

Revolutionizing the Status Quo

Appeals to Pre-Islamic Christianity in the Writings of Anastasius of Sinai

ABSTRACT The works of Anastasius of Sinai offer an important window into the lives of Christians living under Muslim rule at the end of the seventh century. Writing after spending several decades traveling the Muslim-conquered Near East, Anastasius produced works that spoke simultaneously to both the theological significance of Muslim rule and to the continued doctrinal debates between Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians. This article focuses on comparing how Anastasius characterizes Muslims and anti-Chalcedonian Christians, particularly in his *Viae dux* and collections of edifying tales. Although he often discusses Muslims in connection to demons or other evil forces, these references lack any real sense of horror. Moreover, his works have only limited references to Muslims, and he often use their presence as a pretext to discuss doctrinal variation and heresy instead. It is worth noting that modern study of Anastasius' corpus has been complicated by confusion over authorship because his works also often lack internal historical references that could be used for consistent dating. Moreover, many aspects of his theology relate to post-Chalcedon doctrine, and therefore could easily be attributed to an author of the sixth century. However, given the monk's travels, which took place during the height of the Muslim incursion into the Levant, the Muslims' absence may not be merely an accidental omission, but may rather represent a conscious choice by Anastasius to create works that echo pre-Islamic writing, in order to create a sense of continuity and a unified Christian world that was, in reality, disrupted by Muslim rule. **KEYWORDS** Anastasius of Sinai, Chalcedonian Christianity, Anti-Chalcedonian Christianity, Hagiography, Islamic Expansion, Early Islamic Middle East

The works of Anastasius of Sinai offer an important window into the lives of Christians living under Muslim rule at the end of the seventh century.¹ Writing from the monastery at Sinai after spending several decades traveling the

1. This paper was first presented at the American Academy of Religion 2016 Annual Meeting in San Antonio as part of a panel hosted by the Middle East Christian Studies Group on "Theology and Politics in Middle Eastern Christianity: Past and Present." I am grateful for the initial feedback from my fellow panelists, Drs. Mourad Takawi, Jennifer Nystrom, Caleb McCarthy, and Josh Mugler, the panel moderator, Dr. Michael Andraos, as well as the group's excellent organizer, Dr. Jason Zaborowski, who has worked tirelessly to keep the study of Middle Eastern Christianity relevant and

Muslim-conquered Near East, Anastasius produced works that addressed a range of concerns, often speaking simultaneously to both the theological significance of Muslim rule and to the continued doctrinal debates between Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians.² This article focuses on comparing how Anastasius characterizes Muslims and anti-Chalcedonian Christians in his *Viae dux* and collections of edifying tales. Although he often discusses Muslims in connection to demons or other evil forces, these references lack any real sense of horror, often appearing more humorous. Moreover, his works have only limited references to Muslims, and even in these few cases, often use their presence as a pretext to discuss doctrinal variation and heresy instead, rather than focusing on the Muslims themselves, with the anti-Chalcedonians emerging as the true targets of his ire. In this way, the presence of the Muslims serves more as part of the setting for these texts, which, in terms of their doctrine and understanding of the nature of the church, read more like the works of sixth-century neo-Chalcedonians. Given the monk's travels, however, the Muslims' relatively limited role in his stories cannot be merely an accidental omission, but may rather represent a conscious choice by Anastasius to create works that echo pre-Islamic writing, in order to create a sense of continuity and a unified Christian world, despite its actual disruption by Muslim rule.

With the rise of Islam, Near Eastern Christianity was characterized in large part by the continued disputes between the pro- and anti-Chalcedonian communities, particularly in the regions of Palestine and Syria. Although the imperial church had supported Chalcedonianism continuously since the rule of the Emperor Justin in the early sixth century, anti-Chalcedonianism or Miaphysitism (so called for its rejection of the two-in-one definition of

central to modern religious studies, and to all of those who attended, asked questions, and made comments on the original presentation.

2. For a general bibliography on Anastasius' life and the significance of his work for the early Islamic period, see Averil Cameron, "New Themes and Styles in Greek Literature: Seventh-Eighth Centuries," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Volume One, Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), 81–105; Sidney Griffith, "Anastasios of Sinai, the *Hodegos*, and the Muslims," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987): 341–358 and "Christians, Muslims, and Neo-Martyrs. Saints' Lives and Holy Land History," in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land. First-Fifteenth Centuries CE*, ed. Arieh Kofsky and Guy Stroumsa (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1998), 163–207; Alan M. Guenther, "The Christian Experience and Interpretation of the Early Muslim Conquest and Rule," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10.3 (1999): 363–378, and John Haldon, "The Works of Anastasius of Sinai: A Key Source for the History of Seventh-Century East Mediterranean Society and Belief," in Cameron and Conrad, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Volume One*, 107–148.

Christ's nature set at the Council of Chalcedon) remained the larger and more vocal community in the Near East.³ The Miaphysites were not a single church, but a loosely-associated collection of indigenous communities, and included in their communion the Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Coptic Churches, together with some of the Arabian tribes.⁴ The Chalcedonians were similarly not yet a distinct church, but rather a designation for those who supported the Chalcedonian creed and the imperial support thereof—thus, in the Near East, they were also called *malike* or “Melkite” in the local languages of Syriac and Arabic, meaning simply “aligned with the king.”⁵

Despite the imperial determination of Chalcedonianism as the true doctrine of the Byzantine church, the two churches had continually challenged each other for supremacy, with the anti-Chalcedonians beginning to appoint their own distinct church hierarchy by the early sixth century.⁶ Although Chalcedonian bishops and patriarchs in the Near East enjoyed imperial support, their local influence was more limited, as much of the local population appears to have

3. For a general introduction to the Chalcedonian split, see the introduction to Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, ed. and trans., *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005); Fergus Miller, “The Syriac Acts of the Second Council of Ephesus (449),” in *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils 400–700*, ed. Richard Price and Mary Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 45–69, and Richard Price, “The Council of Chalcedon (451): A Narrative,” in Whitby and Price, *Chalcedon*, 70–91.

4. For general discussions on the development of the anti-Chalcedonian churches, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Charles A. Frazee, “Late Roman and Byzantine Legislation of the Monastic Life from the Fourth to the Eighth Centuries,” *Church History* 51 (1982): 263–79; Bart ter Haar Romeny, “From Religious Association to Ethnic Community: a Research Project on Identity Formation among the Syrian Orthodox under Muslim Rule,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16.4 (2005): 377–399; Philip Wood, “The *Chorepiscopi* and Controversies over Orthopraxy in Sixth-Century Mesopotamia,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 63.3 (2012): 446–457; and J.M.B. Martínez, “La violencia religiosa originada por las decisiones del Concilio de Calcedonia (451) en los monjes de Oriente,” in *Formas y usos de la violencia en el mundo romano*, ed. Gozalo Bravo (Madrid: Signifer Libros, 2007), 291–303.

5. For a general introduction to imperial Chalcedonianism, see Peter N. Bell, *Social Conflict in the Age of Justinian: His Nature, Management and Mediation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Dirk Krausmüller, “Making Sense of the Formula of Chalcedon,” *Vigiliae christianae* 65 (2011): 484–513; Pachomios Penkett, “Palestinian Christianity in the *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschos,” *Aram* 15 (2003): 173–84, and Volker L. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

6. The role of the church as representative of indigenous, Syriac interests was of particular importance to Severus of Antioch, as one of the leading voices of the early anti-Chalcedonian movement. See, for example, Pauline Allen, “Severus of Antioch as Pastoral Carer,” *Studia patristica* 35 (2001): 353–68 and “The Syrian Church Through Bishops’ Eyes: The Letters of Theodoret of Cyrillus and Severus of Antioch,” *Studia patristica* 42 (2006): 3–22.

supported the anti-Chalcedonian side. As can be seen from the diversity of church communities associated with anti-Chalcedonianism, the division was not merely religious, but ethnic and linguistic, as well, with anti-Chalcedonian churches emerging among local populations and in local dialects—in Palestine and Syria, for example as the Syrian Orthodox church did among the predominately Syriac-speaking indigenous population.⁷ Imperial Chalcedonianism, on the other hand, remained Greek-speaking into the Islamic period, even in the Near Eastern regions, until the physical separation of the Melkite church from Constantinople eventually caused the church to adopt the local language, which by that time had shifted to Christian Arabic.⁸

Chalcedonianism in the Near East suffered not only from its minority status among the population, but arguably from its weaker theological position, as well. The Chalcedonian Creed as set by the Council in 451 was, at its core, a response and correction to lingering questions from earlier Councils—namely, how the fully divine Son as defined at Nicaea could also be meaningfully human, without compromising divine immutability and impassibility. If Christ is truly *homoousios* with the Father, the question arose whether he could still be *homoousios* with humans in the Incarnation.⁹ The Creed defined Christ's dual nature by negation—that is, the Council defined that he is truly human and truly divine, “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”¹⁰ The inclusion of the so-called Chalcedonian adverbs was intended to provide a precise definition, but it is easy to see how each was also a response to an existing concern.¹¹ Anti-Chalcedonian responses began to emerge almost immediately after the Council, many from the major religious cities of

7. Romeny, “From Religious Association to Ethnic Community,” 377–399. For more on the role of language in Syrian anti-Chalcedonian community formation, see Fergus Miller, “The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 21.1 (2013): 43–92, and David Taylor, “Bilingualism and Diglossia in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia,” in *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Word*, ed. James Noel Adams, Mark Janse and Simon Swain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 298–331.

8. Sidney Griffith, “The Monks of Palestine and the Growth of Christian Literature in Arabic,” *The Muslim World* 78 (1988): 1–28; Frazee, “Late Roman and Byzantine Legislation”; Sebastian Brock, “The Conversations with the Syrian Orthodox under Justinian,” *Orientalia christiana periodica* 47 (1981): 87–121.

9. Price and Gaddis, *Acts*, 2, 10–11; Frend, *Monophysite Movement*, 49.

10. Price and Gaddis, *Council of Chalcedon*, 3:204–5. See also Dirk Krausmiller, “Conflicting Anthropologies in the Christological Discourse at the End of Late Antiquity: The Case of Leontius of Jerusalem's Nestorian Adversary,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 56.2 (2005): 415–449.

11. Evangelos Chrysos, “The Synodal Acts as Literary Products,” *L'icône dans la théologie et l'art* 9 (1990): 85–93.

the Near East, first from Jerusalem, and then from Antioch and Alexandria, which would remain the twin cities of anti-Chalcedonianism well into the Muslim period.¹²

Pro-Chalcedonian writings, however, particularly those that created a theological defense for the necessity of the Chalcedonian Creed, did not appear for nearly a century, with the so-called “Neo-Chalcedonians” such as Leontius of Jerusalem and Leontius of Byzantium. These theologians still understood Chalcedonianism as growing out of the earlier definition set at Nicaea, but tried to move beyond understanding the Chalcedonian Creed as merely a response to earlier doctrine. In particular, these authors focused particularly on reclaiming the theology of Cyril of Alexandria, the great hero of Nicaea. This was no easy task, as anti-Chalcedonian writers often highlighted how Cyrillian doctrine was corrupted by the Chalcedonian Creed because Cyril had strongly emphasized the unity of God.¹³ The Neo-Chalcedonians, therefore, were obligated carefully to define the terms used in both Nicaea and Chalcedon, in particular the “hypostasis” defined at Nicaea and *physis* (nature) discussed at Chalcedon. For example, Leontius of Jerusalem attempted to create a direct connection from the Cyrillian definition of unity to the doctrine set by Chalcedon by focusing on the continued use of the “one hypostasis” formulation at Chalcedon. Similarly, he drew a precise distinction between hypostasis and nature, arguing that natures could be multiple without impacting the essential unity of divine hypostasis, thus, as Gray puts it, “providing, for the first time, a really coherent vocabulary for Cyrillian Chalcedonians.”¹⁴ In doing so, he reclaimed Cyrillian doctrine and traced a new continuity from Nicaea to

12. Heinrich Bacht, “Die Rolle des orientalischen Mönchtums in den kirchenpolitischen Auseinandersetzungen um Chalkedon (431–519),” in *Das Konzil von Chalkedon, Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Aloys Grillmeier and Heinrich Bacht (Würzburg, 1953), v. 2, 193–314, and Richard Burgess, “The Accession of Marcian in the Light of Chalcedonian Apologetic and Monophysite Polemic,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 86–7 (1993–4): 47–68.

13. Patrick T. Gray, *The Defense of Chalcedon in the East (451–553)* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 135–139. It is worth noting that the idea of Christ’s two natures is also Cyrillian. Since Cyril described Christ as “from two natures,” rather than “of two natures,” however, his definition was in many ways as much a further complication that required correction at Chalcedon as a support of its Creed; see Gray, *Defense of Chalcedon*, 2–4, 10–12; Susan Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy: The Making of Saint and Heretic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 183–90, and John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 175–227.

14. Early editions of Leontius’ work in the *Patrologia graeca* attributed his work to Leontius of Byzantium; Patrick Grey, however, has argued persuasively for his works as the product of a different author than the more well-known Leontius of Byzantium; Gray, *Defense of Chalcedon*, 139.

Chalcedon, essentially addressing anti-Chalcedonian claims that the Creed had corrupted Cyrillian thought.

Even in the sixth and early seventh century, however, many Chalcedonian writers relied not on theological arguments to defend Chalcedonianism, but on the Creed's position as official doctrine, chastising anti-Chalcedonians for creating schism and dividing the communion of the unified church. John Moschus' stories, for example, collected during his travels through Egypt and the Near East, often focused on the importance of continued communion between Rome, Constantinople, and the eastern Sees, claiming that, like wayward children, the eastern Sees were sowing wild oats which would eventually lead them into corruption and sin, if they continued to reject the guidance of the imperial Sees.¹⁵ The rise of Islam and the emergence of the Byzantine-Islamic border, however, put both Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians on more or less equal footing in terms of communion with Rome and Constantinople, and so this traditional conception of Chalcedonian superiority as stemming from their preservation of church unity was severely shaken. Therefore, the Chalcedonian communities of the Near East faced several challenges to maintaining their communal identity: First, they were a minority community, with an arguably weaker doctrinal structure for their faith. Second, the emerging Byzantine-Muslim border served to cut off the Sees of North Africa and the Near East from regular exchange with Rome and Constantinople. This separation not only disrupted their practical operations, in terms of their ability to seek guidance from the Patriarch of Constantinople and in the appointment of bishops, but eliminated one of their major identity markers, their role as the defenders of the unified church.¹⁶

15. Indeed, in Moschus' *Spiritual Meadow*, the physical Eucharist itself features in several stories of miracles affecting anti-Chalcedonians; see John Wortley, *The Spiritual Meadow (Pratum spirituale) by John Moschus (also known as John Eviratus)* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992). Moschus recounts stories of the destruction by boiling of an anti-Chalcedonian Eucharist, but not a Chalcedonian Eucharist (no. 29, *idem.*, 21–2), a Chalcedonian Eucharist from Maundy Thursday that sprouted green shoots, serving as a sign to an anti-Chalcedonian bishop (no. 79, *idem.*, 63–4), and an anti-Chalcedonian monk who received a vision from God to change his theology after refusing communion with a Chalcedonian brother (no. 106, *idem.*, 85–6). For the broader Byzantine conception of the Eucharist, see Vincent Deroche, "Représentations de l'Eucharistie dans la haute époque Byzantine," *Travaux et mémoires* 14 (2002): 167–80, and Philip Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 2014), 130–3.

16. Averil Cameron, "The Eastern Provinces in the Seventh Century AD: Hellenism and the Emergence of Islam," in *Ἑλληνισμός: Quelques jalons pour une histoire de l'identité grecque*, ed. S. Said (Leiden: Brill Press, 1991), 287–313.

The works of Anastasius of Sinai, thus, serve as an important window into this period of complicated identity formation for the Chalcedonian church, and provide an important view on how one Chalcedonian author addressed the rapid changes taking place in the Near East. Indeed, Anastasius was particularly well situated to address these changes. Born in Cyprus in the early seventh century, Anastasius first entered the monastery at Sinai in 649. According to his own account of his life, he left the monastery for several years, however, traveling extensively throughout the Near East during the early centuries of Islamic expansion and visiting several important conquered cities, including Alexandria, Damascus, and Jerusalem.¹⁷ In this way, he had the opportunity to witness first-hand the effects of Muslim rule across the Near East. Yet despite his claimed familiarity with the world beyond his monastic cell, his works remain focused predominately on the more traditional, pre-Islamic Chalcedonian themes of immorality and the Miaphysite schism from them.¹⁸

The *Viae dux*, his guide to right living, is Anastasius' only work that can be read as directly addressing Islam. The work was composed after his return to the monastery, circa 690, and includes a number of lengthy recitations against Christian heresies framed as retellings of debates in which the monk engaged during his travels. Anastasius explains that the work is intended to guide his fellow Chalcedonian Christians regarding the refutation of heresy, based on his own experiences.¹⁹ Therefore, a primary characteristic of Anastasius' writing emerges immediately in how he frames his response to Islam: Although Anastasius addresses Muslim belief, the real focus of his ire remains the anti-Chalcedonians, with the Muslims serving as a model of wrong belief being aped by the supposedly Christian anti-Chalcedonians.

Given Anastasius' personal history, it is plausible that, in his travels, he would have debated theology with Muslims as he had done with anti-Chalcedonian Christians. Yet reference to such debates occurs only once in the work:

Before any discussion first we must anathematise all false notions which our adversaries might entertain about us. Thus when we wish to debate with the Arabs (Ἄραβας), we first anathematise whoever says two gods (τὸν λέγοντα

17. Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 92 and Karl-Heinz Uthemann, *Anastasioi Sinaitae Viae dux*, ed. Karl-Heinz Uthemann (Leuven: Brepols University Press, 1981), CCXIV–CCXVII.

18. Clement Kuehn, "Anastasius of Sinai: Biblical Scholar," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 103.1 (2010): 55–81.

19. Griffith, "Anastasios," 341–358.

δύο θεούς), or whoever says that God has carnally begotten a son (τόν λέγοντα, ὅτι ἐγέννησεν ὁ θεός σαρκικῶς υἱόν), or whoever worships as god any created thing at all, in heaven or on earth (τόν προσκυνούντα ὡς θεόν οἰονδήποτε κτίσμα ἐν οὐρανῷ ἢ ἐπὶ γῆς).²⁰

At first glance, it would appear that in this passage, Anastasius is giving guidelines for the correct manner of refuting Muslim belief. However, only two of the three anathemas are reasonably applicable to Muslims: although anathematizing “whoever says two gods” could be a reference to the Muslim accusation that Christians worship Christ as a God separate from God the Father, and anathematizing “whoever says that God has carnally begotten a son” could be a reference to the Qur’anic verses from sura 112, “He begetteth not nor was begotten,”²¹ which may have appeared on Muslim coinage as early as the 690s,²² the final anathema, against those who “worship as god any created thing at all” would seem to be nonspecifically pagan, with no obvious root in Muslim belief or practice, which were at this stage still broadly monotheist.²³

Thus, the reference to carnal begetting stands as the clearest reference to Muslim belief. However, even this accusation becomes less clearly directed at Muslims later in the *Viae dux*, when, in recounting a debate in which he participated in Alexandria, Anastasius applies this same language to the Miaphysites, whom he here refers to as the followers of Severus of Antioch:

When they [the Severans] hear “nature,” they think of shameful and unbecoming things, the sexual organs of the bodies of men and women. Because of that, they avoid this word as if they were the students of the Saracens. For when the latter hear of the birth of God and of His genesis, they at once blaspheme, imagining marriage, fertilization and carnal union.²⁴

20. Anastasius of Sinai, *Viae dux*, I.1, 9.

21. Q. 112:3.

22. It is less clear if a strictly Greek-speaking scholar like Anastasius would have been able to read these coins; see Luke Treadwell, “Qur’anic Inscriptions on the Coins of the *Ahl al-Bayt* from the Second to the Fourth Century AH,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 14 (2012): 47–71, and Fred Donner, “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community,” *Al-Abhāth* 50–51 (2002–2003): 9–53. Similar language also appears on the Dome of the Rock, but the same issues regarding accessibility remain; see Oleg Grabar, “The Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem,” *Ars orientalis* 3 (1959): 33–62.

23. It is worth noting that there is little scholarly agreement about the nature of early Islamic practice, but monotheism emerges as a common theme in a number of the leading theories; see also Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 90–144, and Sidney Griffith, “The Melkites and the Muslims: The Qur’an, Christology, and Arab Orthodoxy,” *Al-Qantara*, 33.2 (2013): 413–443.

24. Anastasius of Sinai, *Viae dux*, X.2, 169–70.

Here again, Anastasius addresses Muslim belief, but he does so only within the context of addressing anti-Chalcedonian thought and Severus in particular. He goes on to compare Severus of Antioch, and by implication, his followers, to Arabs, Jews, and Manicheans, without any further illustration of the similarities to these groups, presumably to further stress the supposedly extreme nature of Severan theology.²⁵ Indeed, Anastasius gives no additional guidance regarding how his reader should refute Muslim belief, apparently assuming that what he perceives as its error is blatant enough. Instead, he continues to focus on refuting anti-Chalcedonian theology, so that the section as a whole remains focused on correcting the errors in Christian belief, not on directly refuting Islam.

None of Anastasius' other writings addresses Islam directly, although Muslims feature heavily in all of them.²⁶ Taken together, these references and descriptions of Muslims form a picture of how Anastasius understood Muslims and their role in his world, in that they often appear as companions of demons, particularly in the context of the Muslim expansion. It is clear from the repeated references to demons and demonic powers that Anastasius understands the Muslims' victory in the expansion as remarkable, and even superhuman. Nevertheless, Muslims themselves remain background figures in these narratives, appearing as merely ordinary humans benefiting from demonic support. This description may reflect Anastasius' own knowledge of the expansion, which ended in Palestine and Syria several decades before he began to travel. Thus, while the conquest may have remained a dramatic event in the minds of the indigenous communities, Anastasius' writings suggest that some of the terror associated with it had begun to die down, with the expansion seen more as a historical event, albeit an important one.²⁷

All the same, for Anastasius, the Muslims represent the visible manifestation of God's Wrath, a wrath brought about by Christians' doctrinal failures, a point

25. *Idem.*, VII.2, 113.

26. Although which references refer to Muslim versus pagan or Christian Arabs is still a point of some scholarly debate, as well; David Sahas, "The Seventh Century in Byzantine-Muslim Relations: Characteristics and Forces," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2.1 (1991): 3–22.

27. This transition is particularly important when compared to Anastasius' co-religionist Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, who lived only a few decades earlier and saw the fall of that city to the Muslims. He wrote with considerable horror about the effects of both false doctrine (in his case, the debates over Christ's Will) and the rise of Islam in his own time; see Jessica Lee Ehinger, "Biblical History and the End of Times: Seventh Century Christian Accounts of the Rise of Islam" *Studies in Church History* 49 (2013): 52–62; Walter Kaegi, "Initial Byzantine Reactions to the Arab Conquest," *Church History* 38.2 (1969): 139–149, and Pauline Allen, *Sophronius of Jerusalem and Seventh-Century Heresy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

further illustrated by the ways in which Anastasius compares the Muslims and Muslim victory to Biblical suffering and demons. The Muslims serve as literary devices for Anastasius' larger themes of righteous behavior and belief, rather than as real actors or defenders of their own faith. This role may suggest that the Muslims did not play a major role in the day-to-day lives on the people whose stories Anastasius aimed to tell in his works. It also parallels the argument that his apparent response to the Muslims in the *Viae dux* is actually aimed predominately at the anti-Chalcedonians. Admittedly, it would be reasonable that Anastasius, as a monk, would not have had regular contact with the new ruling class of the Near East. Yet it seems surprising that he would not address a larger portion of works aimed at his fellow Chalcedonians on how to address the new Muslim ruling class unless he thought they, too, would have only minimal contact with them.²⁸

In addition to his *Viae dux*, Anastasius produced three collections of edifying tales about the lives of his fellow brothers at Sinai and the communities of the surrounding regions. Again, although these works do not address Islamic theology directly, Muslims still feature regularly, often representing the visible manifestation of God's Wrath. The first collection, completed around 660, focused on the lives of his fellow monks at Sinai and the later two, completed around 690, were collections of stories from the surrounding regions.²⁹ As the Muslim incursion into the Levant took place throughout most of the second half of the seventh century, not surprisingly, the Muslims feature more regularly

28. For more on how the monastery at Sinai itself features in Anastasius' work, see John Chryssavgis, "History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai. Including Translations of Pseudo-Nilus' Narrations, Ammonius' Report on the Slaughter of the Monks of Sinai and Rhaithou, and Anastasius of Sinai's Tales of the Sinai Fathers," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 62.1 (2011): 142–143. Of course, regionality and time play major roles here as well: the conquest in Syria and Palestine was already several decades old by the time Anastasius would have been writing. So it makes sense that he would have been addressing a community that was experiencing Muslim rule as a much more settled, established, and limited form of government, rather than as an on-going occupying military force. Compare this situation to the experiences of Christians living in Palestine or Egypt during its conquest, for example, as demonstrated in the sermons of the Patriarch of Jerusalem: Sophronius (634–638), or in the Ethiopic chronicle of John of Nikiu, which suggests a substantial Muslim presence in Egypt and significant loss of life and property among Christians (although John himself is still not above blaming Christian heresies, as he suggests much of the destruction to be the fault of the pro-Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria); see H. Usener, "Weihnachtspredigt des Sophronios," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 41 (1886): 500–16; R. H. Charles, *The Chronicle Of John, Bishop Of Nikiu, Translated From Zotenberg's Ethiopic Text* (Merchantville, NJ: Evolution, 2007), 191–193.

29. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 99.

in this second set, although there is passing reference to their invasion of Sinai in the first. In the second and third collections, the Muslims regularly appear as obstacles to Christian worship and religious practice. In this context, Anastasius regularly compares them to demons, an image which Anastasius employs in order to highlight the most crucial aspects of Christian belief.

Unfortunately, these works have not received much scholarly attention. No published edition exists of the full collection of edifying tales, and no published edition exists at all of the third, or “C” collection. This text is preserved in a single manuscript, Ms. Vaticanus gr. 2592, fols. 123–35, and to date, only summaries or translations of short passages have been published. Bernard Flusin published very brief summaries of all eleven stories, and a French translation of the eleventh (C11) story was published on its own by François Nau. Short passages from C1, C4, and C11, those passages that reference the Muslims directly, were translated in Robert Hoyland’s *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It*.³⁰ A full edition and French translation has recently been produced by André Binggeli for his doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne (forthcoming as a published edition), which should elevate these works important to research of the early Islamic Near East.³¹

The “C” collection of stories is particularly interesting for the ways in which Anastasius integrates the history of the Muslim expansion and the Muslims’ presence in the Near East into more traditional narrative motifs of stories of holy men curing locals of illness, ending disputes between local nobles, and, most importantly, curing people of demon possession. Indeed, the Muslims feature regularly as compatriots of demons in the Near East, often with the implication that their military success is the result of superhuman strength deriving from demonic powers. However, despite this macabre theme, many of the stories of demonic possession in the “C” collection lack any real sense of terror. As is often the case with pre-Islamic demon stories, the demonic powers are often easily defeated by holy men and the invocation of Christian rituals or prayers. Even in the stories specifically about people suffering from demonic

30. B. Flusin, “Démons et sarrasins: L’auteur et le propos des *Diegemata steriktika* d’Anastase le Sinaïte,” *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (1991): 380–409; F. Nau, “Le texte grec des récits du moine Anastase,” *Oriens christianus* 2 (1902): 58–89; partial translations of C1, C4 and C11 can be found in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 96–99.

31. André Binggeli, *Anastase le Sinaïte: Récits sur le Sinaï et Récits utiles à l’âme* (Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2001).

possession, the afflictions are often more humorous than terrifying, serving as ironic observations about the Muslim-occupied Near East.³²

For example, in one particularly strange account, Anastasius tells of a Syrian man named Sartabias who was effectively cured of demon possession, not by the intervention of a holy man, but because his demon left to serve alongside the Muslims in their naval campaign against Constantinople:

There was a man called Sartabias among the inhabitants of Damascus. By God's permission, a spirit came to dwell in him; it terribly oppressed him daily with agonizing, shaking seizures. As the Saracens were preparing to go to sea through the Strait of Abydos, which leads to Constantinople, the demon appeared to Sartabias and said, "Our leader sends us as soldiers to help our companions, the Saracens, in their contest against Constantinople, and I too have received orders to leave. Thus, you have nothing to fear, and no one will bother you further, until our return from this contest." And so it was: before the Lord, the man remained free from abuse until the Saracens had returned.³³

It would appear that the demons of the Near East were prioritizing their actions, being ordered to travel with the Muslims and attack Constantinople as presumably causing more evil than by possessing individual Christians. The story thus implies that the demons needed the Muslims to attack the Christian capital, as without their presence in Syria, the demons would have continued attacking individual Christians through possession and torture.

Indeed, Anastasius makes this mutually-beneficial relationship between demons and Muslims more explicit, as the story ends by addressing the audience directly, explaining how and why Muslims and demons work together:

But you, take note of this: the demons do call the Saracens their companions, and rightly so. Perhaps they are even worse than demons, as demons are often much afraid of many of the mysteries of Christ, I mean his holy body, which was Incarnate and died, as has been written, the cross, the saints, relics, holy

32. It would be impossible to discuss the role of the "holy man" in Near Eastern Christianity without noting Peter Brown's seminal work, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Religious Studies* (1971): 80–85. For more on the role of the Holy Man as a foil to demonic possession and the role of suffering as a sign of divine powers, see Elizabeth Castelli, "The Ambivalent Legacy of Violence and Victimhood: Using Early Christian Martyrs to Think With," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 6:1 (2006): 1–24; Flusin, "Démon et sarrasins," 380–409, and L. Grig, "Torture and Truth in Late Antique Martyrology," *Early Medieval Europe* 11 (2002): 321–336.

33. Cf. Ms. Vaticanus gr. 2592 123v-124r = II.2, Binggeli, *Anastase le Simaïte*, 221.

oils and many other things. But these demons of flesh and bones, all this they trample down under their feet, mock it, set fire to it and destroy it. How then can we call them righteous?³⁴

In this passage, the Muslims transform from companions of demons to demons of flesh and bone.

Anastasius implies a symbiotic relationship between demons and the Muslims, one that draws directly on the more traditional imagery of demons as being easily bested by Christian ritual. Whereas demons can be exorcised by prayers or the application of relics or holy oil, Muslims, despite being human, are immune to these supernatural interventions. Anastasius seems to imply that Muslims could serve alongside demons, effectively addressing the obvious imbalance in demons' supernatural powers by destroying the common, Christian items that could so easily defeat them. Anastasius may have intended this brief passage to serve as an explanation for the Muslim expansion itself, and how the Muslim armies were able to overcome the Byzantine military. On the one hand, the Byzantine army was more experienced and better supplied, and presumably, they had also been blessed by his fellow Chalcedonian church leaders, thus essentially protecting its soldiers from both human and demonic armies. Yet, Anastasius seems to say, the combined armies of Muslims and demons were able to work in concert to weaken both the military strength and religious righteousness of their Christian foes.³⁵

Similarly, Anastasius implies that victory over the Muslims and their demon companions would come not from military force, but from Christian ritual.³⁶ Again, this construction may stem from Anastasius' own experiences traveling throughout the Near East, as it was several decades since the initial Muslim incursion into the region, and a military victory probably no longer seemed like a viable outcome for many of the indigenous communities through which he traveled. The Byzantine army had already been defeated, and there was no longer a non-Muslim standing military force in most areas of Palestine or Syria. Focusing on the salvific power of Christian ritual not only explained how

34. Ibid.

35. Dietmar Winkler, "Christian Responses to Islam in the Umayyad Period," in *Syriac Churches Encountering Islam*, ed. Dietmar Winkler (Piscataway, NJ.: Gorgias Press, 2010), 66–84, and Hugh Kennedy, "The Melkite Church from the Islamic Conquest to the Crusades," *The 17th International Byzantine Congress 1986*: 325–343.

36. For an interesting discussion on Anastasius' understanding of salvation and the supernatural, see Matthew Dal Santo, "Text, Image, and the 'Visionary Body' in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Incubation and the Rise of the Christian Image Cult," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 4.1 (2011): 31–54.

victory could still be achieved without a standing military force, but would have placed that victory in the hands of the indigenous Christian communities themselves, the same communities to whom Anastasius' work was presumably addressed. In writing thus, the monk could comfort his readers that, despite the Byzantines' military failures, local Christians might still see victory and reunification with Byzantium and the imperial, Chalcedonian church, if they could address their divisive sectarianism. This argument may have been particularly meaningful for a Chalcedonian audience, as again, these churches had traditionally defined themselves through their continued allegiance and communion with the Byzantine imperial church. They may have seen the Byzantine military failure not only as a socio-political failing, but a spiritual one, as well.³⁷ Thus Anastasius offered these churches a direct path through which they could overcome the Muslims, again tying contemporary events back to the larger pro-Chalcedonian tradition of church unity, as being the community that did not stray from the doctrines laid down at Chalcedon.³⁸

Despite the discussion of both demons and the horrors of war, however, the tone in Anastasius' story is notably neutral. The story of Sartabias is almost entirely lacking in horror and graphic violence—although he states that Muslims trample the mysteries of Christ under their feet, he provides no examples of them doing so, nor does he go into detail about the pain such acts has caused Christians. Indeed, the story as a whole is almost humorous—no holy figures feature at all, and Sartabias is effectively “cured” of his possession by the very demon who possessed him. The only graphic imagery employed describes the painful seizures Sartabias experienced, and the only moral lesson is that the Muslims work with and are like demons, without any clear implication of what this partnership should mean for Anastasius and his fellow Chalcedonians, who had, at this point, lived under Muslims rule for several decades.

Indeed, demons are not even presented as a constant threat in Anastasius' stories. In one of the final stories from this collection, Anastasius tells of the holy John of Bostra, who had traveled to Damascus to help resolve disputes

37. As will be noted later, this is a victory tied particularly to the Eucharist, a motif that Anastasius shares with his co-religionist Sophronius; see Christoph von Schönborn, *Sophrone de Jérusalem: Vie Monastique et Confession Dogmatique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972), 144–151 and V. Déroche, “Représentations de l'Eucharistie dans la haute époque byzantine,” *Travaux et mémoires* 14 (2002): 167–80.

38. For more on Anastasius' concept of imperial citizenship versus religious identity, see Sophie Cartwright, “Athanasius' 'Vita Antonii' as Political Theology: The Call of Heavenly Citizenship,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 67.2 (2016): 241–64.

between the Syrian churches.³⁹ The governor of Antioch had called for him to help with a case of possession—four girls had been possessed by demons and were “uttering words inspired by the devil.” Rather than exorcising the demons immediately, John talked with them about how demons attack Christians:

Blessed John, of whom we have just spoken, he heard the demons speak many words by the mouth of the girls in the language of Syria, and for his part, he asked them on many different issues about things that are useful to the soul, and I want to relate these here because of the weakness of the majority of people, that they might serve for the edification of all. . . The Holy John cut short a discussion on [another] topic and asked them this question: what objects found among Christian servants do you fear? They answered him: Verily, you possess three things: first, what you wear around your neck, second, the place where you bathe in the church, and finally, what you eat when you gather together. The servant of Christ, John, knew they were talking about the venerable cross, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, and he asked them again: and these three objects, which do you fear most? And they said to him, Verily, if you partake of the Communion, none of us can do harm to a Christian.⁴⁰

This description of the need for correct communion by the demon-possessed girls implies that a weakening in ritual practice both predated and predicted the demonic possession. The story does not appear to be saying that the possessed four girls specifically lacked the cross, baptism, or communion, but that failures in correct practices among the Syrian churches generally, in particular in communion, allowed for demons to possess Christians.⁴¹ Again, particularly by setting these stories in Syria, Anastasius subtly implies that the breakdown of orthodox belief was actually responsible for the rise of Islam, as well as an influx of demons who possessed the people of Syria. In this way, heresy and the failure of Christian belief arise as the true source of the current punishment being inflicted on Christians by the Muslims.⁴²

Anastasius’ concept of Christian identity, therefore, remains inward-looking, defined by Christian failures, in particular with regard to Christology, which

39. For more on Syria as a literary location, see Clive Foss, “Byzantine Saints in Early Islamic Syria,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 125 (2007): 93–119, and Robert Hoyland “Jacob and Early Islamic Edessa,” in *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day*, ed. Bart ter Haar Romeny (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 11–24.

40. C11, Ms. Vaticanus gr. 2592 130r-131r = II.20, Binggeli, *Anastase le Sinaïte*, 249–50.

41. Foss, “Byzantine Saints in Early Islamic Syria,” 93–119.

42. David Frankfurter, “Where the Spirits Dwell: Possession, Christianization, and Saints’ Shrines in Late Antiquity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 103.1 (2010): 27–46.

in turn had enabled Muslim victory. Moreover, Anastasius' conception of Christian identity integrates elements of his community's day-to-day life. Despite occurring only a few decades after the Muslim expansion, however, the image which emerges of this day-to-day life lacks any real sense of terror toward Muslim victory or the realities of Muslim rule. It appears that already in Anastasius' lifetime, the Near East was a place in which debates with Arabs seemed plausible, and in which the suffering caused by the Muslims' victory was something to be explained, but not necessarily a current influence on Christian lives. Instead, elements of acceptance can be seen in Anastasius' writing, as he struggles to explain how Christians should continue to practice their religion in the new world of Muslim rule, focusing particularly on the need to remain vigilant against sectarianism, perhaps fighting against a concurrent desire to create a universal Christian identity that could be held up as preferable to Islam. Time clearly plays an important role in his characterization—Anastasius' work stands in contrast to that of his co-religionist Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem during the Muslim siege of the city, who also likens Muslims to monsters and demons. Yet while Sophronius' writing is fearful and apocalyptic, Anastasius' is not.⁴³ There is every reason to believe that the Chalcedonian community for which Anastasius speaks once believed that the appearance of the Muslim heralded a truly terrible end, but in the decades since their initial conquest, those fears appear to have softened somewhat, and Anastasius appears to desire to return them to their concerns for church unity and doctrinal purity.

Despite the supernatural imagery in these works, Anastasius' description of life under Muslim rule remains focused on normalcy, emphasizing that Christians' lives remained much the same as before Muslim rule. The demons of these stories are neither ferocious nor terrifying. Although nothing in the text suggests that the demons in Syria were not a genuine threat, the text lacks any real sense of palpable horror. In this way, Anastasius appears to write from a position of imagined continuity, developing a narrative that could just as easily come from the pre-Islamic period, one in which "orthodox" Christians were threatened by supernatural evil brought into this world by sectarianism and false doctrine. In fact, this illusion of a pre-Islamic Chalcedonian church is so

43. See, for example, Sophronius' description of the destruction wrought by the Muslims in the territories surrounding Jerusalem during his sermon on the Holy Baptism, delivered circa 637. Here he described the Muslims as God-haters and God-fighters, and followers of the Devil, likening them to a Biblical and apocalyptic plague, and claiming the streets were running with blood and human bodies; A. Papadopoulous-Kerameus, "Tou en hagiois patros hēmōn Sōphroniou archiepiskopou Hierosolymōn logos eis to hagian baptisma," *Analekta Hierosolymitikēs Stachyologias* 5 (1898): 166–7.

convincing that it may have contributed to modern confusion about the figure of Anastasius himself.

Modern scholarship on Anastasius of Sinai has been hindered by confusion with Anastasius, Patriarch of Antioch from 559 to 570 and again from 593 to 599. A detailed history of these debates was presented by Clement A. Kuehn and John D. Baggarly Jr. in the introduction to their edition and translation of Anastasius' *Hexaemeron* for the *Orientalia christiana analecta* series. In it, the editors noted that along with doubts about the true authorship and date of the *Hexaemeron* itself, the monk's full corpus has been debated by theologians and church historians since the 16th century. Furthermore, at its most divisive, the various voices of this debate have theorized no less than seven Anastasii, with dates ranging from 500 to 1100, to have composed the full corpus of works.⁴⁴ Due in large part to the lack of internal historical references in Anastasius' works, these debates often focused on dating by reference to intertextual references and literary style. So, for example, Stergios Sakkos, a major proponent of the multiple Anastasii theory, had argued that the Anastasius who had authored the *Hexaemeron* was an allegorist. In response, Günter Weiss, in his analysis of the *Viae dux*, argued that allegorists were not stylistically popular in the Byzantine period, and therefore unlikely as a source for any of the periods theorized by Sakkos for the *Hexaemeron*. In neither case did either author provide any evidence of internal dating from the work itself or external dating from other works which cited it to bolster their arguments, but focused exclusively on their interpretation of the literary style of the work and its possible author.⁴⁵

A complete analysis of the problem of Anastasius' identity is beyond the scope of the present work, although it is worth noting that Karl Uthemann has argued persuasively for the works discussed here as genuinely composed by Anastasius of Sinai in the late seventh century.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the roundabout ways in which modern scholars have repeatedly attempted to date these works based on textual analysis is important to highlight, as it highlights how

44. Clement A. Kuehn and John D. Baggarly, *Anastasius of Sinai: Hexaemeron* (Rome, 2007), xiii–xvii.

45. Günter Weiss, "Review of *Peri Anastasium Sinaitum*," *Byzantische Zeitschrift* 60 (1967): 342–6 at 344.

46. Uthemann, *Viae dux* CCXIV–CCXVII. See also Marcel Richard, "Les véritable 'Questions et Réponses' d'Anastase le Sinaïte," *Bulletin de l'Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes* 15 (1967–8): 39–56; Michel Aubineau, "Un nouveau témoin d'Anastase le Sinaïte, 'Viae dux,' découvert dans le Vat. gr. 2076 (Xe-XIe S.)," *Revue de philologie, de littérature et d'histoire anciennes* (1984): 79; and Haldon, "The Works of Anastasius of Sinai," 107–47.

Anastasius created a vision of the church that continued to adhere to the pre-Islamic conception of a unified, imperial church threatened predominately by heresy and sectarianism. Because Anastasius' works lack internal dating and rely so heavily on imagery of a unified church, it is easy to see how scholars questioned whether these works were truly penned by a writer living under Muslim rule or by later writers redacting and repurposing pre-Islamic Christian works. Still, it seems equally plausible that these omissions represent a conscious choice by the author, attempting to maintain a Chalcedonian identity based on church unity that was not, strictly speaking, still intact.

In this way, Anastasius' works harken back to the theme of church unity established by pre-Islamic Chalcedonian authors, creating a sense not only of regional and communal unity, in which Chalcedonians remain the community who had not divided the communion of Christ by refusing the Creed established at Chalcedon, but in a sense, a temporal unity, as well, implying to his readers that the unified church and communion with the Byzantine West was still spiritually intact, if physically difficult to evidence. In this light, the relatively mild character of the demons featured in the "C" collection, as well as the continued emphasis on the early Christian tradition of Christian ritual as demons' ultimate weakness, may also be elements of this temporal, spiritual unity. The demon stories help to create a shared tradition with pre-Islamic Christians, reminding his fellow Chalcedonians that Christians have always faced evil, but that the tools of its defeat have always been readily at hand. Similarly, these stories neatly fold the Muslims themselves into this larger Christian tradition of demonic evil, making the Muslims servants and compatriots of demons, implying that their defeat will come alongside the eventual defeat of demonic evil.

The partnership between Muslims and demons that Anastasius draws also puts the ability to overthrow the Muslims back within the indigenous Chalcedonian community's own power, even without the Byzantine army. But it also suggests a vision of an apocalyptic future, as the overthrow of demonic powers was also regularly featured in contemporary apocalyptic works as a sign of the End Times.⁴⁷ This apocalypticism is perhaps further evidence that ending Muslim rule was not of particular, urgent concern for the Christian

47. Obviously, this is a theme that was most thoroughly expanded in the genre of seventh-century Christian apocalypses, which featured the rise of Islam as a sign of the imminent End; see Paul Alexander, "Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources," *American Historical Review* 73 (1968): 997–1012; Ehinger, "Biblical History and the End of Times," 52–62, and Harald Suermann, "The Use of Biblical Quotations in Christian Apocalyptic Writings of the Umayyad Period," in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 69–90.

communities to whom Anastasius addressed his writings. Thus, these works provide an important insight into the character of Chalcedonian identity in the early decades of Muslim rule. It appears that already in Anastasius' lifetime, the Near East was a place in which debates with Arabs seemed plausible, and in which the suffering caused by the Muslims' victory was something to be explained, but not necessarily a current influence on Christian lives. Instead, elements of acceptance can be seen in Anastasius' writing, as he struggled to explain how Christians should continue to practice their religion in the new world of Muslim rule, focusing particularly on the need to maintain vigilance against sectarianism, perhaps fighting against a concurrent desire to create a universal Christian identity that could be held up as preferable to Islam. ■