

# **“The Arabs” in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries: Effects on contemporary Christian-Muslim relations**

**David D Grafton (Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia)<sup>1</sup>**

**Research Associate: Faculty of Theology  
University of Pretoria**

## **Abstract**

*Historical inquiry into the origin and history of “the Arabs” has long been a part of Western Orientalist literature. However, Christian scholars from the 7th century onward sought to understand the rise of Islam from within a Biblical framework. This article looks at how the early church historians of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries viewed “the Arabs” and passed on those images to their ecclesiastical descendents. It aims to argue that the pejorative image of “the Arabs” as uncultured pagan barbarians of late antiquity was extended to Muslims in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and transferred into the Latin derogatory term “the Saracen”. This negative image has been perpetuated in Western Christian literature and continues to color Western Evangelical Christian and Dispensational images of “the Arabs”. The article shows that such perceptions have as much to do with the cultural stereotypes disseminated from the ecclesiastical historians as they do with Biblical hermeneutics.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Research into the identity of “the Arabs” in antiquity has lately become a very important subject, both for scholarly and non-scholarly inquiry. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century Western scholars have been probing and prodding eastern texts in

---

<sup>1</sup> The Reverend Dr David D Grafton, PhD is Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations and Director of Graduate Studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (USA). Professor Grafton is a member of the International Advisory Board of *HTS Theological Studies* and a research associate of Dr Andries G van Aarde, honorary professor at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria (South Africa).

### ***“The Arabs” in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries***

order to uncover the origins of “the Arabs”. This focus has, for the most part, centred on the roots of Arabic-Islamic traditions within pre-Islamic Arabia. More recently however there has been a shift of interest toward the fields of Roman History and Classical studies and the role of “the Arabs” in antiquity. This recent scholarly work has utilized both archaeological and epigraphical surveys in contemporary Jordan and Syria, as well as linguistic analyses of names and places employed by the historians of antiquity.

In popular literature there has been a renewed interest in the link between “the Arabs” and Islam, however. P K Hitti’s seminal work, *The history of the Arabs* (1937), along with Bernard Lewis’ popular and short *The Arabs in history* (1950) were proven hallmarks for some fifty-five years. Since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, these works have been updated and re-released. Both have become popular best sellers. Other antiquated research, including Ameer Ali’s *A short history of the Saracens* (1899) and Edward A Freeman’s *History and conquests of the Saracens* (1856), have been re-published for popular consumption (Ali 2005 and Freeman 2002). The republication of these works has been driven primarily by Western interest (dare we say “fear”) not simply regarding the historical roots and origins of “the Arabs” but the relationship of Islam with the Arabs of the Peninsula (*jazīrāt al-‘arab*).

Finally, recent Western Christian Evangelical works, such as Hal Lindsey’s *The Everlasting Hatred: The roots of Jihad*, and Tony Maalouf’s *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The unfolding of God’s prophetic plan for Ishmael’s line*, attempt to look at “the Arabs” from a Biblical perspective (Lindsey 2002; Maalouf 2003. See also Davidson 2003; Hefley 2005). Their interest has been to expose the origins of “the Arabs” in Scripture, to determine their identity, their purpose, and their role in the current world climate of the “War on Terror”. This certainly is not a new endeavour, however. After the coming of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Christians sought to make sense of the rise of the Arab Muslim Empire by looking into the pages of Scripture. Yet, even before the coming of Islam Christian historians were trying to categorize the people who lived within the Roman Province of Arabia (Hoyland 1997). It is to that historical record of antiquity that we now turn.

## **2. THE ORIGINS OF THE TERM “SARACEN”**

As John C Lamoreaux has so poignantly put it, “The Christian authors who first encountered the Muslims would not do so *tabula rasa*; rather, they would bring to their first interpretations of Islam and its place in sacred history a whole series of unfavorable stereotypes” (Tolan 1996:11). These stereotypes were those developed by Byzantine historians who had negative views of the uncultured “barbarians” living on the fringes of the Roman Empire. In the West

there were the Huns and Goths; in the East in the steppes of the Arabian Peninsula were the *skenetai* (“tent dwellers”) of various ethnic tribes (Shahid 1984:201). The term *skenetai* was intended to express the uncultured ways of the nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples from the Sinai Peninsula to the Euphrates River who had long been involved in protecting the spice trade routes from India and Yemen (Grafton 2006). By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the ecclesiastical and other secular historians had replaced the Greek term *skenetai* with the term Latin *saraceni*. Ammianus Marcellinus, the 4<sup>th</sup> century native of Antioch, provides us with the clear transformation in identity of “the Arabs” during this period. He writes: “It is claimed that the Arab ‘tent dwellers’ are also called the ‘saracens’” (Rets 2002:506).<sup>2</sup>

Yet, what does *Saraceni* mean? Did the Arabs call themselves *Saraceni* or did the Byzantines apply this term to them? This has been a troubling question facing historians. Although Ammianus makes it clear that “the Arabs” were generally known as the *Saraceni*, it is Eusebius, the “Father of Church History”, who provides the standard biblical reference of the term. In any case, the word could have had any number of possible linguistic origins.

Firstly, *Saraceni* could have referred to a particular place from which these people came. The Arabic word for “the East” is *al-sharqiyya* [الشرقية], and an Aramaic word for a “barren place” is *S<sup>e</sup>rāk*. It is possible that the Romans transliterated the word for an area in which the Arabs had described themselves as living, either to the East of the empire, or within the barren land between the Nile and Euphrates (Shahid 1984:126-127, Rets 2002:506).<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the term *Saraceni* could have described the kind of people with whom the Byzantines were dealing. The Arabic word *sarrāq* [سراق] means “thief” or “plunderer”. Often the tribes of the east were described by the Roman historians as “robbers” or “thieves” (Tolan 2002:287).<sup>4</sup> Lastly, the word could be a derivative of *sharika* [شريك], meaning an “association” or “partnership”. By the late 3rd century the Romans had begun to enter into formal treaties with Arab tribes to serve as mercenaries who would protect the

<sup>2</sup> Ammianus, *Res Gestae* XXII.15.2 (Et Scenitas praetenditur Arabas quos Saracenos nunc appellamus); also XXIII.6.13 (Et Scenitas Arabas quo Saracenos posteritas appellavit). We do find a possible earlier reference to the *Saraceni* from the *Historia Augusta* during the reign of Septimus Severus (ca 193). However, this text is very convoluted and has passed through several editors. Its second century authorship cannot be accurately ascertained.

<sup>3</sup> Several authors do mention the possibility of “Saraka” being a particular place from which the tribes originate, including Ptolemy. See for example, Shahid (1984:123-141). However, we see no real support for such arguments.

<sup>4</sup> See Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.10.1, as well as by the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC Greek Historian Diodorus Siculus. The term “robbers” is used frequently in the fourth century by Ammianus, Eusebius, Rufinus and others.

***“The Arabs” in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries***

eastern boundaries of the empire against the Persians. The Byzantines called these Arab tribes the *foederati* in Latin; the “federation” of Arab tribes contracted to serve the empire. This seems to be the most likely origin (Graf & O’Connor 1977). Shahid (1984:123-141), however, offers his criticism of this judgment in *Rome and the Arabs*. He argues that the word “*shariq*” was the name either of a particular tribe or a particular place in Arabia, that the “people of the East” (*bene Qadem*) is the most probable appellation. He argues that the Arabic *sharika* [شريك] could not apply here, because the term *hifl* [حلف] was utilized by the Arabs in pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabia. All of these suggestions are plausible and all of them assume that the Arab tribes had at some point used these words to describe themselves to the Romans, who then transliterated the word and created a Greek or Latin cognate. The Semitic tri-consonantal root “S” or “Sh”, “R”, “Q” or “K” would have been transliterated into “SaRaKin”. This would have been further Latinized to “Saraceni”.<sup>5</sup>

For the Christian historians, however, there was a desire to place the *Saraceni* into a biblical frame of reference. Thus, we find a unique development of the term by Eusebius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Eusebius places these Arab tribes into a biblical category, citing their origins from the narratives of Sarai/h and Hagar in Genesis 16:1-6 and 21:1-9.

In the Biblical narrative, Sarai gives her Egyptian handmaid Hagar to Abram in order to produce offspring. But after Hagar conceives a child, Ishmael, Sarai becomes jealous and begins to treat Hagar “harshly”, so much so that Hagar runs away (Gn 16:6). After Sarai, now Sarah, becomes pregnant and gives birth to Isaac, she sees Ishmael as a potential threat to her own son. Thus, she asks – really demands – that Abraham “cast out this slave woman with her son” (Gn 21:10). Abraham reluctantly agrees and “sent her away” (Gn 21:14). Ishmael then goes on to live in biblical Paran, producing offspring who live “from Havilah to Shur” – that is from the eastern provinces of Egypt across the Syrian Desert to the Euphrates (Gn 25:13-18).

Eusebius, in his work *The Chronicle*, states that Abraham and Hagar produced Ishmael who was the ancestor of the “Ishmaelites” and that these “Ishmaelites” are the “Saraceni” (Shahid 1984:95). Thus, the *Saraceni* are those who have been “sent away” by Sarah. Because we do not have Eusebius’ original, but only a Latin translation by Jerome and a very late Armenian text, we can’t know for certain which Greek words Eusebius

---

<sup>5</sup> Contra Rets (2002:505). We do however agree with Rets that there is no indication whatsoever that the Arabs considered themselves part of a “Saraceni nation”.

utilized.<sup>6</sup> John of Damascus, however, in an 8<sup>th</sup> century Greek work *De Haeresibus* [On the Heresies] cites Eusebius' version of the *Chronicle*. Here John uses Eusebius' term *Saracen* (Sahas 1972:132). What is confusing about John's, and presumably Eusebius', use of the term is that it is not reflected in the LXX (the Greek Old Testament). Rather, in the LXX of Genesis 21:10, 14 Hagar and Ishmael are ἐκβαλε and ἀπέστειλεν ("cast out"). However, if we take John's use as accurate, it seems that Eusebius' use is in reference to "being emptied out" or being "treated with contempt" (Kittel, Friedrich & Bromiley 1964:659-662). Thus, Eusebius conflates the derogatory cultural reference of the *Saracens* with the biblical narrative.

Eusebius rests his claims on several earlier historical works that becomes the crux of the issue. Here he is undoubtedly utilizing the reference of Josephus from the 1<sup>st</sup> century. In *The Antiquities of the Jews* the Jewish-Roman historian writes: "But as for *the Arabians*, they circumcise after the thirteenth year, because *Ishmael*, the founder of their nation, who was born to Abraham of the concubine, was circumcised at that age."<sup>7</sup>

Josephus goes on to explain that the Arabs take their name from Ishmael and the sons of Ishmael.<sup>8</sup> He is employing a *midrashic* commentary on Genesis to describe the movement of 1<sup>st</sup> century Aramaic tribes into the Decapolis and, most likely, to illustrate the origins of the Nabateans from Petra.<sup>9</sup> Eusebius, however, writing in the 4<sup>th</sup> century was faced with a very different historical context. The old Nabatean kingdom had been annexed by Rome in 106 and a new Roman Province of "Arabia" had been created with its eastern boundaries extending into the steppes of the Arabian Peninsula. Rome was not only contending with nomadic bands of tribes, some of whom were pagan, some Jewish, and some Christian, but with a wide assortment of peoples living in the new province.

---

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note the dating of *The Chronicle*. It has been agreed that Eusebius wrote this around 303 (during the Diocletian persecution). However, the work was later updated after the Edict of Toleration in 313. Philip Schaff states that it was Eusebius who provided the updated version of his own work. Shahid, however, argues that it was Jerome who updated the information and possibly provided the appellation to the Ishmaelites while translating Eusebius from Greek to Latin (see Schaff 1886:31-32; Shahid 1984b:95).

<sup>7</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.12.2.

<sup>8</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.12.4.

<sup>9</sup> The relationship of the Ishmaelites in biblical literature is a huge topic which we hope to take up in a later study. Regarding the debate whether there is any extra-Biblical references to "the Ishmaelites" (see Eph'al 1982:60-72, 231-240; Freedman 1992:513-520).

***“The Arabs” in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries***

In his *Preparatio Evangelica*, Eusebius provides another image of these “Ishmaelites” of Arabia of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Citing the Greek author Molon of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC he states that Abraham

went through the desert. And having taken two wives, the one of his own country and kindred, and the other an Egyptian handmaiden, he begat by the Egyptian twelve sons, who went off into Arabia and divided the land among them, and were the first who reigned over the people of the country: from which circumstance there are even in our own day twelve kings of the Arabians ...<sup>10</sup>

What is important here is that Molon does not mention “Ishmael” at all. Nor do any of Eusebius’ other sources (other than the Josephus). Eusebius, utilizing Josephus’ reference to the Nabateans of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, then applies the eponym of Ishmael to all of “the Arabs” (Eph’al 1976:225-235). By the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century, long after the Arab kingdoms to which Josephus refers were assimilated into the Aramaic and Roman worlds, Byzantium came into contact with a whole new sort of peoples living on the edges of the Province of Arabia. With the annexation of Arabia, Rome now extended its boundaries closer to the Persian Empire. In order to help protect the desert boundaries they contracted with numerous tribes living either in the desert or along the edges of the desert. These hired tribes were called the *foederati*, and some of these tribes were Christian Arabs. However, “the Arabs” in common parlance were simply designated by this time as those people living in the geographic boundary of the Roman province of “Arabia”. By the second and third centuries *Saracen* then became a political term, equated with those peoples living in the new province of “Arabia”.

In his *Commentary on Isaiah* we find the clear indication that Eusebius associates the *Saracens* as those who live along the boundaries of Roman imperial rule (the *limes*) within the large Province of Arabia. Here he denotes the *Saracens* as *Arabs* in his reference to Isaiah 15:7, 9 and 42:11 (Rets 2002:508-509). The Biblical story now becomes linked to “the Arabs” by virtue of their residence within a Roman political territory.

From the safe confines of Constantinople, the centre of the “civilized” world, the peoples at the edges of the realm were simply known for their nomadic ways and their “barbarity”. Their Jewish or Christian identity was often overlooked, while their pagan uncivilized and warlike ways were the

---

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius, *Evangelica Preparatio*, 9.19. See also the reference of “the Arabs” by Polyhistor in 9.23 where the “Arabs are offshoots of Israel”.

centre of attention. They were without a fixed civilization and were thus *barbaroi*. In fact, the *Saracens* would come to be known by the Byzantine historians of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries for two things: their skill and prowess in battle, and their polytheistic religions.

## 2.1 Influence of Eusebius

If we take Eusebius' references, along with those who utilized his works, we clearly see the association of the *Saracens* as those descended from Hagar and Ishmael who were "cast out/emptied out by Sarah" with the people living in the Province of Arabia. We find such references in the *Ecclesiastical Histories* of Rufinus of Aquileia (345-410), Socrates Scholasticus (ca 380), Salaminus Hermias Sozomen (400-ca 448) and Theodoret (393-457).<sup>11</sup> Most important, however, was also Jerome (340-420) who translated Eusebius' work into Latin and then made his works available to the Medieval Latin West.

Jerome, the most prominent of the early Latin Church Fathers, translated Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. Writing from his monastic cell in Bethlehem, Jerome frequently witnessed the sacking of monasteries in the Judean desert by marauding tribes. In a private letter Jerome wrote that his "native land is a prey to barbarism" (Schaff & Wace 1892:10). Jerome commented on these events in 412:

I have long wished to attack the prophecies of Ezekiel and to make good the promises which I have so often given to curious readers. When, however, I began to dictate I was so confounded by the havoc wrought in the West and above all by the sack of Rome (in 410). ... This year I began again and had written three books of commentary when a sudden incursion of those barbarians ... to whom may be applied what holy scripture says of Ishmael: "he shall dwell over against all his brethren" (Gn 16:12) overran the borders of Egypt, Palestine, Phenicia, and Syria, and like a raging torrent carried everything before them ... These describe the wars of Gog and Magog, and set forth the mode of building, the plan, and the dimensions of the holy and mysterious temple.

(Schaff & Wace 1892:252)

Jerome transmits this appellation of the "Saracen/Ishmaelite" to the English Church Historian the Venerable Bede. In Bede's *Commentary on Genesis*, as

---

<sup>11</sup> In addition, we might even include the *Ecclesiastical History* of Philostorgius (ca 364-ca 439), however we only have an *epitome* of his work from the 10<sup>th</sup> century Patriarch of Constantinople, Photius. The *epitome* lacks sufficient information to clearly determine the influence of Eusebius.

### ***“The Arabs” in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries***

part of his comments on Genesis 16:12 penned shortly after the Muslim invasion of Spain in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, he writes that Ishmael’s descendents were “condemned by birth to roam the desert”, sweeping across North Africa and then into Spain (Hoyland 1997:226). Furthermore, in his *Ecclesiastical History of England*, Bede comments on how France in 729 was “laid waste by the Saracens with cruel bloodshed” (1907 5:23).

According to the 5<sup>th</sup> century ecclesiastical historian Sozomen, “the Arabs” called themselves *Saracens* because they were ashamed of being descendents of Hagar (as Hagarenes or Ishmaelites), and wished to be known as descendents of “Sarah” (Schaff & Wace 1886:375). Theodret, a contemporary of Sozomen writing from Antioch, provides one of the only positive views of the Arabs. Recognizing the presence of Christianity among the tribes of Arabia, he writes that some Ishmaelites had embraced their role in salvation history by converting to Christianity through the preaching and miracles of monastic holy men, ascetics living in the deserts of Syria and Palestine. He stated that some of these barbarians “proudly derive their descent from their ancestor Ishmael” (Shahid 1989:154). We can certainly attribute this positive view of “the Arabs” to Theodret’s familiarity with the Christian communities in his bishopric of Cyrhus in Syria, but we have no way of confirming whether some of these tribes actually called themselves “Ishmaelites”. We do not find this self-definition claimed by “the Arabs” themselves anywhere else. Theodoret’s positive view of “the Arabs”, in any case, is unique compared to the other ecclesiastical and secular Roman historians writing from Constantinople.

The prominent Byzantine image of “the Arabs” as barbarians can be recognized by focusing upon one particular event which is recorded by several of the ecclesiastical and secular historians: the revolt of the Arab Queen Mavia (or Māwiyya), her subsequent acceptance of Byzantine authority on her own terms, and her Arab troops’ participation in the battles at Adrianople and Constantinople in 378. Let us briefly review these events and then see how “the Arabs” were portrayed.

## **2.2 The *foederati*, M-wiyya, and the defense of Constantinople**

By the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century Byzantium had begun sparing with the Sassanian Empire over territories in Upper Mesopotamia. In order to protect the vast territory between the Euphrates and the eastern steppes of Syria, the empire contracted with various tribes to serve as mercenaries to patrol the edge of

the Roman Province of Arabia. These tribes were called the *foederati*, a federation of tribes, *sharakāt* in Arabic.<sup>12</sup>

One of these Arab tribes, the Tanukh, was an orthodox Christian community. For reasons that are not expressly clear the historians tell us that Māwiyya, Queen of the Tanukh, led her Arab cavalry in a revolt against Constantinople in 373 by conquering the Roman outposts along the garrisons along the Eastern border, possibly advancing as far as Egypt (Shahid 1984a: 188). The Romans summoned their troops to dispatch the ravaging “barbarians” but they were no match for Māwiyya’s skilled horsemen in the desert. The Byzantine Emperor Valens then cut his losses and negotiated a treaty with the Arab Queen. What is interesting to note here is that Māwiyya’s terms were ecclesiastical not political. She demanded that a certain local ascetic holy man named Moses was to be consecrated as the *Saracens’* bishop.<sup>13</sup> Moses was subsequently summoned from his desert cell and ordered to serve as Bishop of the *Saracens*. Valens sent Moses to the Arian Patriarch of Alexandria, Lucius, to be consecrated – and here is the crux of the matter. Moses refused. He would not be touched by any Arian bishop! Therefore, Moses found an orthodox bishop to consecrate him instead (Trimingham 1978:3-10).

Throughout the records of these events we are led to believe by the historians that Māwiyya is simply leading another “barbarian” raid along the Roman frontier. However, according to Irfan Shahid the *Saracen* tribe of Māwiyya of the late 4<sup>th</sup> century revolts not because they are a marauding Arab barbarian tribe; rather, they revolt against the theological position of the Arian emperor. Thus, this particular tribe of *Saracens* became the defenders of Nicean orthodoxy at a time when even the Alexandrian Patriarch and the Emperor of Byzantium were professed Arians! The image of the *Saracens* as the outcast Ishmaelites and the cultural stereotype of their “barbarian” ways prohibited the acceptance of such an idea by the ecclesiastical historians and were simply lost on the secular historians. Māwiyya’s revolt was recorded as a “barbarian” raid on Roman outposts rather than a theological protest.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> The earliest important historical reference for the presence of Arab *foederati* to note is the Namāra grave marker of Imru’ al-Qays (d 328). For a review of the importance of this marker in reference to Arab Christianity (see Shahid 1984a:31-51).

<sup>13</sup> For the importance of ascetics in the dissemination of Christianity by ascetics in Late Antiquity (see Brown 1971:80-101).

<sup>14</sup> In addition to the pejorative cultural image of the Ishmaelites, there is the long standing scholarly acceptance of Arabia as the *haeresium ferax* (fertile ground of heresies) as articulated by Woodward (1916). Woodward’s view, based upon Eusebius’ accounts of Origen in Arabia, sees the province of Arabia as the place, on the edge of the empire, which was filled with heretics. To suggest that Mavia’s tribe was an orthodox Christian tribe cuts against the grain of this scholarship. We hope to address Woodward’s view in the future.

***“The Arabs” in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries***

The classical Roman Historians of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Ammianus and Zosimus, do not share the ecclesiastical views of “the Arabs” as the Ishmaelites. This is only natural, as they have no biblical reference for such a term. They do, however, share the prejudiced pejorative cultural image of the *Saracens*. By focusing upon the events surrounding the reign of Māwiyya we might demonstrate once again the traditional Roman image of these “barbarians.” For Zosimus, “the Arabs” are noted for their valour in battle as skilled horsemen and fighters, proving their ideal image as *barbaroi* (Zoisimus 1967). The barbarity of “the Arabs” is clearly underlined by Amminanus, who we have already noted above, has provided the classic Byzantine definition of “the Arabs” who are called both the “tent dwellers” (*skenetai*) and the “Saracens” (*sarakenoi*).

In 378 the barbarian Goths descended upon Constantinople. The Emperor Valens called upon his troops to defend the capital of Byzantium. One of these units that heeded the call was Māwiyya and her Tanukh horsemen from the Province of Arabia. After reconciling with Byzantium following the consecration of the *Saracen* bishop Moses, Māwiyya raced to Constantinople to defend the Empire. Proving their prowess in battle, the *Saracens* helped to repel the Gothic invasion, not only because of their valour or tactics here, but because the Goths were repulsed by the barbarity of “the Arabs”. Ammianus writes:

A body of Saracens ... being more suited for sallies and skirmishes than for pitched battles, had been lately introduced into the city; and, as soon as they saw the barbarian host, they sallied out boldly from the city to attack it. There was a stubborn fight for some time; and at last both armies parted on equal terms.

But a strange and unprecedented incident gave the final advantage to the eastern warriors; for one of them with long hair, naked – with the exception of a covering round his waist – shouting a hoarse and melancholy cry, drew his dagger and plunged into the middle of the Gothic host, and after he had slain an enemy, put his lips to his throat, and sucked his blood. The barbarians (Goths) were terrified at this marvelous prodigy.

(Yonge 1862)

By the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the *Saracens*, be they “Ishmaelites” or “federated” Christian Arab tribes serving to protect the boundaries of the Empire, were solidified in Western imaginations as “barbarians” from the East. Feared, or viewed with curiosity, they were somehow different than those

coming from Persia, Ethiopia, India or Egypt who had long histories of civilization. The negative cultural image of the *Saracens* as the “barbarians” was combined in Western Christian literature with the biblical reference that “the Arabs” are those cast out from God’s promises as the wayward stepchildren of Abraham. Eusebius’ interpretation of the role of the *Saracens* in salvation history was carried forward by Theodorus Lector, Evagrius of Antioch (536-594), the anonymous *Chonicon Pascale*, the Coptic Bishop John of Nikiou, and finally, in the most important reference to utilize Eusebius, by John of Damascus (ca 743).

John, an official at the Damascene court of the Umayyad Empire under the Muslim Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r.684-705), Walīd I (r. 705-717), and ‘Umar II (r. 717-720), penned the famous *Fount of knowledge*, a philosophical treatise and an explication of the orthodox faith. The second section of this work is called *De Haeresibus* (“On the Heresies”), a compendium of 101 different Christian heresies that he refutes. It is here that Islam is listed as the last “still-prevailing superstition of the Ishmaelites” (Sahas 1972:133).

John’s theological views would go on to serve as the basis for many Christian apologetic arguments throughout the medieval period (Daniel 2000:13-15; Hoyland 1997:486-489; Tolan 2002:50-55). It is his particular placement of Islam in a list of Christian heresies and his understanding of the origins of Islam among “the Arabs”, however, that is of interest to this research. He writes that the:

superstition of the Ishmaelites ... takes its origin from Ishmael, who was born to Abraham from Hagar, and that is why they also call them Hagarenes and Ishmaelites. They also call them Saracenes, allegedly for having been sent away by Sarah empty; for Hagar said to the angel, “*Sarah has sent me away empty.*” These, then, were idolaters and they venerated the morning star and Aphrodite ... therefore until the times of Heraclius they were, undoubtedly, idolaters.

(Sahas 1972:133)

John provides the preferred frame of reference for Western Christendom in its attempt to explain the origins of Islam. Here the faith of Islam is associated with the term *Saracen*, which for John has its roots in the biblical reference to both Ishmael and Hagar of Genesis 16 and 21. John provides a biblical reference for those “Arabs” who had historically been known by Rome for both their uncivilized ways and for their pagan idolatry (Grafton 2006). Undoubtedly, John owes his biblical reference to his reading of an earlier

### ***“The Arabs” in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries***

church historian, Eusebius the “Father of Church History”, as we have noted in the previous section.

By the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the coming of Islam, Western historians and Churchmen utilized these pre-Islamic images of “the Arabs” and applied them to the Arab Muslims. Eph’al has argued that “In the Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions, the terms “Arab(s)” and “Ishmael(ites)” generally have been associated and even regarded as interchangeable, as referring to the same group of people. For generations this association has had far-reaching cultural and historical consequences” (Eph’al 1976:225).

### **3. CONTEMPORARY WESTERN VIEWS OF THE “ISHMAELITES”**

The literature dealing the *Saracen* during the Middle Ages is quite plentiful and there is no need to explore this at length. Norman Daniel, in his classic 1960 work *Islam and the West*, notes that consistently throughout the Latin Medieval world *Saracen* and *Muslim* are used interchangeably (Daniel 2000:32). He notes that it was assumed by many medieval Christian authors that Muslims themselves claimed descent through Ishmael (2000:100). John V Tolan’s recent work, *Saracens: Islam in the medieval European imagination* provides a very helpful analysis of the wide array of criticisms European Christians threw at Islam. He provides numerous examples in European Christian literature of how the term *Saracen* came to refer to many different facets of Islamic culture and served as a catch-all definition to fit Muslims into the early Christian categorization of the people of the world: Jew, pagan, heretic (Tolan 2002:3). Regardless of its usage, the term was a pejorative label, intended to degrade and demean.<sup>15</sup>

Western Christianity continues to apply these pejorative images to Islam. However, it is not only Islam that bears the brunt of these derogatory images, but Arab culture as well. Thus, Arabs are equated with Islam and Islam with Arab culture: Muslims are “Ishmaelites” who are Arabs. The problem with this association is that it is simply not accurate. Firstly, Muslims do not take Ishmael as their forefather; it is Abraham/Ibrahīm who they claim as their spiritual ancestor. Secondly, not all Muslims are Arabs; in fact only 12-18% of the Muslim world can claim Arabic lineage. Thirdly, not all Arabs are Muslim. Just as the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century Ecclesiastical historians often

---

<sup>15</sup> The list of Medieval, Reformation and early Orientalist texts that follow this interpretation is quite extensive. For the sake of brevity we have left out a review of such sources and have moved directly to the contemporary period. The argument of this work is simply to demonstrate the origin of these pejorative terms and their culmination in contemporary Evangelical literature.

overlooked the presence of Christianity among the tribes of the Roman Province of Arabia, the West often overlooks the presence and deep-seated faith of Arab Christianity, which has its roots going back to the day of Pentecost (Ac 2:11).

### 3.1 Hal Lindsey

A prominent example of this inherited image of the *Saracens* comes from one of the most popular North American Dispensationalist preachers, Hal Lindsey. Lindsey is famous for his 1970 best seller *The late great planet earth*. This work utilized Dispensational Theology to interpret events that would lead to Armageddon. These events, argued Lindsey, were mapped out in both Ezekiel and Revelation. Lindsey's initial claim was that given the historical events of the 1970's and the prediction of such events in the Bible that the world would soon come to an end. Lindsey continues to update his work and provide more interesting material for popular consumption.

His most recent book, *The everlasting hatred, the roots of Jihad*, seeks to look at biblical prophecies that demonstrate that, whereas in the 1970's and 1980's it was the Soviet Union that would bring about the end of the world, it is now Islam that will help to bring about the Return of Christ. Lindsey provides his own interpretation of the Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac story. Taking up the Eusebian imagery of those "cast out from Sarah", Lindsey tries to demonstrate that the Ishmaelites (i.e. "the Arabs") are locked in an eternal battle with their stepbrothers, the Jews (i.e. the Israelis). For Hal Lindsey, we see that "the nature and genetic characteristics of Ishmael and his descendents the Arabs" will lead to the final cataclysmic battle of Armageddon foretold by Scripture, "between the sons of Isaac and Jacob and the sons of Ishmael and Esau" (Lindsey 2002:12, 59).

Following the biblical story where Ishmael and his descendents lived to the "east" of Isaac (Gn 25:6), the descendents of Ishmael "settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria" (25:18). The daughter of Ishmael, Mahalath was married to Esau. Through this marriage "Esau became part of the Arabs" (Lindsey 2002:79). Esau was embroiled in a bitter rivalry with his brother Jacob. Thus, a second generation of brothers exposes, for Lindsey, the truth of what he considers to be biblical prophecy. The descendents of Ishmael through Esau, begat the Edomites, who begat the Idumeans, who begat Herod the Great (who seeks to kill Jesus), whose descendents then (somehow) intermarry with each other and they begat all "the Arabs", who begat the Muslims. "Edom and the Ishmaelites are the primary Arab people. ... All of these people are linked together by their common continuous enmity toward Israel" (Lindsey 2002:81). Muslim hatred

### ***“The Arabs” in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries***

of Israel began “in the tents of Abraham” between Isaac and Ishmael, says Lindsey (2002:143).

What stands out in Lindsey’s biblical perspective is that it holds a particular political ideology of Christian Zionism that supports the interests of the modern State of Israel against “the Arabs” (i.e. Muslims). Aside from interesting biblical hermeneutics, Lindsey’s views stand on the accepted tradition of Eusebius regarding the “Ishmaelites”. He not only misses the history of Māwiyya and the early Arab Christian tradition but assigns this “eternal hatred” on all Arabs – regardless of their particular religion, social status, national, or political association; and on all Muslims – regardless of their own social, national, political association, or ethnic background!

In response to the views of Lindsey and other dispensational theologians, Tony Maalouf, professor of Old Testament at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, attempts to respond to this negative image of “the Arabs”. He writes, “the negative image of Ishmael in Christian circles in the West may be related, among other things, to deeply rooted biases against Arabs in general in broader Western societies” (Maalouf 2003:18-19). Maalouf is absolutely correct: the negative image of the *Saracen* runs long and deep in the Western consciousness. Unfortunately, Maalouf associates all Arabs with Ishmael. Like Theodoret, Maalouf attempts to “trace the history of the Arab people back to its biblical roots, back to Abraham and his son Ishmael ... (for) the millions of people who call themselves Arab” in order to find the redeeming value for the Arabs in God’s salvation history (Merrill in a foreword to Maalouf 2003:12). What is at issue here in this particular hermeneutic of seeing “the Arabs” as the Ishmaelites is the attempt to equate and identify a modern people, who, according to current social sciences are defined solely on a linguistic basis – because they speak Arabic – with a people from antiquity whose historical origins are unknown. The most dangerous result of this hermeneutic is the assignation of an entire category of people as the adversaries of God.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

As we have noticed, the particular view of “the Arabs” as *the Saracens* provided by the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> ecclesiastical historians has provided a hermeneutic for how the Western Church has viewed “the Arabs”. Because of their prejudicial views of the *barbaroi*, the ecclesiastical historians were quite sceptical toward, or are even silent on, the development of Christianity among the Arabs. If Irfan Shahid is correct in his assessment of the Orthodoxy of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Arab Christian tribe of Tanukh, that their revolt against Rome was driven by theological convictions because the Arian faith of Emperor Valens,

then the Arabs of the 4<sup>th</sup> century become the upholders of Orthodox Christianity not the outcasts of God's promises!

It is important to underline here that the early Church Fathers appropriated earlier Roman views of the "barbarians" on the edges of their empire and then applied the Biblical reference of the Ishmaelites to the inhabitants of the Roman Province of Arabia. Regardless of the origin of this term for the ecclesiastical historians there are theological consequences for this ethnic group. From the church historian's perspective, the "barbarity" of the Arabs is evidence of their being cursed. This reference identified the "barbarians" of the arid steppes on the edge of the Roman Empire not only as uncivilized peoples but as the "outcasts, outside the promises" of God, the *Saracens* (Shahid 1984b: 104). By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and with the coming of the Arab Muslims into the eastern Byzantine provinces, Christian authors then applied the pre-Islamic images of the *Saracens* to the Muslims. For John of Damascus, who viewed the Muslims as a heretical form of Christianity, "the Arabs" fit neatly into the biblical narrative, as the wayward "step-children". However, across the political borders and far away from the realities of both the Umayyad and 'Abbassid Empires, the portrayal of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Arab "barbarians" who suck blood out of live victims is carried throughout Western Medieval literature, and even utilized by contemporary Evangelical Christians when attempting to provide their own Biblical references for Islam in a post 9/11 world.

If the ecclesiastical historians had been able to appreciate the developments of Christianity within both the Roman Province of Arabia, and the steppes of the provinces of surrounding Arabia (e.g. Phoenicia Libanensis, Syria, Euphratesia, and Osrhoene) perhaps the Western Church would have had a very different view of those who heroically protected, not only the far desert boundaries of the Empire, but the very capital of Christendom itself. Perhaps, then, "the Arabs" would be seen in a very different light today, both culturally and theologically.

### **Works consulted**

- Ameer Ali 2005. *A short history of the Saracens*. Boston, MA: Adamant Media.
- Bede, St 1907. *Ecclesiastical history of England*. London: George Bell & Sons.
- Bell, R 1968. *The origins of Islam in its Christian environment*. London: Cass.
- Brown, P 1971. The rise and function of the Holy Man in late antiquity. *Journal of Roman Studies* 61, 80-101.
- Daniel, N 2000. *Islam and the West*. Oxford: One World.
- Davidson, H M 2003. *The other Bible code: Ancient Hebrew revelations about events of our time*.
- De Perceval, C 1847. *Essai sur L'Histoire Des Arabes*. Paris: n.p.

***“The Arabs” in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries***

- Eph'al, I 1976. "Ishmael" and the "Arab(s)": A transformation of ethnological terms. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 35(4), 225-235.
- Eph'al, I 1982. *The ancient Arabs*. Leiden: Brill.
- Freeman, E A 2002. *History and conquests of the Saracens*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger.
- Freedman, D N (ed) 1992. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 3, 513-520. New York: Doubleday.
- Gibbon, E 1783. *The decline and fall of the Roman Empire*. London: W Strahan.
- Graf, D F & O'Connor, M 1977. The origin of the term Saracen and the Rawwāfa inscriptions. *Byzantine Studies* 4, 52-66.
- Grafton, D D 2006. *The Arabs of Pentecost: Greco-Roman views of the Arabs and cultural identity*. Cairo, Egypt: Center for Middle East Christianity.
- Hefley, J & Hefley, M 2005. *Arabs, Christians, and Jews: Whose side is God on?* LaVergne, TN: Logos International.
- Hoyland, R H 1997. *Seeing Islam as others saw It*. Princeton, NJ: Darwin.
- Kittel, G, Friedrich, G & Bromiley, G W (eds) 1964. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol 3, 659-662. Michigan, MI: Eerdmans.
- Lindsey, H 2002. *The everlasting hatred the roots of Jihad*. Murrieta, CA: Oracle.
- Maalouf, T 2003. *Arabs in the shadow of Israel*. Michigan, MI: Kregal.
- Millar, Fergus *The Roman Near East, 31 BC-AD 337*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ockley, S 1757. *History of the Saracens*. London.
- Pococke, E 1650. *Specimen Historiae Arabum*. Oxford: Henry Hall.
- Rets, J 2002. *The Arabs in antiquity*. London: Routledge.
- Sahas, D J 1972. *John of Damascus on Islam*. Leiden: Brill
- Schaff, P & Wace, H (eds) 1886. *A select library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers of the Christian Church*, ser 2, vol 2. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Schaff, P & Wace, H (eds) 1892. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers of the Christian Church*, ser 2, vol 6. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Shahid, I 1984a. *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fourth century*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks.
- Shahid, I 1984b. *Rome and the Arabs*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks.
- Shahid, I 1989. *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fifth century*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks.
- Tolan, J V 1996. *Medieval Christian perceptions of Islam*. London: Routledge.
- Tolan, J V 2002. *Saracens*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Trimingham, J S 1978. M~wiyya: The first Christian Arab Queen. *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review*, Vol 1(1), 3-10.
- Woodward, E L 1916. *Christianity and Nationalism in the later Roman Empire*. New York: Longmanns.
- Yonge, C D 1862. *Ammianus Marcellinus: The Roman History*. London: Bonn.
- Zoisimus 1967. *New history*. San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press.