in their perspectives on the mystery of the Sabians, *Hanīfs*, and Zoroastrians, classifications of pre-Islamic civilizations, and the role astrology plays in their beliefs. The body of my research will compare these classical framings of Sabians to those of modern works by closely examining their word choice, recurring names and themes, and overarching paradigms.

Ibn al-Nadim authored *al-Fihrist* in 377/987 at the height of the Abbasid Translation Movement. He was a copyist and bookseller, who not only catalogued the works in circulation in Baghdad at the time but was keen on documenting background information on the authors,

translators, scholars, and civilizations from which these works came.³² *Al-Fihrist* offers a snapshot of the books that were read prior to its publishing date in the 4th Islamic century. In addition, Ibn al-Nadīm relates several important historical counts that elucidate some of the beliefs and practices of the Sabians, such as those related by al-Kindī and Abū Yūsuf ʿIshaʿ al-Qaṭīʿah. His verbatim recounting of ancient works that discuss the Sabians, their history, and knowledge carries significant meaning for this study, as they constitute some of the earliest Arabic writings on the topic.³³

Ṣāʿid al-Andalusī writes during the Islamic 5th century in Spain. Taking inspiration from Ibn al-Nadīm and Ibn Ḥazm, he aims at providing an Islamic historical framework that classifies ancient civilizations into seven categories. He then gives details about each civilization and the disciplines in which they excelled, tracking their intellectual genealogy to Andalusian scholars of his time.³⁴ Moreover, he provides some key insights into Muslim perceptions of Sabianism, which he believes is the religion of the ancient world before its decline. While this work is mentioned in Western scholarship, its historical framework has not been taken seriously despite its popularity in the Medieval Islamic world.

Writing most likely in the earlier half of the Islamic 6th century in the Khorasan region (Afghanistan), al-Shahrastānī attempts to provide a fair assessment of the religious groups who knew of at the time. His detailed insights into the multitudes of religious currents are

³² J. W. Fück, "Ibn Al-Nadīm," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, April 24, 2012), http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/*-SIM_3317.

³³ Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Ishaq Ibn Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist* (Beirut: Dar al-Maʿrifah, 937), 331-4.

³⁴ Ṣāʿid Al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt Al-Umam* (Beirut: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Kāthālūkīyya li'l Abā' al-Yasū'īyyīn, 1912).

invaluable to understanding the religious climate in the ancient world. The work is often credited with being one of the first works of comparative religion. As mentioned previously, al-Shahrastānī has been studied and criticized in Western scholarship at length, but I will read his work in tandem with other Islamic sources that share a similar paradigm.

The list of relevant classical Arabic sources is in no way confined to the above-mentioned texts. Indeed, some classical works worthy of study in relation to the topic of Sabians are al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr’s exegetical works, as well as some writings of Ibn Taymīyah, which we will examine in section 4.1. Other works that dig deeper into the details of Sabianism in classical Arabic scholarship but are beyond the scope of this study are: al-Bīrūnī’s *Athār al-Bāqiyah*, Abū Ma‘shar’s *Kitāb al-Mudkhal al-Kabīr* and *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Duwal*, and Ibn Waḥshīyah’s *Al-Filāḥah al-Nabaṭīyah*.

Chapter 3: Sabianism and *Interpretio Islamica*

To better understand Islamic literature on Sabianism, we must read them in light of *interpretatio*, the various methods of cross-cultural interpretation. These methods were employed between the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Persians (all of whom have been referred to as Sabians in classical Islamic texts), as well as by Jews and Christians. This section presents the theoretical concept of *interpretatio* by illuminating how it was practiced by past civilizations. It will also introduce the concept of *interpretatio islamica* by briefly reviewing examples of its practice in Islamic history.

Interpretatio is the act of one civilization or culture translating ideas and practices from another civilization or culture. There are no standard rules for how this is done, but several authors have observed the appearance of this phenomenon in hegemonic civilizations throughout antiquity. Albert de Jong defines *interpretatio graeca* as “the ‘translation’ of foreign divine names (and practices) into Greek divine names (and practices).” However, he is cautious not to present a formula of how Greek authors performed this “translation,” because it depended on the personal religion of the interpreter, the religious community he belonged to, and his understanding of the foreign divinity or practice. Due to these variables, there was no universal method of *interpretatio graeca*. Moreover, *interpretatio* goes two ways; one made by members of the dominant culture, and one made by members of the subordinate culture. Jong states that Persian authors performed *interpretatio iranica* concurrently to *interpretatio graeca*, which led to a different equation of deities than that put forth in *interpretation graeco*. For instance,

sometimes the Greek deity, Apollo, was analogous to Mithra, and at other times analogous to Tīri³⁵

Speaking of the Roman context, Clifford Ando asserts that “*interpretatio Romana* resembles many of the other mechanisms with which Romans and their subjects negotiated cultural difference, translation among them...” Ando suggests that in the ancient world, there was a general tolerance of religion because they assumed all religions were the same, they simply used a different language. Conflict often resulted from mistranslations, misinterpretations, and cultural divergences. Ando gives the example of the differences between Greek and Roman understandings of the concept of *in fidem*, which the Romans understood as an unconditional surrender while the Greeks understood it to mean a full pardon.³⁶ While both groups believed in this one concept, they understood it two different ways, and could therefore be a point of contention when they are confronted with the situation to apply it.

Religions based on revelation like Christianity and Judaism also needed to perform *interpretatio* of knowledge and practices from ancient civilizations while divorcing them from their theological beliefs. As Johann Konrad Eberlein describes, this was the work of Philo, the Jewish Platonist from Alexandria and the early Christian reformer, Paul. Philo used an allegorical approach to interpreting the Pentateuch to harmonize pagan philosophy and Judaism. His interpretation of scripture included a historical, legislative, liturgical, and prophetic analysis. His methods and writings would later influence pivotal Christian thinkers such as Origen,

³⁵ Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 30-33.

³⁶ Ando, “*Interpretatio Romana*,” 44-50.

Augustine, Clement, and Ambrose. Similarly, the Apostle Paul applied an allegorical method - which Eberlein calls typology - to read the Old Testament in light of emerging Christian thought. Eberlein points to Paul's equating Christ to Adam and baptism to the crossing of the Red Sea and the great flood as examples of *interpretatio christiana*. Other methods of *interpretatio* employed by early Christians include semantic encoding (i.e., translation), etymology, and dream interpretation.³⁷

In the Muslim world, *interpretatio islamica* is best exemplified by the Translation Movement, which was initiated by the Abbasid caliph, Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr, who consulted and employed in his court scholars of the ancient sciences. These scholars were from a myriad of religious and linguistic backgrounds. However, they were being subsumed into an Islamic world order that valued their knowledge for the benefit of the empire. Gutas contends that the Translation Movement was not a temporary trend. To the contrary, it lasted over 200 years, from the reign of al-Manṣūr well until the Būyid period. Its support base came from many different strata of the Abbasid society, including different religious and sectarian affiliations. He further emphasizes that the movement was not simply thoughtless translation but was characterized by philological and academic rigor. To this point, Gutas argues that the Translation Movement ceased not because translators ran out of texts to translate, but because the ancient texts were no longer relevant to the society and the need emerged to produce scholarship that was more socially relevant. In other words, Islamicate scholarship had advanced pass the issues discussed

³⁷ Eberlein, "Interpretatio Christiana."

by the ancients. Thus, scholars like Ibn Sīnā, Ibn al-Haytham, al-Farābī, and al-Bīrūnī began to approach ancient works critically and produce works on their own terms.³⁸ This would be the point at which such Muslim authors were conducting *interpretatio islamica*, by interpreting ancient cultures, religion, and knowledge for an Islamic worldview.

El Daly believes that Muslim scholars saw the study of ancient civilizations as a basic human need and they preserved both the oral and material culture of the ancients for historical evidence, proof of the Qur'an's veracity, reminders of humans' past and future state, souvenirs of their ancestral greatness, as well as their monetary value. While this need undoubtedly carried religious undertones, El Daly contrasts classical Muslim scholarship on ancient Egypt to that of early European Egyptology. He argues that Muslim scholarship was not blinded by the Qur'an, but European scholars could only read the history of ancient Egypt through the lens of the Old Testament. Another major difference between Muslim and European scholarship was the fact that Muslim scholars had the privilege or insight to study the past and present as a continuum, rather than compartmentalizing their studies. This meant that Muslim scholars did not close chapters of history as European scholars commonly did by claiming, for instance, that ancient Egypt ended with the decline of the New Kingdom.³⁹ Muslim scholars often seemed intent on connecting the ancients with themselves or with another contemporaneous people.

It might seem intuitive that Muslim scholars were in the business of interpretation, but Western scholarship normally portrays them only as interpreters of the "Islamic tradition"

³⁸ Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 2 and 152-3.

³⁹ El-Daly, *Egyptology*, 10-.

(Qur'an, hadith, jurisprudence, and Arabic language). They are not usually perceived as interpreters of preceding religions, cultures, and practices, and non-Muslims in Muslim-dominated lands are not perceived to have a role in interpretations of Islam. Yet, there is ample evidence of this interpretive interplay in classical Arabic texts. Some modern scholarship erroneously assumes that Muslim writers had no intimate knowledge of other religions and cultures, were incapacitated by the Qur'anic perspective on them, and naively believed false narratives about various people and faiths they encountered.

I argue, on the other hand, that classical Muslim writers were likely more connected to ancient civilizations through shared culture, proximity, and familial and intellectual lineages than we commonly think. Not only that, but those who expounded on ancient religions (particularly Sabianism) were in fact following the pattern of previous hegemonic powers in the tradition of *interpretatio*. A dominant culture needs some form of *interpretatio* to adapt ideas, knowledge, and practices from a subordinate culture. Likewise, the subordinate culture needs *interpretatio* to maintain their identity and negotiate their status in a society dominated by the other.

One might ask: why was a process of *interpretatio* necessary? Was it not possible for Muslims to benefit from information rooted in other cultures without "Islamizing" it? And could a minority group not live within a Muslim society without fitting themselves into an Islamic narrative? While this line of questioning reflects neo-liberal concerns in the modern day, *interpretatio* appears to be a common practice of civilizational transfer throughout history and is supported by the Islamic literary corpus. If we examine a selection of classical Islamic writings on ancient religious groups, for instance, we will inevitably find jurists giving legal rulings on them, theologians classifying their beliefs based on Qur'anic terminology, and historians attempting to find their place in history according to Qur'an, hadith, Arabian folklore, and

judaica narratives. Similarly, we find various minority religious groups, such as the Ḥarrānians and Mandaean assigning themselves a place in Muslim scripture and history, often interpreting those sources themselves, to obtain a *dhimmī* status in Islamic societies. Whether these claims are factually true is not the focus of this study and whether *interpretatio* is valid in current times or not is irrelevant. This study focuses on the function of Islamic texts in the broader context of *interpretatio*.

If we were to examine various instances in which Muslim scholars engage the topic of Sabianism, we would find them using these techniques to affirm, sanction, or reinterpret Sabian identity, beliefs, practices, and knowledge. Indeed, this has been a longstanding conflict in the Islamic world as we can identify in the debates between the Muʿtazilites and the Traditionalists. One example of this *interpretatio islamica* can be found in the debate that ensued between al-Ghazālī’s *Tahāfut al-Filāsifah* and Ibn Rushd’s *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* on the utility of ancient Greek knowledge, which many Muslim scholars understood to be influenced by Sabians. Al-Ghazālī took a legal and theological approach by judging which philosophical ideas were acceptable for Muslims to believe and which places a Muslim in the category of disbelief (*kufur*).⁴⁰ Ibn Rushd’s response was a utilitarian argument. He argues that instead of reinventing the wheel in the use of analogy in metaphysical matters, it is necessary to look to those who have done so before, even if they were not of his religion.⁴¹ In addition, he states that the “craft of

⁴⁰ Abu Hamid Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazali’s Tahāfut al-Falāsifah: Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali, Pakistan Philosophical Congress Publication, no. 3 (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963), 6.

⁴¹ Averroës, *The Attitude of Islam Towards Science and Philosophy: A Translation of Ibn Rushd’s (Averroës) Famous Treatise Faṣḥul-al-Maqāl*, trans. Aadil Amin Kak (Sarup & Sons, 2003), 139.

ḥikmah” needs to be passed down like other crafts.⁴² Ibn Rushd’s *interpretatio* is therefore to tie Muslim philosophers into a chain of transmission that connects them to the ancient Greek philosophers. As such, both authors were performing *interpretatio islamica* by propounding perspectives on ancient and foreign philosophy for Muslim audiences.

Interpretatio islamica can inform our understanding of Sabianism and ancient religions in modern times. Scholars have yet to apply this concept to peleo-Islamic history or the Qur’an with regards to the Sabians. Only esoteric strains like the Freemasons, Theosophists, and Traditionalists have come close to conducting such an analysis on Sabianism (which they know as the Ancient Mysteries), and I use some of their concepts to inform my own analysis. Their discussions commonly seek to reclaim knowledge and wisdom that was lost due to materialism and the degradation of the human condition due to modernity, but it can also be applied to the history of ancient religions.

Our questions at hand are: how can we reevaluate our current understanding of religious life in 6th and 7th century Arabia in a way that realistically reflects its relationships to surrounding civilizations? How did classical Islamic scholars address the topic of ancient religions and the knowledge inherited from them? More importantly, how did these scholars interpret visages of ancient religions and their inherited knowledge in theological, legal, and historical writings, and for what aim? Underlying these questions is the notion of which voices are allowed to be part of the scholarly conversation. In my opinion, many studies on Sabianism in the field of Near

⁴² Averroës, *The Attitude of Islam Towards Science and Philosophy*, 141-42.

Eastern studies muffle the voices of classical Muslim scholars and are quick to judge the accuracy of information related by these scholars. Moreover, they often focus on what the scholar is *saying* rather than looking at what he is *doing* by publishing these works, which I will argue is cross-cultural *interpretatio islamica*. I will also offer a new way of reading pre-Islamic Arabian history, paleo-Islamic history, as well as the stories of selected prophets in the Qur'an considering our current understanding of Sabianism.

Chapter 4: Sabian Identity in Classical Arabic Scholarship

The verses *al-Baqarah*: 62, *al-Mā'idah*: 69, and *al-Ḥajj*: 17 are the only verses in the Qur'an that mention Sabians by name. The fact that the term is mentioned beside terms with which we are more familiar, i.e., Jews and Christians, has given exegetes an indication as to who they are, or rather who they appear to be. This has led many of the early Muslim scholars to pontificate on their status for an Islamic worldview; each one contributing to a multifaceted *interpretatio Islamica*. Qur'anic exegetes and jurists pondered their legal status, while historians pondered their role in the overall Islamic narrative, and theologians pondered their beliefs in a Qur'anic framework. In this chapter, I will examine Qur'anic exegetical and legal perspectives on Sabians, particularly some of the earliest rulings recorded by al-Ṭabarī, with the purpose of highlighting a jurists' approach to *interpretatio*. Then I will examine three of the earliest and most widely cited primary sources from the Islamic canon to highlight historical and theological approaches to *interpretatio*. This exploration will demonstrate how reading these sources through the lens of *interpretatio* reveals new layers of meanings and the functions of these texts, which was to interpret non-Abrahamic religions in Islamic terms.

4.1 Qur'anic Exegetes and Jurists

Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) authored one of the first encyclopedic works of Qur’anic exegesis, which features the major opinions of early Muslim scholars who are quoted in many subsequent commentaries of the Qur’an. In his explanation for the verse with the first instance of the word *Ṣābi’ūn*, *al-Baqarah: 62*, al-Ṭabarī presents eleven points from various scholars concerning the Sabians. In the minds of modern scholars, it appears that he was just as puzzled as we are today about the precise identity of the Sabians. However, I will demonstrate below that the opinions he provided add up to a scant, but coherent concept of Sabianism, based on his legal approach to *interpretatio*. I found that subsequent reports on Sabians in the Qur’an generally do not diverge much from his initial citation of previous scholars so I will start by enumerating his points.

Al-Ṭabarī’s linguistic definition of a *Ṣābi’* is one who converts from one religion to another, similar to an apostate. The word is also used to denote that a star appears in a determined place in the sky or the growth of a child’s front teeth.⁴³ These two definitions signify that the origin of the word is related to religious conversion and the appearance of something at a pre-determined location. Before entering the discussion, al-Ṭabarī asserts that the scholars differed over who this title should be applied to. Some believed that it applied to anyone who converted from one religion to another. Others say it should be applied to a people who have no religion. Al-Ṭabarī’s

⁴³ Abū Ja‘far Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ Al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muhammad Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymīyyah, 2008), 145.

first two points claim that the Sabians are neither Jews nor Christians and have no religion. In another two points - both attributed to the Kufan exegete, Mujāhid – the Sabians are said to be between the Jews and the *Majūs* (Zoroastrians). One mentions that their slaughtered meat is not to be eaten and their women are not to be married. The other point also mentions that they have no religion. The following point records a dialogue between Ibn Jurayj and ‘Atā in which Ibn Jurayj states that the Sabians are a tribe from the area of al-Sawād (Iraq) and reiterates that they are not *Majūs*, Jews, or Christians. ‘Atā then says, “We have heard this. The pagans also said the Prophet - peace and blessings be upon him - had ‘left his religion’ (*ṣab’a*).”⁴⁴ In another point, Ibn Zayd states that the Sabians are a people upon one of the religions that was situated in the vicinity of Mosul who used to say “there is no god but God” but they had no practices, no book, and no prophet. Only the statement “there is no god but God.” They did not believe in the prophethood of Muhammad. For that reason, the polytheists used to say of the Prophet and his disciples “they are Sabians,” comparing between the two groups.

The final four points all affirm that Sabians are People of the Book who worship the angels. Some scholars hold that they pray five times a day towards the *qiblah* (the direction of the *Ka’bah*), and they read the *Zabūr*.⁴⁵ Al-Ṭabarī concludes that the meaning of this verse is that if

⁴⁴ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’*, 146.

⁴⁵ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’*, 147. The *Zabūr* is understood by most exegetes to be unnamed divine scriptures. Other opinions include that it was specifically the Psalms of David and a cursive script in southern Arabia. See Josef Horowitz and R. Firestone, “Zabūr,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill, April 24, 2012), [doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8061](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8061) and Jacques Ryckmans, “Inscribed Old South Arabian Sticks and Palm-Leaf Stalks: An Introduction and a Palographical Approach,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 23 (1993): 127–40.

these people believed in their religions, then they learn about Muhammad and believe in him and the Last Day, then they will have their reward with their Lord.⁴⁶

In stating these opinions, al-Ṭabarī is putting forth a general view of the Sabians. First, it could mean that they are a people who converted from Zoroastrianism to Judaism or Christianity (or vice versa). In that process they most likely retained elements from their previous religion, making them neither Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian. While their meat should not be eaten and their women not to be married, they can still retain a status as People of the Book because they are not polytheists. In some of these statements, they are characterized by syncretic practices that appear to be like those of Islam, such as their declaration of monotheism, their five daily prayers, and the direction in which they pray. However, they are clearly not Muslims because they reject the prophethood of Muhammad and claim to read other scriptures.

As for the Sabian worship of angels, this requires some explanation. If they were truly monotheists who say, “there is no god, but God,” then would it be fitting that they worship angels? Put another way, would their worship of angels not be classified as polytheism? As al-Shahrastānī will demonstrate, angel worship was a stage in the evolution of Sabian belief and practice. It can be understood from other Qur’anic verses that many so-called pagans actually believed in a single creator, but they worship intercessors out of a sense that those intercessors are purer and closer to God as we will see in more detail when we discuss al-Shahrastānī’s *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* (section 4.2.3).⁴⁷ In addition, more than one scholar mentions a group in Iraq

⁴⁶ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 149.

⁴⁷ See Qur’an (*Zumar*: 3 and 38).

identified as Sabians. Other scholars would later revisit these points, but it suffices us to say that al-Ṭabarī has gathered several opinions from *Tābi* ṭ scholars on Sabianism. Their opinions provide a framework by which later scholars will establish a more concrete conception of Sabianism.

With regards to verse 62 of *al-Baqarah*, al-Qurtubī states that the word for Sabian has two forms: *ṣābi*ʿ and *ṣābin*. Scholars differed about the placement of the *hamzah*. The former variant of the word, which contains a *hamzah* in the final position, has a connotation to *khurūj* (leaving) or *ṭulū*ʿ (rising). Nāfiʿ (the Medinan reciter), whose recitation omitted the *hamzah*, preferred the latter variant, which has a connotation to *mayl* (bending or turning). Like the definitions that al-Ṭabarī related, al-Qurtubī states that the Arabs considered a person who converted to another religion a *ṣābi*ʿ. As such, the Meccans considered the early Muslims to be *ṣābi*ʿ. However, scholars like al-Zamakhsharī believe the word applies to one who has left one of the religions of the People of the Book.⁴⁸

There was clearly a difference of opinion on whether the Sabians are a People of the Book. Ishāq ibn Rāhawayh and Ibn Mundhir said there is no harm in eating their slaughtered meat because they are a sect of the People of the Book. Abū Ḥanīfah had a similar opinion on the grounds that they followed a revealed scripture.⁴⁹ However, Abū Yūsuf and al-Shaybānī

⁴⁸ Abū ʿAbd Allah Muḥammad ibn ʿAḥmad al-ʿAnṣārī Al-Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ Li ʿAḥkām al-Qurʿān*, vol. 1, 21 vols. (Riyad: Dar Alam al-Kutub, 2003), 434; Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar Zamakhsharī, ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd, and ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ, *Al-Kashshāf ʿan Ḥaqāʾiq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl Wa-ʿUyūn al-Aqāwīl Fī Wujūh al-Taʾwīl*, 1st ed. (Riyād : Maktabat al-ʿUbaykān, 1998), 287.

⁴⁹ Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ*, 434.

prohibited it on the grounds that they do not have a scripture that is recognized by Muslims. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ appears to believe that Abū Ḥanīfah arrived at his position by mistake. He was apparently deceived into believing that the Sabians were actually following Christian scripture and he thus based his opinion on this faulty information.⁵⁰ Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad also stated that their religion resembled that of the Christians, except that their *qiblah* was in the direction of the southerly wind and they claim to follow the religion of Noah.⁵¹ Ibn Abī Ḥātim was of the opinion that they were a people from Kūthā, Iraq (an ancient Sumerian city now called Mount Ibrahim). They believed in all of the prophets, fasted 30 days throughout the year, and prayed five times a day facing Yemen. There was also an opinion that they were those who the message of Muhammad had not yet reached.⁵²

Other classical exegetes like al-Qurṭubī and Ibn Kathīr also relate the opinions of Mujāhid, Ibn Zayd, and other scholars that Sabianism is a mix of Judaism and Zoroastrianism, they worship angels, read the *Zabūr* and pray in the direction of the *Ka'bah*. When Wahb ibn Munabbih was asked about them, he said, “Only God knows [for sure]. They do not have a revealed law (*sharī'ah*) that they adhere to, but they do not speak disbelief.”⁵³ However, others insisted they were unbelievers. For instance, Abū Sa'īd al-Iṣṭakhrī ruled as such upon learning of

⁵⁰ Oussama Arabi, David Stephan Powers, and Susan A. Spector, eds., *Islamic Legal Thought: A Compendium of Muslim Jurists*, Studies in Islamic Law and Society, volume 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 135.

⁵¹ Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi'*, 434.

⁵² Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr and Sāmī ibn Muhammad al-Salāmah, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, 2nd ed., 8 vols. (Dār al-Ṭayyibah, 1999), 286-7.

⁵³ Ibn Kathīr and Salāmah, *Tafsīr*, 286.

their belief that the stars govern the affairs of human beings.⁵⁴ Ibn Kathīr gives a decisive statement based on the statements of Mujāhid and those who followed him. He agrees that the Sabians do not fit into the categories of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, or polytheists. They are a people who remained in their primitive state (*fiṭrah*) and followed no religion. Therefore, the polytheists of Mecca called the early Muslims Sabians, because they did not follow any of the known religions in their locale, meaning that Sabianism is an unknown or unfamiliar set of religious beliefs.⁵⁵

Ibn Taymīyah enumerates the opinions recorded by al-Ṭabarī and provides his interpretation of them. He believes that the Arabs were rightly guided Sabians (*Hunafā'*) who honored Abraham and Ishmael before 'Amr ibn Luḥay innovated the practice of worshiping idols to the Arabs. They did not have a book or revealed law. They only stuck to making pilgrimage to the ancient shrine (Ka'bah).⁵⁶ As for those who said that they read the Zabūr, Ibn Taymīyah says that they were referring to those who entered a religion of the people of the book. These types of Sabians when they became Christian used to shave the middle of their heads. Those that worship the angels are a type of Sabian considered to be of the polytheists. He cites al-Shafi'ī and Aḥmad who both said if they entered the religion of the People of the Book then they are considered from among them, but if they do not then they are considered polytheists.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi'*, 434.

⁵⁵ Ibn Kathīr and Salāmah, *Tafsīr*, 287.

⁵⁶ Taqī al-Dīn Abū'l-'Abbās Aḥmad Ibn Taymīyah, *Al-Radd 'alā al-Manṭaqiyyīn* (Pakistan: Dār Turjumān al-Sunnah, 1976), 455.

⁵⁷ Ibn Taymīyah, *Al-Radd 'alā al-Manṭaqiyyīn*, 456.

Ibn Taymīyah highlights that there was a difference of opinion regarding accepting the *jizyah* from them. There are those who accepted the *jizyah* from them like Mālik, Abū Ḥanīfah, and Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal according to one of two of his narrations. There were those who did not accept the *jizyah* from them if they did not enter one of the religions of the People of the Book, like al-Shāfi‘ī and Aḥmad in one of his narrations.⁵⁸

Ibn Taymīyah is clearly of the opinion that the Sabians were ancient philosophers and *some* of them were People of the Book. As for the Sabians of Ḥarrān, Ibn Taymīyah declares them to be polytheists who worship the stars and the planets. Their meat is not to be eaten and their women not to be married. Even if they present a belief in the prophets, it is the philosophers’ concept of prophethood that the Sabian philosophers follow.⁵⁹ However, he concedes that there are records of the great philosophers who were *al-Ṣābi’ah al-Ḥunafa’* (the Righteous Sabians) and did not defy the words of the prophets. He states that they were originally upon guidance, just as the Jews and Christians were. Then he cites *al-Baqarah* verse 62, which in his explanation means that they were believers until the coming of the Prophet Muhammad. If they did not accept his prophethood, then they became disbelievers and thus destined for hell and torment in the hereafter. Ibn Taymīyah goes on to say that they differ from the Majūs in this aspect. In verse 17 from *al-Ḥajj*, he argues that God does not praise them like He praises some of the Sabians. Therefore, the Majūs are not People of the Book. In contrast, the praiseworthy Sabians are those who do not contradict the prophets. As such, the praiseworthy philosophers - if they are not of

⁵⁸ Ibn Taymīyah, *Al-Radd ‘alā al-Manṭaqiyyīn*, 457.

⁵⁹ Ibn Taymīyah, *Al-Radd ‘alā al-Manṭaqiyyīn*, 456-7.

the Jews, Christians, or Muslims - then they are praiseworthy Sabians. The blameworthy philosophers are pagan magicians like Aristotle.⁶⁰

What we can gather from these various statements and debates is that these are primarily legal discussions. Not much information is given about their doctrines and rituals. Instead, they only provide enough information to determine their identity according to Islamic categories. Secondly, they are applying the term Sabian to different groups of people based on what is known or what is said of their doctrines and rituals. Included in this application is the linguistic meaning of *ṣab'a* and its terminological meaning given in the Qur'an. Therefore, early Muslims were called Sabians according to its linguistic meaning, not its terminological meaning. Subsequent groups are given this label according to early Muslim understandings of who the Qur'an was referring to when it mentioned the Sabians. Thus, we should understand that the job of a *faqīh* (jurist) is not to investigate the beliefs and practices of a people, but to provide a legal ruling from the Qur'an, hadith, and other primary sources using the methodology and previous legal rulings of the *madhhab* (legal school). In this process of analogy and applying old terms to new situations the identification of the original Sabians can become confounded. For instance, when Ibn Jurayj and Ibn Zayd identified groups in Iraq as Sabians, these groups would not have been those discussed in the Qur'an since the scripture's immediate audience was based in the Hijāz. Contemporary scholars, in their quest to locate the original community of Sabians, have lost sight of what the source material was intended to *do*. Early Qur'anic exegetes were not

⁶⁰ Taqī al-Dīn Abū'l-'Abbās Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya and 'Alī Muhammad 'Umrān, *Al-Radd 'alā al-Shādhulī Fī Hizbayhi Wa Mā Ṣannafahu Fī Ādāb al-Ṭarīq* (Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 2008), 136-7.

attempting to locate the Sabian community in the Qur'an, which might have been known to them, but had since become irrelevant because they would have identified as Muslims by then. Rather, their purpose was to apply the term given in the Qur'an to groups that existed in their time. A jurist's role in *interpretatio*, therefore, is to assign all groups and ways of being a label from the Qur'an.

4.2 Muslim Historians and Theologians

If the jurist's role was to assign legal labels to other religious groups, then a historian's role was to show where in the Muslim narrative these groups lay. Naturally, these historians would rely on the information gathered from exegetes and jurists, but their scope and source material were a lot broader. El-Daly notes that Muslim historians had a genuine interest in the history of humanity and this impetus was inspired by the Qur'an and hadith literature, but not limited to them. They learned about ancient religions and cultures in much the same way that modern-day archaeologists and historians learn about them; through classical texts and observing monuments and artefacts with the added dimension that they consulted the peoples who had a memory of the ancient ways.⁶¹

4.2.1 Ibn al-Nadīm's *Al-Fihrist*

In the 4th/10th century at the height of the Abbasid Caliphate, Ibn al-Nadīm, a Shī'ī copyist and bookseller, produced a book of his own that cataloged the written works in Arabic he knew were circulating in the Islamic world at the time. His *al-Fihrist* (meaning catalog or index) is valuable for several reasons, not the least of which is that it gives us an overview of what learned people were reading and studying in the 4th Islamic century and prior.⁶² The reader will notice

⁶¹ El-Daly, *Egyptology*, 9.

⁶² J. W. Fück, "Ibn Al-Nadīm," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Brill, April 24, 2012), http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/*-SIM_3317.

that most books mentioned were not originally authored by Muslim scholars. Rather they were attributed to more ancient non-Muslim authors, signifying that there was a critical mass of scholars in Islamicate lands studying the works of the ancients before they began to author books on their own. Ibn al-Nadīm goes beyond listing authors and titles. He also quotes from books, relates stories, and surveys the intellectual landscape of his day.⁶³

With regards to his characterization of the Sabians, he cites a passage that Ahmad ibn al-Ṭayyib quotes from al-Kindī. Speaking on the Sabians of Ḥarrān, they are characterized as a monotheistic people who believe in a transcendent deity, who is unlike the creation in every way. He has selected distinguished individuals to acknowledge His lordship. He sends messengers to these people to guide them aright. The Sabians say that the punishment is not eternal but expires after 9,000 cycles. The chosen ones are those who call to God and His correct way (*ḥanīfīyah*), upon which they took a vow. The Master Teachers they agree upon are *Arānī*, *Aghāthādhīmīn*, and *Hirmīs* (Heron, Agathodaemon, and Hermes Trismegistus), and some have included Solon, a maternal ancestor of Plato. All these teachers called to the same doctrine; there was no difference in their sacred law or customs. They also prayed in the same direction (*qiblah*), which faced the North Star. Their three daily prayers correspond with the fixed points of the earth, the east (*mashriq*), the zenith (*zuhr*), and the west (*maghrib*). One commences half an hour before the sunrise, the second after the zenith of the sun, and the third ending at sunset. They pray optional

⁶³ Preceding the introduction of his book, Ibn al-Nadīm states: “This is the index of the extant books for all the nations, Arab and non-Arab, [written] in the language of the Arabs and its script on the classifications of knowledge, the reports of their compilers, biographies of their authors [as well as] their lineages, date of birth, their lifespan, the time of their death, the lands in which they resided, and their virtues and shortcomings from the inception of when the field of knowledge was created until our current time, the year 377 of the Hijrah.” Ibn Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*.

prayers in at the second and ninth hours of the day and the third hour of the night. They perform all prayers with a proper ablution. Other practices include fasting and making animal sacrifices, which they perform in the name of the planets because the acceptance of a sacrifice is beneath God. The men also avoid intercourse with women during their menstrual cycles. The eating of pork and other animals with teeth in their jaws, as well as certain types of birds and vegetables are forbidden to them. They also have an aversion to people with missing body parts or those with a contagious disease like leprosy.⁶⁴ With the exception of a few major differences, this characterization portrays their religion as primarily monotheistic with practices and norms resembling those of Islam.

In other places, they are characterized quite differently. Other descriptions of their rituals related by Ibn al-Nadīm align more closely with Greek Mystery cults. He speaks of monthly rituals that involve animal and human sacrifice to gods, devils, jinns, and spirits. For instance, in the month of *Āb* (August), they make wine to their *ālihah* (gods), then they sacrifice a newborn child, baking its skin into small disks. All observers can eat from it except women, slaves, children of slave-women, and the insane.⁶⁵ Much like the etymology of our current days of the week in English and other European languages, they named their days for different planetary gods. Sunday (*Īlīyūs*) was the day of the sun, Monday (*Sīn*) was the day of the moon, Tuesday (*Irīs*) was the day of Mars, Wednesday (*Nābiq*) was the day of Mercury, Thursday (*Bāl*) was the

⁶⁴ Ibn Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, 442-4.

⁶⁵ Ibn Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, 447-8.

day of Jupiter, Friday (*Balthī*) was the day of Venus, and Saturday (*Qarnas*) was the day of Saturn.⁶⁶

In addition, Ibn al-Nadīm often describes their rituals as *asrār* (mysteries) that take place at one *bayt* (shrine) or another. This terminology is made evident in Bayard Dodge’s translation of the Sabian initiation account from *al-Fihrist*. He translates the word *asrār* as mysteries, and even makes a connection between this account of initiation and the Mithraic Mysteries. This is based on a repeated phrase from the ceremony, “our Lord is the victor, to whom we give delight.”⁶⁷ Dodge mentions that this could be an allusion to the deity Mithra, who was known as “the victor” or “the invincible.”⁶⁸ In the footnote to Ibn al-Nadīm’s description of their cultic practices, Dodge clearly makes the analogy between the practices of the Ḥarrānian Sabians and the rites of the Mithraic Mysteries.

Perhaps this faction of Ḥarrānian Sabians is spoken of in the story of their encounter with the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mūn on his way to fight the Byzantines.⁶⁹ The famous incident is narrated in *al-Fihrist* on the authority of a Christian by the name Abū Yūsuf Īsha‘ al-Qaṭī‘ah and is emblematic of a cross-religious *interpretatio* in which a Christian is relating an event that

⁶⁶ Ibn Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, 447.

⁶⁷ Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist*, 771. The statement given in Arabic is *rabbunā al-qāhir wa naḥnu nasurruhu*, Ibn Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, 455.

⁶⁸ Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist*, 770.

⁶⁹ Al-Mājidī points out that this story is only related by Ibn al-Nadīm, *Al-Mandā‘īyah*, 28. The House of Wisdom (*Dār al-Ḥikmah*) was established during al-Ma’mūn’s reign, and he was a patron of the ancient sciences. The Ḥarrānians were some of the most prominent beneficiaries of this patronage during the Abbasid era. So, it is unlikely that the encounter happened as is described here. Nevertheless, we know that Ḥarrānian scholars eventually self-identified as Sabians by the reign of al-Mu‘taḍid in the late 9th century. This narration is used as an example of how Muslim scholars conducted *interpretatio* to negotiate the status of the Ḥarrānians.

happened between Muslims and Sabians. According to the narration, al-Ma'mūn passed by the lands of the Sabians and detested their appearance because they wore capes and had long hair. He asked them what type of dhimmi they were. They did not have an immediate reply, so al-Ma'mūn gave them respite until he returned from Byzantium to either change their religion or face execution. In the meantime, many began to wear different attire and cut their hair. Many became Christians, some became Muslims, and others remained on their religion. Those who did not convert consulted a learned person from among them who came up with the solution to call themselves Sabians.

Al-Ma'mūn, however, did not return because he was killed in battle. Once the Ḥarrānians learned of this, they turned away from Christianity, grew their hair out, and started wearing their traditional attire. However, the Muslims forbade them from wearing capes because that was considered the dress of sultans. Those who converted to Islam remained so outwardly out of fear that they would be killed if they commit apostasy. Yet they were in the practice of marrying Ḥarrānian women and raising the male children as Muslims and the females as Sabians. The Muslim jurists that arose from their community, Abū Zīrārah and Abū 'Urūbah, later forbade Muslim men from marrying Ḥarrānian (i.e. Sabian) women because they were not People of the Book.⁷⁰ This story functions as a pretext for the ruling given by more than one Muslim jurist who decreed that their women are not to be married, just as the narrations of their pagan-esque sacrifices could serve as a reason as to why their slaughtered meat should not be eaten.

⁷⁰ Ibn Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, 445-6.

We can gather that the Muslims of Ibn al-Nadīm’s day who were reading this material were not under the impression that the Ḥarrānians were *the exact* Sabians mentioned in the Qur’an, but a faction of Sabians from elsewhere in the Near East. What we have in these descriptions is another example of *interpretatio islamica*; one conducted by a Ḥarrānian scholar, who investigated the Muslim scripture to find a place for his religion in Islam. Perhaps he understood as Ibn al-Kathīr understood that Sabianism is a term applied to people who follow an “unknown” or rather Mystery religion. The claim of Sabianism for the Ḥarrānians would have been a wise solution to their predicament if al-Ma’mūn approved of their *dhimmi* status. His approval would have strengthened the scholarly position that viewed the Sabians as People of the Book. However, the lack of precedence in this instance enabled the Muslim scholars that emerged from that community to circumvent the deceptive practice of Ḥarrānians claiming that their Sabianism granted them People of the Book status. They did this by decisively ruling that Sabianism did not grant this status.

The crux of the matter is that the practitioners of the Ancient Mysteries, in order to live in a society dominated by Muslims, needed to interpret their doctrine and practices in Islamic terms. Perhaps al-Kindī and Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib’s version of Sabianism is how the religion was presented to Muslim audiences. Of course, the Mysteries were no strangers to this practice of *interpretatio*, as they have translated their beliefs across language, cultures, and religions before, and in the case of the Ḥarrānians, we find that they were able to interpret the Muslim scripture for themselves in order to find their place in the Islamic worldview.

4.2.2 Şā‘id al-Andalusī’s *Ṭabaqāt al-Umam*

Abū al-Qāsim Şā‘id ibn abī al-Walīd Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Şā‘id al-Taghlibī al-Qurṭubī served as a judge (*qādī*) under the Dhannūnid amīr of Toledo, al-Ma’mūn Yaḥyā who reigned during the 5th/11th century. In addition to his background in Islamic jurisprudence, he had a keen interest in the history of the rational and esoteric sciences. This was the focus of one of his few extant works, *Al-Ta’rīf fī Ṭabaqāt al-Umam* (Exposition of the Generations of Nations).⁷¹ In this work, he provides a history of the sciences from its Sabian origins until his present time in Andalus. He took inspiration from Ibn al-Nadīm’s *al-Fihrist*. When *Ṭabaqāt* was published, the people of Andalus took pride in it and found it to be an indication of the amount of scholarly activity taking place in the East. Ibn Abār mentioned in *al-Takmilah* that when he arrived at Alexandria he narrated this book to the hadith scholar, Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī. Despite *Ṭabaqāt*’s popularity in the eastern Islamic world not many copies of the work were found in modern eastern libraries.⁷²

Al-Andalusī’s work has influences from Abū Muhammad ibn Ḥazm’s *Al-Faṣl fī al-Mīlāl wa’l-Ahwā’ wa’l-Niḥāl* and Ibn al-Nadīm’s *al-Fihrist*, as he gives an Islamic analysis to ancient religions like Ibn Ḥazm while tracking the history of ancient knowledge like Ibn al-Nadīm. However, his analysis of ancient religion is much more succinct than these two influences. A

⁷¹ Lutz Richter-Bernburg, “Şā‘id Al-Andalusī: Abū Al-Qāsim Şā‘id Ibn Abī Al-Walīd Aḥmad Ibn ‘Abd Al-Raḥmān Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Şā‘id al-Taghlibī Al-Qurṭubī,” in *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomer*, ed. Thomas Hockey et al., Springer Reference (New York: Springer, 2007), 1005-6.

⁷² Al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2.

narrative whose origin is not completely known but is worth investigating, nevertheless. It starts with a typology of the ancient civilizations (*umam*, singular *ummah*):

1. Persia, which extends from Northern Iraq to Central Asia.
2. Chaldea, which includes the Syrians, Babylonians, the Nabateans who dwelled in the Sawād of Iraq, Yemen, and Arabia. Its ancient language was Syriac, the language of Adam, Idrīs, Noah, and Lot.
3. Greece, which encompassed Rome, Franks, Bulgaria, Slavakia, Russia, etc.
4. The Copts, which included the people of Egypt, Sudan, Habasha, Nuba, the Zanj, Berbers, etc.
5. The Turks, which includes the Asian peoples of Georgia, Kīmāk, Khazar, Jīlān, Khūzān, etc.
6. Hind and Sind, who are the people of India.
7. China and the people of the Far East.⁷³

What is more peculiar is that he identifies them all as adhering to a single religion, Sabianism, which was based on the worship of heavenly bodies and making idols and statues of precious stones. They later dispersed to different regions, their languages branched off, and their religions were set apart from one another. Al-Andalusī further divides these *umam* into those that were known for their knowledge production and those that were not. Those known for

⁷³ Al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 5-7.

knowledge production, in his opinion, were India, Persia, Chaldea, Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Arabs. Those not known for knowledge production were the Chinses, Gog and Magog, the Turks, Khazars, Slavs, Bulgarians, Russians, Berbers, and some classes of the Sudan like the *Habasha*, Nubians, and *Zanj*.⁷⁴

When speaking of the Arabs, Al-Andalusī classifies them as many historians have. They are divided into the extinct (*bā'idah*) and extant (*bāqiyah*) Arabs. The extinct Arabs are the people of 'Ād, Thamūd, Jadīs, Ṭasm, al-'Amāliqah, and Jurhum and the extant Arabs are Qaḥṭān and 'Adnān. He further specifies the people of Qaḥṭān to the major tribes of Himyar, Kindah, Hamadān, Lakhm, Daws, and Madhḥij.⁷⁵ Al-Andalusī brings to light an aspect of the Arab's Sabianism by mentioning the deity that each tribe worshiped. For instance, Himyar worshiped the Sun (*al-shams*) and Kinānah worshiped the Moon (*al-qamar*). Taym worshiped Aldebaran, which is the bright star in the Taurus constellation (*al-dabarān*). Lakhm and Judhām worshiped Jupiter (*al-mushtarī*), Tayy worshiped Lambda Velorum (*sahīl*), Qays worshiped Sirius (*al-shu'rā al-'ubūr*), and Asad worshiped Mercury (*'aṭārid*). Allāt, al-Andalusī said, was the god of Thaḳīf and Iyād.⁷⁶ Al-Andalusī goes on to mention populations of Christians (*Naṣārā*) among the tribes of Rabī'ah, Ghassān, and Quḍā'ah, Jews (*Yahūd*) among the Himyar, Kinānah, al-Ḥarth,

⁷⁴ Al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 7-8.

⁷⁵ Al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 40.

⁷⁶ Al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 43.

and Kinda, and Zoroastrians (*Majūs*) among the Taym. As for the Quraysh, they were *Zandaqah*, who adopted the worship of idols from Ḥīra.⁷⁷

Al-Andalusī asserts that these Arab tribes were monotheists whose rituals involved the use of idols. They made images and structures not because they believed they were creator gods of the universe, but to seek nearness to the supreme God as stated in the Qur'anic chapter, *al-Zumar*: 4. Some of them, however, did not believe in the resurrection, the Day of Judgement, or the prophethood of Muhammad. Conversely, there were those who believed in these doctrines.⁷⁸ On face value, it is odd that al-Andalusī would refer to idol worshipers as monotheists and modern Arab historians like Shawqī Ḍayf have denied this claim.⁷⁹ However, we must examine the ancient religious persuasions of the Arabs considering al-Andalusī's presentation of Sabianism. If Sabianism was the original religion of all the ancient nations - and within this paradigm the original religion was monotheistic - then he is correct in his assertion. Moreover, we should not forget the aim of his work, which is to provide a history of the ancient sciences, especially astrology. Therefore, in his *interpretatio*, establishing a proto-monotheistic origin to the ancient sciences is necessary for a Muslim reception of them. He also provides a much more acceptable basis for the place of Sabianism in an Islamic worldview than Ibn al-Nadīm. While Ibn al-Nadīm alludes to the primordial origins of the Sabians, al-Andalusī states this explicitly.

⁷⁷ Al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 44.

⁷⁸ Al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 44.

⁷⁹ Shawqī Ḍayf, *Al-ʿAṣr al-Jāhilī*, 11th ed., vol. 1, *Tarikh Al-Adab al-ʿArabi* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1960), 89.

As for the sciences in which the Arabs specialized, they were foremost in language, poetry, oration, and history. He cites Abū Muhammad al-Hamadānī when he asserts that they knew the histories of all the neighboring peoples. He asserts that the ‘Amāliqah, Jurhum, and other ancient Arabs that inhabited Mecca knew the histories of the even more ancient Arabs, the Pharaohs, and the ancient People of the Book. Al-Andalusī attributes the Arab's knowledge of the history and genealogies to the fact that their location on Earth lay beneath the Zodiac house that traces the Sun's orbit, which passes through all seven planets and shows them events from all over the world. In addition, he states that although they were knowledgeable of the stars and the winds, they knew very little about philosophy, nor did God incline their nature to it. Al-Andalusī only recounts two Arabs who were endowed with knowledge of philosophy: Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī and Abū Muhammad al-Hamadānī.

After the Great Flood by 2,060 solar years, there was a smaller flood that broke the strait of Ma'rab. After this event the tribes of Aws and Khazraj migrated to Madinah and the tribe of Khuzā‘ah settled in Mecca. Al-Andalusī states that all the Arabs later embraced Islam and inhibited all forms of star and idol worship. They were then granted authority on earth by God but did not occupy themselves with the study of anything except language. There were some practitioners of medicine (which in ancient times was intrinsically connected to philosophy), but their practice was limited to that which was taught or encouraged by the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Andalusī then narrates the history of the Arabs under the reign of the Umayyads and the Abbasids. He counts the second Abbasid caliph, Abū Ja‘far ibn al-Manṣūr among those who were learned in philosophy and the craft of astrology by the time he assumed power. He and his successors then funded the translation of books from the ancients, encouraged his subjects to

learn knowledge from them, and debate in their presence so that they too could learn. In this way, the Abbasids were fulfilling the Platonic concept of the philosopher king.⁸⁰

Al-Anadaluṣī mentions these details about the Arabs to establish a clear link between the ancient sciences and the burgeoning Islamic civilization in which he lived, while also explaining Arab reticence towards philosophy and the other sciences. In the world that al-Andalusī paints through his *interpretatio* in his *Ṭabaqāt*, there is no religious prohibition against any of the ancient sciences because they all have their origins in a single monotheistic religion that the Prophet Muhammad later reformed. The aspects of worship changed, but the sciences practiced by the various civilizations remained valid fields of study.

4.2.3 Al-Shahrastānī's *Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*

Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī was born in the eastern province of Khorosan where he began his studies in jurisprudence at the feet of Salmān ibn Nāṣir ibn ʿImrān al-Naysabūrī as well as ʿAbd al-Raḥīm ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Hūzān. He lived between the end of the 5th/11th century and the first part of the 6th/12th century. The biographer, ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shaʿrānī, described him as a virtuous leader (*imām*), researcher, theologian, specializing in *uṣūl* (legal theory), and possessing erudition in literature and the "neglected sciences." Al-Shaʿrānī goes on to say that al-Shahrastānī was accused of heresy due to his inclination to those "neglected sciences" just as he was accused of having Shīʿī (Ismāʿīlī) leanings. It should be noted

⁸⁰ Al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 44-7.

that al-Sam‘ānī and Maḥmūd al-Khuwārizmī both reported this accusation.⁸¹ However, Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī defends al-Shahrastānī’s Ash‘arism, stating that his works do not show evidence of Ismā‘īlī leanings.⁸² Yet, modern scholars like Muḥammad Riḍā Jalālī Nā‘īnī, Muḥammad Taqī Dānishpazhūh, Wilferd Madelung, Guy Monnot, and Diana Steigerwald would reopen this discussion given evidence from another work of al-Shahrastānī, al-Majlis, which uses Ismā‘īlī terminology.⁸³

Whatever the truth of the matter, al-Shahrastānī would make the pilgrimage to Mecca and spend three years in Baghdad, where he studied at the Nizāmīyah. Chwolson also suggests that there al-Shahrastānī was exposed to the theosophical literature of the Sabians.⁸⁴ Among his major publications is *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal (Sects and Creeds)*, which is the Muslim world’s most popular heresiography and is known in the West as one of the first works of comparative religion. These characterizations, however, must be qualified with the actual character of the text. It is a heresiography in the sense that he apparently champions an Ash‘arite Sunnism and

⁸¹ ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Sam‘ānī, *Al-Muntakhab Min Mu‘jam Shuyūkh al-Sam‘ānī*, vol. 3. (Riyāḍ: Dār ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1996), 1502-3. The name Salmān ibn Nāṣir ibn ‘Imrān al-Naysabūrī was given as Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī by al-Sam‘ānī and ‘Abd al-Raḥīm ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hūzān as Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī.

⁸² Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, Maḥmūd Muhammad al-Ṭanāḥī, and ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Muhammad al-Ḥilwū, *Ṭabaqāt Al-Shafī‘īyah al-Kubrā*, vol. 6. (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyya, 1964), 129-30.

⁸³ Diana Steigerwald, “Al-Shahrastānī’s Contribution to Medieval Islamic Thought,” in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2005), 264-5. In my opinion, the theory that al-Shahrastānī was feigning belief in the Ash‘arī school while concealing his belief in the Ismā‘īlī doctrine is highly unlikely. He lived in a time when the Fāṭimids still ruled Egypt and even controlled parts of the Levant and the Hijaz. Had he sincerely held Ismā‘īlī beliefs, there was no need to hide it, because he could have relocated to the lands controlled by the Fāṭimids, rather than live in places where Ash‘arism dominated. In addition, the Ash‘arites that came after him endorsed his works as authentically Ash‘arī. What benefit would he obtain for publishing such a text while harboring opposing views?

⁸⁴ Lawrence, *Shahrastani*, 14-16.

classifies beliefs based on their proximity to that creed. It is also a work of comparative religion in that it presents each religious creed in the terms of its practitioners and scholars, and not solely in Islamic terms. His exposè reflects a depth of understanding of each tradition from its sources and lack of fanaticism. Rather this distancing of a religious system from Islam is always on theological grounds. This is evidenced by his presentation of Sabianism, pre-Islamic Arabian religion, and Indian religions. He refrains, in most instances, from using the Qur'ānic word, *shirk*, for the worship of anything besides God, and presents a nuanced view of these beliefs instead. Like al-Andalusī, al-Shahrastānī aims to classify the known world into categories. However, rather than classifying people into various nations or geographical regions, he seeks to classify them based on theological views.⁸⁵

Al-Shahrastānī's *interpretatio* in *al-Milal* includes a detailed typology of Sabian theological beliefs. These categories are: 1) angel worship (*aṣḥāb al-rūḥānīyāt*), 2) astral worship (*aṣḥāb al-hayākil*), 3) idol worship (*aṣḥāb al-ashkhāṣ*), and 4) reincarnation and pantheism (*al-tanāsukh wa al-ḥulūl*). We can assume that these categories are ordered in the sequence that they appeared because the logic of subsequent categories rely on the preceding categories. In turn, al-Shahrastānī is not only providing nuance to Sabian theology, but a logical rationale for paganism in its various iterations, while also disputing them.

Al-Shahrastānī describes the angel worshipers as those who direct their worship to the angels, called *rūḥānīyāt*. They affirm a belief in an All-wise Creator but believe Him to be

⁸⁵ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 1, 4.

transcendent and beyond the approach of human beings. Therefore, the angels must serve as intercessors between God and mankind. The masters (*arbāb*) among men are the likes of 'Ādhīmūn and Hermes (Shīth/Seth and Idrīs respectively), who purified themselves of all natural desires and perfected their ethics from all bodily fetters until they reach a state between human and angel.⁸⁶

Al-Shahrastānī presents this controversy between the angel worshiping Sabians and the Ḥanīfs over the nature of prophethood as a dialectic.⁸⁷ The *al-rūḥānī al-maḥḍ* (pure spirit), in the Sabian creed, is pure light and perfect in every way and is thus more worthy of worship and obedience than the *al-nabī al-bashar* (human prophet). The Ḥanīf view is that a prophet eats, drinks, and looks like normal human beings. To the angel worshipers, *al-rūḥānī al-maḥḍ* has transcended human desires and faults, and advanced to the level of an angel. The Ḥanīfs argue that they forgot about the means to know the angels, which is only through the human prophets such as Agathodaemon and Hermes.⁸⁸ The Sabians believe that the souls, when they enter the bodies, they are tainted with the bodily functions. They are only purified by acquiring good morals and performing good deeds until the soul departs the body and returns to its origins.⁸⁹ The angel worshipers say that the *rūḥānīyāt* have free will that originates from the command of God. They incline to good in all things and no evil can persuade them. This contrasts with mortals,

⁸⁶ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 298.

⁸⁷ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 294.

⁸⁸ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 294-345.

⁸⁹ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 322.

who, if it was not for the mercy of God, they would be taken by evil and corruption. The Ḥanīfs respond to this by saying that there is no honor in compulsion. The one who does not have an appetite will not be tempted. Therefore, the one who faces temptation and then forbids himself from it possesses a higher spiritual station.⁹⁰

To the astral worshipers, these intercessors must be visible for one to direct one's prayers to them. As such, they claimed that the *hayākil* (the seven planets or heavenly bodies) were visual representations of the angels and ascended masters. The planets were then assigned special days with specific rituals. For instance, Saturday was the day of Saturn, in which the worshiper wore special clothes, burned incense, and made formulaic prayers to Saturn. These planets were deemed "lords" (*arbāb*) and "gods" (*ālihah*), but generally referred to the Creator as the "Lord of lords" and "the God of gods." Some Sabians ascribed this designation to the sun. In their creed, the planets and stars were the physical manifestations of the angels. They posited the analogy that the angels are to the heavenly bodies as the human soul is to the human body. The angels speak through them just as the human soul speaks through its body and causes it to think, move, and behave in a particular manner.⁹¹ Thus, they worshiped the planets in order to transmit their worship to the angels, who then transmit their worship to the Creator.

Al-Shahrstānī recounts the astral worshipers' position that the *rūhānīyāt* are intercessors who serve the Creator in the same way that angels do in the Abrahamic traditions. They are the

⁹⁰ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 316. This is also an allusion to the Qur'anic verse from al-Nāzi'āt: 40-41, which can be translated as "As for whosoever fears the station of his Lord and prohibits his self from lower desires, then surely his abode is paradise."

⁹¹ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 348-9.

ones that play an active role in the lives of creation and guide people from their original state to a state of perfection. There are some who govern the behavior of the seven planets, which are called *haykal* (pl. *hayākil*) or astral bodies, and each *haykal* has its domain. The relationship between the *rūḥānīyāt* and their *hayākil* is like that between the spirit (*rūḥ*) and its body. In this sense, the *rūḥānīyāt* are "lords" (*arbāb*) or "fathers" (*abā'*), and its elements (*'anāṣir*) are considered "mothers" (*ummahāt*). The *rūḥānīyāt* determine the movement of elements, which cause them to assume their unique characteristics and make them prone to compounds and chemical reactions. This thus creates different types of plants and animals. Furthermore, each element and phenomenon are assigned an angel, which could be on a macro or micro level. For instance, there is an angel of rain, but each drop also has its own angel.⁹²

As for the idol worshipers, they believe as the astral worshipers believe that there must be a tangible intercessor by which the worshiper can approach the transcendent God. They insist on visible intercessors, however, the planets and stars are only seen at set times, like at night or in certain seasons. Therefore, in the times in which these astral bodies were not present, they must create forms to represent them in the form of idols. Al-Shahrastānī declares explicitly that the *aṣḥāb al-ashkhāṣ* are idol worshipers because they refer to images and idols as gods, and not merely intercessors.⁹³

Al-Shahrastānī then performs a scripture-based *interpretatio* to demonstrate how the Qur'an supports the Ḥanīf point of view and rejects that of the Sabians. He references the scenes from

⁹² Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 291.

⁹³ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 352-3.

chapters *Maryam*, *al-Anbiyā'*, and *al-An'ām*, in which Abraham opposes the religion of his father and his people. According to al-Shahrastānī, Abraham began with a verbal refutation against idol worship in *al-An'ām*: 74, *al-Şaffāt*: 95-96, and *Maryam*: 42. When that was not sufficient, he used demonstration, by destroying the idols except the largest one. He then claimed that the largest one did it to establish a demonstrable proof against the idol worship of his people, who undoubtedly understood when they bowed their heads, but chose to punish Abraham anyway by attempting to burn him to death (*al-Anbiyā'*: 63-65).

After that, according to al-Shahrastānī, Abraham insisted on establishing proof against the astral worshipers (*aşhāb al-hayākil*). Abraham was first shown the dominion of the heavens in the earth to increase his certainty (*al-An'ām*: 75). This was done to demonstrate that a human prophet could attain a lofty state above the angels and the stars. His proof against astral and sun worship was the fact that these bodies weakened and dissipated.⁹⁴

To al-Shahrastānī, the Ḥarrānians (which he wrote in its archaic form, *al-Ḥarnānīyah*)⁹⁵ were a type of Sabian, who espoused a unique theological approach that included reincarnation and pantheism. They believe that the Creator worthy of worship is “one and many.” He is one in His essence, the First, Original, and Eternal, but many in the sense that He can manifest in every idol made in His image. They also believed in cyclical epochs that reset every species of man,

⁹⁴ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 354-9.

⁹⁵ Dodge clarifies the term *al-Ḥarnānīyah al-Kaldīnīyīn* as the Ḥarrānian Sabians or the Chaldean Sabians. The word *Ḥarnānīyah* was the term designated specifically to the Sabians of Ḥarrān, whereas followers of other religions from that city were simply called Ḥarrānī. He says that the Chaldean descriptor further differentiates them from the Sabians of southern Iraq. Another opinion is that Chaldean in the singular form alludes to an astrologer. Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist*, vol. 2, 745.

animal, and vegetation every 36,425 years. Therefore, time is eternal. The ends of these cycles are what the prophets called *al-qiyāmah* (the Day of Resurrection). Otherwise, there is no abode besides the one in which we live. Al-Shahrastānī then references *al-Jāthiyah*: 24, which states this view on the tongue of the polytheists, “Nothing destroys us but time.” The Ḥarrānians also had no concept of resurrection from the grave. Al-Shahrastānī cites *al-Mu’minūn*: 35-36, in which those who deny the meeting in the Hereafter mockingly ask the believers, “Does he [the Prophet] promise you that when you die and turned to dust and bones, that you will be brought out [again]? Far, far is this from what you were promised.”⁹⁶

While he is under no pretenses that the Ḥarrānians are the Sabians of the 7th century Arabia, al-Shahrastānī finds their ideas articulated and refuted in the Qur’an. Al-Shahrastānī applies his Sabian typology to pre-Islamic Arabian and Indian religious perspectives in a different section of *al-Milal*. In fact, given the order and logic of his work, we can assume as Ibn Kathīr and others have that the groups analyzed after the section on Sabians are perceived as different expressions of Sabianism. These include the Greek philosophers, pre-Islamic Arabs, and ancient Indians. Interestingly, al-Shahrastānī posits that the Arabs and Indians had similar approaches to religion. They both formulated doctrines based on the essence of things rather than the quality of things as was characteristic of the Romans and Persians.⁹⁷

Al-Shahrastānī’s *interpretatio* of the ancient Arabs does not depart much from al-Andalusī’s, except in a few ways. For instance, ‘Amr ibn Luḥay, the first to put idols in the

⁹⁶ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 359-61.

⁹⁷ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 3, 644.

Ka‘bah, found people in the Levant worshiping idols who spoke in terms of the Sabians, stating that they represented their lords in heaven. Here al-Shahrastānī is elaborating on al-Andalusī’s mentioning of the Khuzā‘ah tribe that settled Mecca after the flood that broke the strait of Ma‘rab. ‘Amr ibn Luḥay was the progenitor of this foreign tribe who brought idols and other strange religious ideas to Mecca. On these grounds, it is easier for al-Shahrastānī to reject pre-Islamic Arab claims that the Ka‘bah was originally a shrine for Saturn.⁹⁸

He describes the *Mu‘aṭṭalat al-‘Arab* as those who denied the existence of a creator, the resurrection, or any return to life after death. He rejects this group of Arabs on the same basis as he rejects the Ḥarrānians, by referencing *al-Jāthiyah*: 24, “nothing destroys us but time.” Others among this group believed in a creator and some sort of return, but they denied prophethood and worshiped idols, believing that they were intercessors to God just as the *aṣḥāb al-ashkhāṣ*. Like al-Andalusī, al-Shahrastānī lists the idols to their corresponding tribes. Some groups of Arabs believed in reincarnation and opposed the idea that a prophet would appear in human form. This was made known in the Qur’an, *al-Isrā’*: 94. Similarly, there were those who favored messengers in the form of angels as referenced in *al-Furqān*: 7. Still some believed that their only intercessors were idols like *Wadd*, *Suwā‘*, *Yaghūth*, *Ya‘ūq*, and *Nasr* as alluded to in *Nūḥ*: 23. Al-Shahrastānī also mentions that a faction of Arabs adopted Judaism and Christianity as well. Al-Shahrastānī also notes those Arabs who were inclined to the beliefs of the *aṣḥāb al-hayākil* Sabians. They believed in the stars and followed the astrological signs in all their

⁹⁸ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 3, 649.

dealings. Some of them also worshiped angels, or according to al-Shahrastānī, jinn, who they believed to be the daughters of God as alluded to in *al-Ṭūr*: 39.⁹⁹

Al-Shahrastānī's position on Sabianism is congruous to the legal opinions on them as well as those of the previous historians. However, his contribution to this discourse is an important one as he gives a place to Sabianism in a Muslim theological worldview. What is more, he provides a collection of Qur'anic verses that voice the beliefs of the Sabian categories. As a result, the reader can determine exactly how Sabianism was refuted in the Qur'an. Furthermore, al-Shahrastānī illuminates the nuanced relationship between Sabians, Ḥanīfs, and polytheists. Sabianism is an umbrella term for all ancient religions that did not distinguish themselves with a scripture, such as the Ḥarrānians, Greek philosophers, pre-Islamic Arabs, and perhaps erroneously, the Hindus. Nevertheless, Sabianism represents a spectrum of theological variants ranging between monotheism and polytheism, which is Qur'anically called *Ḥanīf* and *shirk* respectively.

4.3 Summary of Sabian Identity in Classical Arabic Scholarship

Though the texts analyzed in this section have been previously examined in the Western scholarly literature, they have not been examined in relation to their collective civilizational impact, i.e., the role they played in formulating an Islamic understanding of Sabianism. Qur'anic

⁹⁹ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 3, 651-60. Amidst a series of rhetorical questions directed towards the polytheists of Mecca, they are asked: "Does He (God) have daughters and you have sons?" Not only is this referencing their anthropomorphizing of the angels as the female offspring of God, but also their practice of infanticide on female newborns.

exegetes like al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr primarily relate juristic understandings of the identity of the Sabians in the Qur'an, whereas Ibn al-Nadīm and al-Andalusī relate historical understandings of their identity. Still the likes of Ibn Taymīyah and al-Shahrastānī relate theological understandings of Sabian identity in Islamic terms. All these understandings contribute to an *interpretatio islamica* on the topic. If the final picture of Sabians does not appear definitive and uniform, it is because *interpretatio* is a messy process as we have seen with preceding civilizations.

However, upon consideration of these various reports and opinions, one can get a general Islamic conception of the identity of the Sabians. They can be described as an ancient theosophical religious persuasion with undeterminable ancient origins. Islamic sources only record what remains of this persuasion based on their then-extant forms and reports that had come down to them from others. During the time in which these Muslim authors were writing they would have appeared syncretic, embodying aspects of Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, philosophy, and Islam. This could be due to two reasons: 1) the Sabians were being influenced by the above-mentioned religions and the degree of influence depended on the religion that was dominating the place and time in which they lived, and 2) these religions were originally influenced by the beliefs, practices, and knowledge of the Sabians, but their different expressions represented a type of reform or response to the preceding iteration of Sabianism. While I think both possibilities are true, the latter should be given more emphasis because the reports in the Arabic literature all support a belief in a primordial religion and this is even alluded to in the Qur'an in such verses as the one below:

Mankind was [of] one religion [before their deviation]; then Allah sent the prophets as bringers of good tidings and warners and sent down with them the

Scripture in truth to judge between the people concerning that in which they differed. And none differed over the Scripture except those who were given it - after the clear proofs came to them - out of jealous animosity among themselves. And Allah guided those who believed to the truth concerning that over which they had differed, by His permission. And Allah guides whom He wills to a straight path. (al-Baqarah: 213)

Sahih International translation

This verse and others like it clearly indicate that there was but one original religion of mankind, to which every civilization adhered. After which, people disputed among themselves about particulars and this disputation led to factionalism and the multitude of religious expressions we have today. The saving grace was the prophets and sages that appeared at the height of various epochs to reaffirm those universal teachings. This runs counter to the evolutionary view on the origins of religion, which is accepted as a matter of fact in many academic publications as well as in popular culture. The evolutionary view posits that humans created religion in a long process that commenced with animism, ancestral worship, the worship of nature, and heavenly bodies, then their beliefs became progressively more abstract, eventually culminating in monotheistic or atheistic religions.

Yet the likes of al-Andalusī and al-Shahrastānī, who were also both steeped in the empirical sciences, indicate that the opposite is true, a perspective mostly acknowledged by esoterists. In the next chapter, I will attempt to elucidate the concepts explored in this chapter by applying al-Andalusī's worldview to the historical context of the Near East prior to Islam and showing exactly how people known as Sabians connect to that history. Upon establishing those historical links between expressions of Sabianism, I will extend al-Shahrastānī's Qur'anic *interpretatio* to what is known of Sabian beliefs concerning a selection of prophets and the subtle polemics

contained in the Qur'an against them. In doing so, we will experience a novel approach to reading similar verses in the Qur'an.

Chapter 5: Qur’anic Polemics Against Sabian Inversions

We will now turn to specific Sabian beliefs about Biblical prophets that might have been circulating in pre-Islamic Arabia. As we know, the word *hanputā* in Syriac is a cognate to the word *hanīf* in Arabic (plural *ḥunafāʾ*). François de Blois provides a lengthy discussion of this word in various Semitic languages. He states that in Syriac it carries the meaning of “pagan.” In Jewish Aramaic it means “to deceive” or “to flatter.” Mandaic variations of the word allude to “the worship of false gods” and “hypocrite.” It also carries these meanings in Hebrew as well as “to pollute” and “to be polluted.”¹⁰⁰ Despite the negative connotations in other Semitic tongues, the Arabic of the Qur’an would give *hanīf* a positive meaning. Throughout the Qu’ran, it is most often used in reference to Abraham (Ibrāhīm) with the clarification that he was not of the polytheists.¹⁰¹ In light of de Blois’s presentation of Semitic cognates to *hanīf*, we can gather that the majority of the Qur’an’s interlocutors probably associated *ḥanaḥīyah* (a strain within the pre-Islamic religion of Arabia) with polytheism.

¹⁰⁰ François de Blois, “Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and Ḥanīf (Ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 65, no. 1 (2002): 19.

¹⁰¹ See Qur’an: *al-Baqarah*: 135, *Āli ‘Imrān*: 67 and 95, *al-An‘ām*: 79 and 161, *Yūnus*: 105, *al-Naḥl*: 120 and 123, *al-Ḥajj*: 31, and *al-Bayyinah*: 5. All ten of these verses provide additional clarification to the word *hanīf*, negating its association with polytheism.

Beyond the linguistic *deceptae*, why would Abraham and his *ḥanaḥīyah* be associated with polytheism? After all, would the Jewish, Christian, and polytheist Qur’anic interlocutors not already acknowledge him as a patriarch of monotheism? We must remember, that according to al-Andalusī and al-Shahrastānī’s paradigms, 7th century Arabia is heavily influenced by Sabian thought. So, we cannot assume that our contemporary understandings about Biblical and Qur’anic figures were always understood in the manner we understand them today. To the contrary, we should understand figures such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as extremely controversial figures whose lives necessitated divine vindications. In *al-Aḥzāb*: 7, God says that He has taken a covenant from the four above-mentioned prophets to question the truthful ones about their truthfulness and to prepare a painful punishment for the disbelievers.

In this chapter, I will place such beliefs in conversation with Qur’anic verses that appear to polemically engage interlocutors concerning these prophets. In doing so, I will be extending al-Shahrastānī’s Qur’an-based *interpretatio* of pre-Islamic Sabianism. This will involve an examination of Mandaean perspectives on the prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mary, whose narratives drastically differ from those in the Qur’an. Since the Mandaeans are the only extant group directly identified as Sabians in modern times, what is known of their beliefs must serve as the most authentic voice of the Sabians in antiquity as well. I will rely on narrations from their scriptures translated by modern Western and Arabic scholars, such as Abdullah Samak, Khaz’al al-Mājidī, E.S. Drower, Jorunn Buckley, and Kevin van Bladel. Then I will select relevant passages from the Qur’an, enriched by some of al-Qurṭubī’s exegetical insights, to show how God in the Qur’an is disputing the claims of the Sabians, which give Muslims fodder for *interpretatio islamica* concerning beliefs about the selected prophets in Arabia prior to Islam.

5.1 Noah

The Mandaean claim descent from Seth, the son of Adam, who is also known as *al-Mandā'ī*, “the knower,” from whom they derive their name.¹⁰² This descent is traced through Danānūkht (also identified as Enoch, Hermes, and Idrīs), his son, Methusaleh, down to Shem who is, according to their texts, the only fully human son of Noah. In one counternarrative, there were only three people on Noah’s Ark: him, his wife, and Shem. However, an evil spirit or *jinn* named Rūhā appeared and took the form of his wife. She wore make up and braided hair and succeeded in seducing Noah, for which he was chastised. This evil spirit then bore Ham, Yāmīn, and Japheth, who all spoke a different language from the others. They became the forefathers of the Sudan (Africa), Turks (Asia), and Franks (Europe) respectively. For this reason, the Madaeans do not mention Noah among the ancestors they seek intercession through to in their prayers.¹⁰³

When we return to the Qur’an, we find 43 mentions of Noah’s name, but not one of Shem. While both Sunni and Shī’ī scholarship acknowledges Shem as a successor to Noah’s prophethood and the progenitor of Semitic people, very few scholars have attempted to explain why he of all prophets are overlooked in the Qur’an. But if read in light of Mandaean ideology, it is possible that God in the Qur’an has intentionally omitted his name in the discussions of Noah so as to vindicate him as a rightly guided prophet and rectify his narrative for future believers.

¹⁰² Samak, *Al-Ṣābi’ūn*, 37, and Buckley, *The Madaeans*, 7.

¹⁰³ Samak, *Al-Ṣābi’ūn*, 3-9.

Al-Ghāfir: 78 declares that God sent messengers whose stories He related to the Prophet Muhammad as well as those whose stories He did not relate. Surely, Shem is one of these omitted prophets. Not only that, but the only son of Noah mentioned in the Qur'an is nameless and is disavowed as an unbeliever.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, in *al-Mu'minūn*: 24, following a verse that introduces Noah's prophetic mission to call to pure monotheism, a group from among his people disbelieved and declared that he was only a mortal man (*bashar*) who sought rank over people. Had God wished to send messengers, He would have sent them as angels, but they had never heard of a human prophet from their forefathers. The rejection of human prophets in favor of angels is yet another trademark of Sabian thought. In the following verse, those disbelievers state that Noah was accompanied by a *jinn* or evil spirit, just as the Mandaean narrative insinuates.

5.2 Abraham

As for Abraham, it is common knowledge that he was raised in an area populated by Chaldeans, which is sometimes used interchangeably with Sabian.¹⁰⁵ Al-Qurṭubī cites Abū Ja'far al-Kisāī's biography of Abraham in his *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* ("Stories of the Prophets"). He states that Nimrod had a vision in which he saw his kingdom destroyed by a child who was born under

¹⁰⁴ See Qur'an, *Hūd*: 46. The reader should not assume this is speaking of Shem.

¹⁰⁵ Dodge states: "This term may refer to a group of persons from Harrin or southern 'Iriq who belonged to one of the sects of Sabians in those regions, residing in Asia Minor for trade. It also may simply refer to a group of pagans, permitted to live in Asia Minor and called Chaldean Sabians by the Arabs because they were accustomed to think of the undisturbed pagans in their territories as Sabians." Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Ishaq Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of Al-Nadīm: A Tenth Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, trans. Bayard Dodge, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 586.

his reign, so he ordered the killing of every male child. Āzār (or Tāriḥ/Tāriḫ) was one of his close advisors and Nimrod sent him on an assignment. Before leaving, he had intercourse with his wife, and she bore Abraham. It is also said that Abraham was conceived in a shrine of idols and at the moment of conception, the idols fell prostrate on their faces. Abraham's mother retreated to a mountainous region to give birth. Some say he was born in Ḥarrān and his father moved him to Babel later. She dug an underground cavern for him and put a rock over it so that wild animals would not prey on him. When she attempted to nurse him, she found him sucking his fingers. One contained honey, another contained water, and another contained milk. After a year, he resembled a three-year-old child. This rapid growth continued until it was finally time to come out and people thought that he had been born several years prior. At this point, he engaged his mother in a foreboding dialogue:

He asked his mother: "Who is my lord?"

She said: "Me."

He asked: "Who is your lord?"

She said: "Your father."

He asked: "Who is his lord?"

She said: "Nimrod."

He asked: "Who is his lord?" At this point, she slapped him and knew that he would be the one to destroy the kingdom.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmi'*, vol. 7, 24.

Abraham would become a pivotal figure in the major religions of the Near East, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He was also a contentious figure among the Sabians, because of his disputation against their doctrine and rituals. Those who followed Abraham were known as *Ḥanīfs*, while those who opposed him continued to be known as Sabians. We will see the Sabian perspective below.

In the Mandaean counternarrative, Abraham was a member of their priestly class, the *Nāṣūrā'ī*, who was believed to have taken an oath of loyalty to an evil entity known as *Yūrbā*. Then he contracted leprosy on his foreskin. This entity possessed Abraham's body and overpowered him, forcing him to circumcise himself. This would disqualify him from continuing as a Nāṣōraean, since, according to Sabian practices, anyone missing a part of their body is deemed ritually impure. His brother told him that his ailment came from the Dark World, because no one who is pure would ever fall ill. Abraham then decided to live in the wilderness with other impure individuals, amputees, and their families. Abraham returned to his worship and conjuring of *Yūrbā*, until he appeared to him and his people. Abraham was then given a magical power that protected him from fire. He then commanded those who remained Sabians to join his religion or face attack. The Sabians refused to fight him because killing is forbidden to them. In turn, Abraham and his followers proceeded to seize the Sabians on the roads and in the wilderness, forcibly circumcising the men to make them impure as well.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Samak, *Al-Ṣābi'ūn*, 42-3, and E. S. (Ethel Stefana) Drower and Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran Their Cults, Customs, Magic Legends, and Folklore* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 269.

This Mandaean counternarrative is cause for reflection on Abraham's Qur'anic narrative. We understand that Abraham's lineage is from star worshipping Chaldean Sabians. We also witnessed how al-Shahrastānī previously established that the Qur'anic verses regarding the life and works of Abraham were in fact a polemic against their doctrines. Therefore, it is appropriate to read the multiple references to the life of Abraham in the Qur'an as an anti-Sabian polemic.

When we read in *al-An'ām*: 75, which relates Abraham's disputation with his father and his people over their idol worship, we should understand that his looking to the sun, moon, and stars and declaring "this is my lord," is not what it seems. The apparent meaning of these verses is that Abraham rebukes his people for worshipping idols, then sets off to a spiritual quest to which he turns to heavenly bodies, identifying them as his lord. Only after witnessing them dissipate did he realize that God is beyond his creation. Would this phase of astral worship not negate the infallibility of his prophethood from an Islamic point-of-view? Is a prophet not chosen from birth and guarded from all forms of idolatry until his prophetic mission is manifest? If so, why does he need to burden himself with a spiritual quest? Why would he rebuke his people for worshipping idols and celestial bodies – as was the norm among the Chaldeans – only to do the same thing? Was he not yet firm in his conviction? And why did he only realize at this point in his life that the sun, moon, and stars fade, when he most likely witnessed them appear and fade daily? These questions can only be answered satisfactorily by appreciating the Sabian influenced background from which he came.

The Sabians might have recognized Abraham as a scholar in the Nāṣoraean, but not a messenger or prophet whose teachings should be followed. Hence, the reference in *al-Baqarah*:

124 and *al-Nahl*: 120 to him as a leader.¹⁰⁸ In Sabian thought, messengers were only angels, not men, so they would naturally reject his claim to prophethood or any type of religious authority beyond the status quo of the Nāṣoraeans. God, in *al-An‘ām*: 85, then declares that He showed Abraham the dominion (*malakūt*) of the heavens and the earth. To this al-Qurṭubī states: “It is said that God unveiled for [the Prophet Abraham] the heavens and the earth to the level of the Throne [of God] and the lower worlds (or under worlds).” Then he cites Ibn Jurayj on the authority of al-Qāsim who narrates on the authority of Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī who said, “The seven heavens were opened to him. He gazed at them until it reached the Throne. Then the lands were opened up and he gazed at them. He also saw his place in *jannah* [i.e., heaven].” Then al-Qurṭubī states that al-Ḍaḥḥāk believed the dominion of the heavens is what he saw of the stars and the dominion of the earth are the seas, mountains, vegetation, and the like.¹⁰⁹ This statement in verse 85 is of particular significance because the Qur’an is stating for a Sabian audience that God allowed a human prophet to traverse the heavens and gaze upon His Throne, whereas the Sabians see this as the domain of the angels who occupy the forms of the stars and planets.

If we consider mankind’s fascination with outer space even today, we can only imagine how awe-struck Abraham was to encounter first-hand the celestial *malakūt* as well as that of the earth. So, when he was shown the secrets of the sun, moon, and stars he exclaimed “this is my lord!”

¹⁰⁸ Note that the *al-Baqarah*: 124 uses the word *imām* and *al-Nahl*: 120 uses the word *ummah*, which most exegetes determine to mean leader. However, referring to a single person as an *ummah* carries a stronger meaning, insinuating that Abraham as an individual embodied some of the other meanings of the word: nation, epoch, religion, etc.

¹⁰⁹ Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi‘*, vol. 7, 23-4.

Yet, this was not an expression of astral worship as many Qur'anic exegetes and laypeople believe. Rather, there is an ellipsis (*iḍmār*) in his statement in which a word is purposefully omitted. So it is as if Abraham exclaimed “this is *the dominion* of my lord!” or “this is *the evidence* of my lord!”¹¹⁰ However, when these celestial bodies dissipated, he understood that the dominion of God never dissipates; and at this moment he became a *Ḥanīf* by turning his face to the One who originated all those magnificent things. Contrary to Sabian astral worship, the result of his exposure to these sights was not that he embraces the sun, moon, and stars as deities, rather it increased him in certainty that they were not deities. As Abraham continues to dispute with his people in *al-An‘ām*: 81, we have a clear indication between an idolator and monotheist: a true monotheist fears associating anything with God, no matter how impressive they are. To that, God asks which of these two groups is more secure?

5.3 Moses

The story of Moses stands as yet another prime example of the anti-Sabian polemic in the Qur'an. If we accept the idea that his story takes place in Egypt,¹¹¹ then Moses would have been challenging the most prominent Sabian civilization in the world. In Mandaean mythology, there is also a great deal of overlap with ancient Egypt. They believe that the first race of humans was

¹¹⁰ Out of all of the well-known exegeses of the Qur'an, only al-Qurṭubī recorded this position, although it might be an afterthought. It is the last thing he mentions after a lengthy discussion about potentiality of Abraham entertaining polytheistic notions. *Al-Jāmi‘*, vol. 7, 27.

¹¹¹ There is a growing body of Biblical scholarship that questions the location of events in the Bible. One view posits that the showdown between Moses and Pharaoh occurred in southern Arabia.

created by an angel by the name of Pthāhīl, analogous to the Egyptian deity Ptah. He created earth and the body of man in his image with the help of the "Mother of Darkness," Rūhā, and the seven planets. This in turn prepared the souls of human beings to descend from the "Realm of Light" and occupy human bodies. After 216,000 years, Rūhā returned and attempted to destroy the human race in a natural disaster. In the following epoch, which lasted for 156,000 years, the Nāṣōraeans appeared, but they would be afflicted with a cataclysmic fire. The third age would last 100,000 years before it was destroyed by a great flood. This was the flood that was survived by Noah and his son, Sam, who became the Nāṣōraean authority in his time. In their narrative, Danānūkht, also identified as Enoch, Hermes, and Idrīs, lived after the Great Deluge. He would emerge as a leader of the Nāṣōraeans, who built the pyramids, and taught the arts of civilization and wisdom teachings to mankind. They claim that his son, *Sāb* (spelled with the Arabic letter *sīn*), was buried in one of the pyramids and that Sabianism takes its name from him. Thus, the Mandaean see their religion as the same as that of ancient Egypt.¹¹² Furthermore, Maimonides, the 12th century Jewish polymath from Cordoba, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, suggests that Jewish law is an inversion of ancient Egyptian Sabian practices. He believed that the Judaic laws decreed by Moses were instituted to undermine the pervading theology and rituals of the Sabians to which the Children of Israel became accustomed.

From a Sabian point of view, Moses was guilty of fomenting rebellion against the Sabian world order and opposing their established religious doctrine. In the Mandaean account, the

¹¹² Mājīdī, *Al-Mandā'īyah*, 37-9.

majority of Sabians were led by Ardabān Malakā, a brother of the Pharaoh, Fīrūkh Malakā. Pending the turmoil caused by Moses, Ardabān chose to flee Egypt with his people to the Arabian Peninsula, while Fīrūkh fought unsuccessfully against Moses and the Jews in Egypt. Ardabān crossed through the Red Sea, which opened for them and Moses pursued them until they reached the Mount of Mīdīyā in Ḥarrān. As Fīrūkh attempted to pursue Moses, he and his soldiers were swallowed up by the Red Sea.¹¹³ To this day, the Mandaean mourn their Egyptian Sabian brethren who were drowned.¹¹⁴

There are obviously some major differences between the Mandaean and Qur'anic accounts of Moses. The Mandaean account accuses Moses of promoting a deviant ideology and causing the conflict between the Children of Israel and the Egyptians. Moses' chief antagonist was Fīrūkh, who he managed to subdue. Then Moses aggressed upon Fīrūkh's brother, Ardabān, the true hero in this epic, but was able to escape to safety in Ḥarrān. This is an aspect of the story that has no equivalent in the Bible or the Qur'an, yet it provides an alternative view to the exodus of Moses and the drowning of Pharaoh.

This requires us to investigate the chapter, *al-Qaṣaṣ*, from the Qur'an, which recounts Moses' life in sequence. Verses 3 to 6 state that God will recite the truth of Moses' story, alluding to the fact that this is a corrective story informing the listener or reader of the facts of the matter. God in the Qur'an states that Pharaoh was a corrupting force in the land by arrogating himself and causing dissention between people. He did this by oppressing a faction of people,

¹¹³ Drower and Buckley, *Mandaeans of Iraq*, 261, and Mājidi, *Al-Mandā'īyah*, 39.

¹¹⁴ Samak, *Al-Ṣābi'ūn*, 41.

who we can understand as the Children of Israel. He slaughtered their children and shamed their women. This exposition clarifies that it was Pharaoh, not the Children of Israel, who caused the conflict in Egypt. Rather, it was Pharaoh's confusion that led to Moses hastily running to the aid of his countrymen and killing a man, then going into exile.

God states that His purpose for sharing this story was to bless those who were oppressed, to make them into their own independent *umma* (religion, nation, or civilization), and to make them the inheritors of the sacred message. The reader should heed to the fact that Mandaean narratives are vague as to which points of doctrine Moses differed with them. However, the Qur'an makes it clear that it was for the above-mentioned deeds, and moreover Pharaoh's claim to be God, that Moses opposed him and it was for this reason that God punished Pharaoh. Some modern scholars of ancient Egypt, like al-Sayyār, have sought to distance ancient Egyptians from the notions of polytheism and pharaoh-worship. But if they were Sabians, then they would have continued to hold some gnostic teachings like pantheism, the idea that humans can attain union with God. This was a trait of Sabianism stated by al-Shahrastānī as well as a goal of the Mysteries, as stated by James.¹¹⁵

Finally, we have the mentioning of the name Hāmān in *al-Qaṣaṣ*: 8 as well as a few other places in the Qur'an. Could Hāmān be Ardabān, the brother of Pharaoh or Fīrūkh in Mandaean literature? While there are very few details about him in the Qur'an or even in the *tafsīr* literature, we can deduce from the context that he was from Pharaoh's family. Either he was

¹¹⁵ Shahrastānī and Muhammad, *Al-Milal Wa al-Niḥal*, vol. 2, 298, and James, *Stolen Legacy*, 7, 95-9.

part of Pharaoh's army or had an army of his own. Nevertheless, it is clear from this and other verses that he opposed the message of Moses.¹¹⁶ In more than one place, Pharaoh commanded him to build a structure that would allow him to gaze upon the God of Moses.¹¹⁷ This harkens to the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel from *Genesis*: 11, in which a group of people decided to build a city with a tower that could reach the heavens.¹¹⁸ The identity of Hāmān in the Qur'an remains inconclusive, but is solid ground for speculation with regards to the Mandaean account.

5.4 Jesus and Mary

The final inversion between the Mandaean narrative and that of the Qur'an pertains to Jesus and Mary. The Mandaeans accept Mary, known to them as Miriai, but reject Jesus. They believe that Miriai began life as a Jew, but later converted to Mandaism. It is not clear whether Miriai is the mother of Jesus, but it is generally accepted that she is the same as Mary from the Abrahamic traditions. The *Ḥarān Gawaita* states that Mary was from the family line of Moses. Not mentioning Jesus by name, it claims that she was "bewitched" with the pregnancy of a child,

¹¹⁶ See *al-ʿAnkabūt*: 39 and *Ghāfir*: 23-24.

¹¹⁷ See *al-Qaṣaṣ*: 38 and *Ghāfir*: 36-37.

¹¹⁸ While this is a seemingly farfetched notion from the Biblical story, which places Babylon in Mesopotamia, I happened to notice that the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo features an exhibit on Coptic art. Therein is a map that tracks the flight of the Holy Family (i.e. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph) through Egypt. One of the place names on the map is Babylon, located near current-day Cairo on the east bank of the Nile. There could have been another ancient city known as Babylon as well located in Egypt.

who would later be known as a “Messiah.” Compare this to their version of the pregnancy of Nisbai (Elizabeth), the mother of John the Baptist, whose birth came from a “pure seed.”¹¹⁹

In another scripture, Miriai is considered the daughter of the kings of Babel, who was raised under the tutelage of Jewish priests. One day, she disobeyed her father by going outside and eventually wandered into a Mandaean temple where a service was underway. She fell asleep during the service and awoke just prior to daybreak. When she arrived home, her father demanded to know where she was and accused her of prostituting herself. She denies this accusation. Rather, she emerges as a Mandaean priest who can argue against the doctrines and practices of the Jews.¹²⁰

As for Jesus, the Mandaean narrative juxtaposes the personas of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, and distances him from Mary. Whereas John is thoroughly righteous and pure, Jesus is said to have been born an evil spirit. Although he had risen to the ranks of the Nāṣōraeans, they believe that he deviated from the right path, despite having been baptized by John. According to Buckley, neither Jesus or John is connected to the Jewish tradition but are counted among the Nāṣōraeans. Jesus is accused of creating his own religion by relaxing the rules of Mandaism.¹²¹

On the other hand, the Qur’an honors both Maryam or Mary and Jesus the Messiah. It appears to interject into a cross-sectional debate between Jews, Christians, and Sabians over their nature, deeds, and spiritual status. For instance, it defends Mary against the Jewish allegations of

¹¹⁹ Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 49.

¹²⁰ Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 50.

¹²¹ Buckley, *The Mandaean*, 24.

unpiety, by affirming the immaculate conception and possibly raising her to the level of a prophetess, as alluded to in *Maryam*: 42, which declares that the angels addressed Maryam telling her that God chose her, purified her, and elevated her over all the women of the world. In his explanation of this verse, al-Qurtubi gives the reasons why he thinks Mary is a prophetess. He states that Mary was purified from disbelief, while acknowledging that some scholars claim that she was free from other impurities like menstruation, postpartum bleeding, and the like. He also states that she was specifically chosen to birth Jesus. Then he cites a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad in which he is reported to have said: “perfection is found in many men, but it is not found in women other than Mary, the daughter of ‘Imrān, and Āsiyā, the wife of Pharaoh, and surely the merits of ‘Ā’isha are like the merits of stock-soaked bread (*tharīd*) over all other foods.” Al-Qurtubī is of the opinion that the word “perfection” (*kamal* or *kamul*) here means “prophethood,” because the prophets are the most perfect of humankind. He then states that one can infer from this hadith that Mary and Āsiyā are prophetesses, and some scholars have taken this position although he does not mention which ones. Yet, al-Qurtubī argues that the most correct opinion is that only Mary was a prophetess, because an angel spoke to her just as the angels spoke to other prophets. There, however, is no indication from the Qur’an that Āsiyā experienced this. In fact, al-Qurtubī argues that Mary was given something not given to any other women. That is, that the “Pure Spirit” (Gabriel) spoke to her, appeared in front of her, and lowered himself to her to blow into her garment.

Additionally, al-Qurtubī shows that she was quick to confirm the truth that was revealed to her as alluded to in *al-Mā'idah*: 75 and *al-Tahrīm*: 12. She is contrasted to Prophet Zachariah (Zakariyā), who, when brought the news of his son John (Yaḥyā), noticed his old age and his wife’s barrenness, then questioned how they could conceive a child. Then he asked God for a

sign. This is unlike Mary, who, when brought the news of her son Jesus, said that she was a virgin, and no man has touched her. Upon this, the angel stated “Thus said your Lord,” and she immediately conceded to this divine decree. Although al-Qurṭubī strongly believes that she was a prophetess, he states the opinion of those who do not think so. They say that she saw the Gabriel (Jibrīl) in the same way the disciples of Muhammad saw Gabriel in the hadith in which he questioned the Prophet Muhammad about *Islām*, *Īman*, and *Iḥsān*. They were not prophets, but Gabriel appeared to them just as well.¹²²

Despite this indirect assertion argued by al-Qurṭubī, we can gather that the Qur’an promotes Mary to a high status, usually occupied by men, just like in Mandaeism. However, Mandaeism’s highest rank for a human is a Nāṣoraean priest, whereas Islam’s highest rank is a prophet. The Qur’an also affirms Mary and Jesus’ Jewish background, although it refers to them more precisely as the “Children of Israel” (Banū Isrā’īl) and omits mentioning the Mandaeans by name (which van Bladel contends was not an institution until the 5th century). Yet if we consider that the Mandaeans were still counted among the Jews, we can glean that specific Qur’anic verses were directed towards their positions on Mary and Jesus. First of all, the angel Gabriel gives Mary glad tidings of the birth of Jesus, rather than an evil omen, drawing a similitude between Jesus’ creation and that of Adam, who was created from a speck of dust and God simply said “be” and he was (*Āli Imrān*: 59 and *al-Mā’idah*: 171). Subsequently, nearly every mention of Jesus in the Qur’an refers to him as “the son of Mary” (‘Īsa ibn Maryam), in response to both Christian conceptions that state that he is the son of God and Mandaean conceptions that seek to

¹²² Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi‘*, vol. 4, 82-4.

distance him from Mary. Secondly, the Qur'an addresses factions of the Jewish community who denied or tried to kill prophets they did not agree with (*al-Baqarah*: 87 and *al-Şaff*: 41). In *Āli Imrān*: 55, God promises Jesus that He will raise him up and purify him from the accusations of those who disbelieve in him. Not only that, but He will give preference to those who follow him.

Whereas the charisma of Miriai or Mary and John the Baptist is emphasized in the Mandaean Sabian accounts, God in the Qur'an stresses the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ through the edified womb of Mary. John the Baptist's birth and prophetic mission are discussed and honored in the Qur'an, but with substantially less emphasis than in Mandaean works. The Qur'an wishes to make some clarifications about Jesus, while maintaining that a true believer does not reject any of the prophets.

We find that the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran to this day claim John as the primary prophet they follow and assuage Muslim sensibilities regarding the requirements of the "People of the Book" in terms of prophets and scriptures, although the Nāşoraean priesthood status quo represents the final authority in Mandaism. They present a well-crafted *interpretatio islamica* of their beliefs, which has existed since their first encounters with Muslim conquerors in Persia, wherein a Nāşoraean by the name of Unūsh ibn Danqā supposedly explained their beliefs and books to the Muslims and they were given *dhimmi* status.¹²³ Perhaps, understanding that the Qur'an contains a strong polemic against their positions, they chose to conceal their beliefs among their Nāşoraean class and not openly oppose any of the prophets' teachings in order to live peacefully within an Islamic world order. In the next section, we will summarize our

¹²³ Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans to Şābians of the Marshes*, 8, and Mājjidī, *Al-Mandā'īyah*.

discussion of Sabianism by extracting some key themes that appeared throughout the research and discussing some of the implications of my claims.

Chapter 6: Concluding Thoughts

The crux of this thesis is that classical Muslim scholars were not as naive as some Western authors perceive them to be regarding the identity of the Sabians in the Qur'an. This logic stems from the fact that if the Ḥarrānīan assumption of the Sabian identity was arbitrary, then why did they not choose to call themselves *Yahūd*, *Naṣārā*, or *Majūs*, groups mentioned along with the *Ṣābi'ūn*? The answer is clear. Muslims had a general understanding of these groups' characteristics. Therefore, we can argue that Muslims understood the Sabians' characteristics as well. Hence, the groups that ascribed Sabianism to themselves and those who Muslim scholars identified as Sabians were associated with it based on these previous understandings. For instance, these groups possessed a worshipful reverence for angels, intently studied of astrology and other occult sciences, and propagated alternate views of the Biblical prophets and the notion of prophethood. In the classical literature of exegesis, jurisprudence, history, and theology, Muslim scholars have characterized the Sabians and their religion in the following manners:

1. They follow a religion that resembles other known religions mentioned in the Qur'an (Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism) in that they are monotheistic, have scripture, and rituals like fasting and praying.
2. They are often associated with the worship of the angels and celestial bodies.
3. They were often associated with philosophy and advanced knowledge of the stars.

4. Although their religion was once prominent on earth (especially in Babylon, India, Egypt, as well as pre-Islamic Arabia), their final recognizable visages in the Muslim world were in Ḥarrān and southern Iraq.
5. Sabians and Ḥanīfs, though they share a common origin, represented two distinct views with regards to human prophets and the roles of angelic beings in religion.
6. Al-Shahrastānī's typology places Sabianism on a continuum between angel worship, star worship, idol worship, belief in reincarnation, and pantheism.

Contrary to the views of some modern Western scholars, these characterizations establish that the so-called “modern Sabian myth,” which sees Sabianism as a unified ancient religion, was a reality to some medieval Muslim scholars. We have adequate evidence from the classical Islamic corpus to suggest that medieval scholars held the belief that there was a unified but uncentralized ancient religion that pervaded the entire Near East, if not the whole of the known world, and they referred to it as Sabianism. The likes of al-Andalusī and al-Shahrastānī not only confined Sabianism to the Ḥarrānians and Mandaeans but extended this term to all groups that resembled what they knew of the Qur’anic Sabians through the phenomenon of *interpretatio*. These groups included the ancient Egyptians, pre-Islamic Arabs, the Philosophers, and many others whose religions would otherwise be labeled with the broader term of paganism. In doing so, scholars like al-Andalusī and al-Shahrastānī extend a proverbial olive branch to these groups, implying that they understood the nuance of their beliefs and provided a place within Islamic society for them, given the interpretation of *al-Baqarah: 62*, which implies that whomsoever among them submits to the authority of God and His messenger, they will not be treated

unjustly.¹²⁴ While the particulars of these medieval views are debatable, the inter-civilizational phenomenon of *interpretatio* in the Islamic context is worthy of exploration.

This study has compared the concept of *interpretatio* to the Islamicate Translation Movement and the intercourse between religious movements in Near Eastern antiquity. *Interpretatio islamica* was Islamicate civilization's attempt at reconciling their burgeoning hegemony with that of their ancient and not-so-ancient predecessors. We have seen Muslim scholars across specializations theorize how to incorporate Sabians and their knowledge into the Islamic paradigm while also witnessing how Sabians attempted to enter themselves into the Islamic paradigm. This was undoubtedly understood by classical Muslim scholars, even if they did not express their ideas in these terms. Few Western scholars have sought to explore this civilizational phenomenon under Islamic rule, despite the fact that the powerful Near Eastern civilizations of antiquity like the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Jews, and Christians all engaged in the practice of *interpretatio*. It is my hope that this phenomenon be applied to topics beyond that of Sabianism.

¹²⁴ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 149.

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