

‘Textual Encounters’: The Sabians in Qur’ānic Exegesis*

Alena Kulinich**

[ABSTRACT]

Three verses of the Qur’ān (2:62; 5:69; 22:17) refer to the enigmatic religious community called the Sabians (*al-ṣābi’ūn*). Mentioned alongside the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians, their identity has been a matter of disagreement for medieval Muslim authors and modern scholars alike. Muslim exegetes, when commenting on these verses, were obliged to discuss the Sabians too. This article explores the exegetes’ engagement with the Qur’ānic Sabians, focusing on the questions they addressed regarding them and the answers they offered. In the process, the article highlights various factors that shaped the discussion on the Sabians in Qur’ānic exegesis, including consideration of the literal meaning of the verses in question, the conventions of the *tafsīr* genre, uncertainty about the historical identity of the Sabians, but also the

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** Assistant Professor, Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations, Seoul National University

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presence of historical communities who self-identified or were referred to as Sabians, and the implications of the ‘Sabian verses’ for the question of salvation for non-Muslims.

1. Introduction

The enigmatic religious community of the Sabians (Arabic *al-ṣābiʿūn*)¹⁾ is mentioned in the following three verses of the Qurʾān:

1) Sūra 2 (*al-Baqara*), verse 62:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالنَّصَارَى وَالصَّابِئِينَ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ
وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

Those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, – any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.²⁾

2) Sūra 5 (*al-Māʿida*), verse 69:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّابِئُونَ وَالنَّصَارَى مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ
يَحْزَنُونَ

1) This article follows the transliteration system for Arabic of the American Library Association – Library of Congress transliteration scheme (*ALA-LC Romanization Tables: Transliteration Schemes for Non-Roman Scripts*. 1997. Compiled and edited by Randall K. Barry, 10-9. Washington: Library of Congress).

2) This and other translations from the Qurʾān in this article are based on Yusuf Ali’s translation (*The Holy Qurʾan* 1946) with minor modifications.

Those who believe, and the Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians, – any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

3) Sūra 22 (*al-Ḥajj*) verse 17:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّابِئِينَ وَالنَّصَارَى وَالْمَجُوسَ وَالَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَفْصِلُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ

Those who believe, and the Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians, and the Zoroastrians, and the polytheists, – God will judge between them on the Day of Judgment: for God is witness of all things.

A reader who relies on the literal meaning of these verses alone, without recourse to the Islamic exegetical tradition (*tafsīr*), might draw several conclusions about the representation of the Sabians in the Qur'ānic text. First, since the Sabians are mentioned alongside those who believe (*alladhīna āmanū*), the Jews (*alladhīna hādū*), the Christians (*al-naṣārā*), and in the last verse also with the Zoroastrians (*al-majūs*) and the polytheists (*alladhīna ashrakū*), the Sabians are not identical to any of these groups and are therefore an independent religious community. Second, the verses appear to imply that the Sabians, like the Jews and Christians, believe in God and the Last Day. Third, the Sabians are mentioned in a generally favourable context, with the first two verses concluding that they are among those who will have 'their reward with their Lord', and 'on them shall be no fear', 'nor shall they grieve'; although admittedly the last verse, stating that God will judge between the various mentioned communities on the Day of Judgement, is more ambiguous, since it does not specify God's judgment regarding any of the

mentioned groups including the Sabians.

However, a reader who compares such conclusions about the Sabians with the readings of the same verses by Muslim commentators on the Qur'ān, would encounter not only suggestions of alternative conclusions, but a much wider variety of questions being raised about the Qur'ānic Sabians, ranging from their identity to their legal status, as well as the intended meaning behind the reference to this group in the Qur'ānic text; and the answers to these questions are equally varied. This article sets out to explore the commentators' readings of the 'Sabian verses', and in the process it will shed light on various considerations that shaped the exegetes' engagement with the Sabians of the Qur'ān. These included the literal meaning of the verses, the conventions of the commentary genre, and the lack of consensus among the Muslim scholars about the identity of the Sabians; but at the same time we must also consider the commentators' awareness of the presence of historical communities who self-identified or were referred to as Sabians, and the theological implications that these verses have for the question of salvation for non-Muslims. Furthermore, given the uncertainty about the historical identity of the Sabians and the diversity of the ways in which they are identified and their beliefs described in the commentaries on the Qur'ān, the article will raise a question about the possible impact that the commentators' own agendas, for example regarding the legal status of the Sabians, had on their representation of the Sabian religion, specifically their emphasis on either its monotheistic or polytheistic character, and will point out some cases where such a correlation could be observed.

The article begins with an introduction to the Sabian question, discussing various identifications of the Sabians proposed in medieval

Islamic sources and modern scholarship. It then proceeds in the second part of the article to examine the exegetes' engagement with the Sabians in the Qur'ān, followed by concluding remarks.

2. The Sabian Question

The question of the historical identity and religious beliefs of the Sabians has long been and still remains a matter of scholarly discussion and disagreement. Stanley Lane-Poole aptly described this long-lasting interest in the Sabian question in the following words (Lane-Poole 1966, 252):

Among the various problems that have vexed the souls of learned men, few have provoked greater controversy, or given rise to more fanciful and conflicting theories, than that connected with the name of Sabian. What the Pelasgians and Etruscans have been to classical commentators, the Letters of Junius and the personality of the Man in the Iron Mask to students of modern mysteries, the origin, character, and habitat of the Sabian religion have proved to Oriental writers and their European followers.

The first systematic study on the Sabians, titled *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus* ('The Sabians and the Sabianism'), was published by Daniil Chwolsohn in the middle of the 19th century (Chwolsohn 1856). Having collected, translated into German, and analysed the passages mentioning the Sabians from a variety of sources available to him, Chwolsohn

concluded that Muslim authors used the appellation ‘Sabians’ in relation to two historical religious communities. Before the reign of the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 813 to 833 CE), it was applied to the Mandaeans, a gnostic religious community who lived in the marshes of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq. However, since the time of al-Ma’mūn, whom some reports credit with questioning the Hellenistic pagan community of Harran about their religion, which ultimately resulted in the appropriation of the name ‘Sabians’ by the Harranian community,³⁾ the name ‘Sabians’ became applied to this Hellenistic Harranian community as well. Although Chwolsohn’s influential study is highly regarded, some of his conclusions have been challenged (for critique, see Green 1992, 101-23). One of the major criticisms was directed towards Chwolsohn’s identification of the followers of Elchasai, a baptist community of *mughtasila* (Arabic ‘those who wash themselves’), also known according to Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995) as the ‘Sabians of the marshes’, with the Mandaeans (see Pedersen 1922; de Blois 1995; Fahd 2012). Another criticism relates to the date at which the appellation ‘Sabians’ began to be applied to the Harranian community. It has been demonstrated that the date of al-Ma’mūn’s reign, accepted by Chwolsohn, was too late, since some earlier sources already refer to the Harranians as ‘Sabians’ (Green 1992, 106-8). Since the publication of Chwolsohn’s work, a number of studies have further explored the uses of the name ‘Sabians’ in medieval Muslim sources and beyond.⁴⁾ Since these studies have been outlined in

3) The reported story about the appropriation of the name ‘Sabians’ by the Hellenistic Harranian community is discussed below.

4) See, for instance, on the understanding of the term ‘Sabians’ among the early modern European writers, Jonathan Elukin (2002), “Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the

several publications (Fahd 2012; Green 1992; Göküz 1994), they will not be discussed here; however, it might be useful to offer a concise summary of the major uses of the appellation 'Sabians' in Islamic sources, as well as major scholarly suggestions concerning the identity of the Qur'ānic Sabians. The following summary is based on the list compiled by Christopher Buck (Buck 1984), with further additions reflecting the results of more recent studies on the Sabian question.

Mandaeans

The identification of the Sabians with the gnostic religion of Mandaeans,⁵ who also self-identify as Sabians, was based on the reports of Muslim authors who described the religious tradition of the Sabians and their habitat. One of these is the account on the fast and feast days of the Sabians by the Persian polymath Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (d. after 440/1048), where he mentions the 'real Sabians' in contrast to the Sabians of Harran. These 'real Sabians', according to him, were the descendants of the captive Jews of Babylonia who stayed in Babylonia and gradually incorporated into their religion some doctrines of the Magians (Zoroastrians), as the result of which their religion became a mixture of

Sabians: Explaining Mosaic Laws and the Limits of Scholarship." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (4): 619-37.

- 5) On the Mandaeans, see E.S. Drower (1937), *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Magic, Legends, and Folklore*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Kurt Rudolph. 1978. *Mandaeism*. Leiden: Brill; and Şinasi Gündüz (1994), *The Knowledge of Life: The Origins and Early History of the Mandaeans and Their Relation to the Sabians of the Qur'ān and to the Harranians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. For the recent suggestion regarding their origin, see Kevin van Bladel (2017), *From Sasanian Mandaeans to Şābians of the Marshes*. Leiden: Brill; and a review of this work by Predrag Bukovec in *Iran and the Caucasus* 2018 22 (2): 211-3.

Judaism and Magianism (Zoroastrianism). Al-Bīrūnī also mentions that they turn towards the north while praying, and that “the greatest part of this sect is living in Sawād al-‘Irāq. These are the real Sabians. They live, however, very much scattered and nowhere in places that belong exclusively to them alone. Besides, they do not agree among themselves on any subject, wanting a solid ground on which to base their religion, such as a direct or indirect divine revelation or the like. Genealogically they trace themselves back to Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam” (al-Bīrūnī 1879, 314; Buck 1984, 174). Although al-Bīrūnī only refers to this community as Sabians, his description of them suggests the religion of the Mandaeans (Buck 1984, 174-5). However, as has already been mentioned, the identification of the Sabians with the Mandaeans, suggested by Chwolsohn, was later criticised.

Elkasaites (Elchasites) and other Judeo-Christian sects

The question whether the description of the Sabians in the Islamic sources refers to Mandaeans or to some other sect revolves around the identity of the group who inhabited the swamps of Iraq and were called by Ibn al-Nadīm the ‘Sabians of the marshes’ (*Ṣābi’at al-baṭā’ih*) or *mughtasila* (‘those who wash themselves’, ‘baptists’), ‘their head’ and the one who ‘instituted their sect’ being named al-Ḥasīḥ (Elchasai).⁶ It has been suggested that this referred to a ‘baptist’ sect founded in the 2nd century CE by Elchasai in southern Mesopotamia, not to the Mandaeans;

6) For the translation of this passage, see [Ibn al-Nadīm] (1970), *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-century Survey of Muslim Culture*. Translated by Bayard Dodge. New York: Columbia University Press, vol. 2, 811; and François de Blois (1995), “The ‘Sabians’ (Ṣābi’ūn) in pre-Islamic Arabia.” *Acta Orientalia* 56: 39-61.

or alternatively, that all three – the Elchasites, the *mughtasila*, and the Mandaeans were distinct religious sects (Pedersen 1922).⁷⁾ In addition, other Judeo-Christian sects, such as the sect of 'Archontics' mentioned by Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 404 CE), have been put forward as possible referents of the Sabians (Fahd 2012 with reference to the study of M. Tardieu).

Harrānians

The pagan Hellenistic sect of Harran, a city in Upper Mesopotamia, known for their temple to the moon god, star-worship, and the distinguished scholars from there who served as astronomers, astrologers and translators at the 'Abbasid court in Baghdad,⁸⁾ were not considered by al-Bīrūnī as 'real Sabians'. Although in his time they were better known by this name than other sects, al-Bīrūnī maintained that the Harranians adopted the name 'Sabians' only during the 'Abbasid rule and "solely for the purpose of being reckoned among those from whom the duties of *dhimma* (covenant of protection)⁹⁾ are accepted, and towards whom the laws of *dhimma* are observed" (al-Bīrūnī 1879, 315). Such an understanding of the Harranians' appropriation of the name 'Sabians' has

7) On the Elchasites, see Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (1985), *The Revelation of Elchasai: Investigations into the Evidence for Mesopotamian Jewish Apocalypse of the Second Century and its Reception by Judeo-Christian Propagandists*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.

8) On the Harranians, see Tamara M. Green (1992), *The City of Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran*. Leiden: E.J. Brill; and David Pingree (2002), "The Šābians of Harran and the Classical Tradition." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 9 (1): 8-35.

9) On *dhimma*, a contract by which the followers of revealed religions were granted protection on the condition that they acknowledged the domination of Islam, see Cl. Cahen. "Dhimma." In *EI2*.

a parallel in the story narrated by Ibn al-Nadīm from the Christian Abū Yūsuf ([Ibn al-Nadīm] 1970, 751-2). According to this story, the Harranians adopted the name ‘Sabians’ during the reign of al-Ma’mūn. The story goes that on his journey to Byzantium, al-Ma’mūn encountered a group of Harranians who were wearing short gowns and had long hair with side bands. He “found fault with their dress”, and asked them which of the subject people they were. When they replied that they were neither Christians, nor Jews, nor Zoroastrians and failed to give a clear answer as to whether they had a revealed book or a prophet, al-Ma’mūn concluded that they were unbelievers, whose blood it was legitimate to shed. To their offer to pay the poll tax (in return for protection), he replied, “The poll tax is accepted only from persons who are members of those non-Islamic sects which Allāh, may His name be exalted and magnified, mentioned in His Book, and who have a book of their own, assuring them of good relations with the Muslims. As you do not belong to one or other of these groups, now choose one of two alternatives: either embrace the religion of Islam, or else one of those religions which Allāh mentioned in His Book.” The story concludes that following the advice of a shaykh from Harran, to whom they brought a large sum of money, the Harranians began claiming the name ‘Sabians’, which is mentioned in the Qur’ān, for themselves, and after the reign of al-Ma’mūn they also became known as Sabians.

The historicity of this story aside, it has been noticed that sources earlier than the time of al-Ma’mūn use the name ‘Sabians’ with reference to the Harranians (Green 1992, 106-8).

Based on the geographical localization of the Sabians in *jazīrat al-Mawṣil* and references to their monotheistic belief by al-Ṭabarī (see

below), François de Blois remarked that since Mosul was a long way from Harran and the Harranians were described as polytheists, “it would seem more likely that the reference [applied] to some Kurdish sect, perhaps even the ancestors of the Yezidis” (de Blois 1995, 41, footnote 6).

Manichaeans

In al-Bīrūnī’s account of Manichaeism there is a brief reference to the use of the name ‘Sabians’ for the Manichaean community in Samarqand.¹⁰ It reads, “Of [Mani’s] adherents, some remnants that are considered as Manichaeans are still extant: they are scattered throughout the world and do not live together in any particular place of Muhammadan countries, except the community in Samarqand, known by the name of Ṣabians” (al-Bīrūnī 1879, 191; Buck 1984, 177). Al-Bīrūnī does not explain why these Manichaeans were known as Sabians, but taken together with Ibn al-Nadīm’s report about the Manichaeans who in the face of persecution in Iraq fled to Khorasan in disguise, and his description of the circumstances of the Manichaeans of Samarqand whose religious identity became known, but who were left alone and tribute exacted by the ruler of Khorasan because of the intervention of the Manichaean king of the Uighurs ([Ibn al-Nadīm] 1970, 802-3; summary in Buck 1984, 176), it would seem likely that the name ‘Sabians’ was applied to the Manichaeans of Samarqand to signify, or justify, their status as *ahl al-dhimma* (people who entered into the covenant of protection).

10) On Manichaeism, see N. Baker-Brian (2011), *Manichaeism: An Ancient Faith Rediscovered*. London: T&T Clark; and Samuel N.C. Lieu (1998), *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*. Leiden: Brill, and *idem* (1999), *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East*. Leiden: Brill.

François de Blois, however, argued for the identification of the Qur'ānic Sabians with the Manichaeans (de Blois 1995, 48-53). His argument is based on the assumption that Manichaeism (*zandaqa*) was present among the Quraysh tribe in Mecca, who learnt it from their trading trips to Hira, the capital of the Arab principality of Lakhmids. This assumption, in turn, relies on the references in the unpublished work of Hishām Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819) titled *Mathālib al-'arab* ('The Shortcomings of the Arabs') (de Blois 1995).

It could be added here that Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) mentions in his *tafsīr* an anonymous opinion that identifies the Sabians of the Qur'ān with the Zindīqs (Manichaeans) (for which see below).

Buddhists and Hindus

Several Muslim authors posited a link between Sabianism and Buddhism, among them al-Bīrūnī. Al-Bīrūnī considered Buddha (Būdhāsaf) a 'pseudo-prophet' who appeared in India and called the people to the religion of the Sabians. Many people, according to him, followed Būdhāsaf's call, and the remnants of those Sabians were still living in Harran (al-Bīrūnī 1879, 186; Buck 1984, 177-8 with further references). The appellation 'Sabians' has also been used in reference to the religions of India. Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Sahrastānī (d. 548/1153) employed it to describe different religious groups in India in his work *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal* ('The Book of Religions and Sects') (Lawrence 1976 which also contains an English translation of al-Sahrastānī's chapter on Indian religions; Buck 1984, 177-8).

Ancient nations (Egyptians, Greek, Chinese, Persians, Indians) and followers of tribal religions in East Africa

The identification of the Sabians with various ancient nations (Egyptians, Greek, Chinese, Persians, Indians) as well as some contemporary to the medieval Muslim authors' own communities, such as the Turks or the followers of tribal religions in East Africa (on which see Buck 1984, 178), was founded on the premise that these nations followed a religion of star-worshipping. In this case, Sabianism has acquired a general meaning of 'star-worshipping' and its use was not limited to a particular religious community. The first references to the ancient nations as Sabians appear in the writings of the 9th century authors. The geographer Ibn Khurdābih, for example, used it with reference to the ancient Egyptians, while the historian and geographer Aḥmad ibn Abī Ya'qūb al-Ya'qūbī linked it to the ancient Persians (see Bartold 2002, 483 for references). In the 10th century the historian al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956) adhered to similar ideas (Khalidi 1975, 63-70).

Ḥanīfs of the early Muslim sources

The identification of the Qur'ānic Sabians with the Ḥanīfs – the pre-Islamic monotheists, who according to the Islamic tradition were neither Jews nor Christians yet followed the religion of Ibrāhīm (Abraham),¹¹⁾ was suggested by A. Sprenger and supported by V. Bartold (Bartold 2002, 470-2). Bartold pointed to the similarity of the meaning of the two words,

11) See W. Montgomery Watt. "Ḥanīf." In *EI2*; on the term *ḥanīf*, see François de Blois (2002), "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and ḥanīf (ἕθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (1): 1-30.

both meaning ‘to be inclined to something’. But he also suggested that they had different connotations: whereas the name ‘Ḥanīf’ carried a positive sense of a ‘noble inclination’ and tended to be used for praise, the name ‘Sabian’ had a negative connotation of ‘passion’ and ‘desire’ (Bartold 2002, 471). It is this negative connotation that was reflected in the use of the name ‘Sabians’ in relation to the Prophet Muḥammad and his followers by their adversaries (al-Ṭabarī 2001, II, 36).

These uses of the appellation ‘Sabians’ for the followers of different religions, as well as the scholarly suggestions regarding the identity of the Qur’ānic Sabians, have relevance for the discussion of the Sabians in Qur’ānic exegesis. The uncertainty regarding the identification of the Sabians, the use of this name in relation to various historical communities, and also the abstract meaning of ‘star-worshippers’ or ‘people of the covenant’ are reflected in the treatment of the Sabians in Qur’ānic exegesis. As for the suggestions regarding the identity of the Sabians in the Qur’ān, scholars in search of the Qur’ānic Sabians have long employed works of *tafsīr*, whose authors were expected to discuss the Sabians, as one of their major sources.¹²⁾ However, the limits of relying on *tafsīr* works for the identification of the Qur’ānic Sabians are increasingly becoming apparent, as, being uncertain about the identity of the Sabians, the commentators offer a ‘bewildering variety’ of views (Friedmann 2003, 82), some of them of an abstract character. Moreover, to the commentators on the Qur’ān, it seems, the Qur’ānic Sabians were

12) Chwolsohn’s study (Chwolsohn 1856) draws on thirteen commentaries on the Qur’ān, both Arabic and Persian, while subsequent publications on the Sabians usually include a chapter or a section on their identification in *tafsīr*. Jane Dammen McAuliffe’s article (McAuliffe 1982), on which the next section draws, deals specifically with the identification of the Sabians in Qur’ānic exegesis.

much more than simply a group in need of identification; their encounter with this community in the Qur'ānic text triggered discussion of a variety of topics, as addressed in the following section. These topics, in turn, could have shaped the proposed identifications of the Sabians and the representation of their religion in the works of *tafsīr*.

3. The Sabians of Qur'ānic Exegesis

The commentators' textual encounters with the Sabians in the Qur'ān led to discussion encompassing various themes and questions. These themes, for convenience, could be grouped under four rubrics: identification of the Sabians, their beliefs and habitat; discussion on the etymology of the word *al-ṣābi'ūn*, its variant readings and syntax; the question of the legal status of the Sabians – whether they are to be counted among the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*); and commentary on the theological implications that the 'Sabians verses' had for the question of salvation for non-Muslims.

Identification of the Sabians, their beliefs and habitat

Identification of the Qur'ānic Sabians was a natural concern for the exegetes, but it was not their only concern, and perhaps not even their major one. The 'bewildering variety' of identifications offered in the works of *tafsīr* (discussed in detail in McAuliffe 1982) can be illustrated by the list of seven suggestions from the *tafsīr* of 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), each reported on the authority of Companions or Followers. According to this list (Ibn al-Jawzī 1964, 92), the Sabians are:

1) a type of Christian (*ṣinf min al-naṣārā*) but more ‘mild’ in their speech (*qawl*), the Sabians being Anchorites who tonsure their heads; 2) a people between the Zoroastrians and the Christians who do not have an (identifiable) religion; 3) a community between the Jews and the Christians; 4) a people similar to the Zoroastrians; 5) a group from the People of the Book, who recite the Psalms (*al-zabūr*); 6) a community which prays in the direction of the *qibla*, venerates the angels and recites the Psalms; 7) a people who only believe that there is no god but God, but do not have any religious practice (*ʿamal*), nor revealed book or prophet. To this list, which already touches upon the religion of the Sabians, one could add further comments regarding their religious traditions. The representation of the Sabian religion varies greatly among the commentators: from the portrayal of the Sabians as sun-worshippers, star-worshippers, and angel-worshippers; to attempts to present them in a more monotheist fashion as a community which believes in one God and the prophets, recites the Psalms, and practices rituals that would have been familiar to the Muslims; to the idea that the Sabians are people who follow their natural dispositions. This last suggestion is mentioned by Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) (Ibn Kathīr 1985, 188), who on the authority of Mujāhid and Wahb ibn Munabbih says that the Sabians are neither Jews, nor Christians, nor Zoroastrians, nor polytheists, but people who follow their natural disposition (*fiṭra*)¹³⁾ and do not subscribe to any particular religion. Ibn Kathīr also mentions that according to some anonymous scholars, Sabians are people whom the mission of the Prophet (*daʿwa*) has not reached. But he also mentions an opinion which places the Sabian

13) On the concept of *fiṭra*, see D.B. Macdonald. “Fiṭra.” In *EI2*.

religion closer to monotheism, namely that the Sabians believe in all the prophets, they fast thirty days each year, and they pray in the direction of the Yemen (south) five times a day (Ibn Kathīr 1985, 188).

The Twelver Shī'ite exegete al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) mentions three different views that imply some monotheistic connection – that the Sabians are 1) a gnostic people who follow a unique religion which includes worship of the stars, but who acknowledge the Creator and the Day of Judgement and some prophets; 2) a community whose religion is similar to Christianity, but who pray in the direction of the place from where the southern wind blows at midday; 3) the followers of the religion of Nūḥ (Noah) (al-Ṭūsī n.d., I, 282-3).

However, other commentators, like al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) describe the Sabian religion as far from monotheistic. Al-Māturīdī (al-Māturīdī 2005, 485) gives two anonymous views regarding the Sabian religion. First, that the Sabians are a people who worship the planets; second, that they follow the religion of the Zindīq̄s (Manichaeans), adhere to dualism (*yaqulūn bi-ithnāyn*) and do not have a revealed book, adding that 'we do not have [much] knowledge about them'.

In his *tafsīr* Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) mentions a view of Qatāda that the Sabians are a people who venerate the angels and pray to the sun five times a day, and also gives an anonymous view, which he prefers, that refers to the Sabians as worshippers of the planets (al-Rāzī 1981, III, 113). Al-Rāzī also explains their two beliefs regarding the planets: 1) that God is the creator of the world but that He commanded to exalt the stars and appointed them as the *qibla* for the obligatory and supererogatory prayers and magnification; 2) that God created the spheres and the stars and that the stars are in charge of the good and the evil in

this world, the health and illness, and humankind should venerate them because they are divinities that regulate this world while they [in turn?] worship God. This belief, al-Rāzī says, is traceable to the Chaldeans to whom Ibrāhīm came in order to refute them and demonstrate their belief to be false (al-Rāzī 1981, III, 113; McAuliffe 1982, 98-9).

In addition to the comments on the Sabian religion, the commentators' awareness about the existence of historical communities referred to as Sabians can also be observed in their occasional comments on the geographical habitat of the Sabians. Thus, Ibn Kathīr, for example, says that the Sabians live in Kutha near the border of Iraq (Ibn Kathīr 1985, 188). Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) mentions two different locations: al-Sawād, an agricultural region of southern Iraq (on the authority of Ibn Jurayj), and *jazīrat al-Mawṣil*, the region of Mosul in northern Iraq (on the authority of Ibn Zayd) (al-Ṭabarī 2001, II, 36). While al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) says on the authority of Mujāhid that the Sabians are a tribe in Syria (*al-qabīla nahwa al-Shām*), and also includes a remark from 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Yahyā that the Sabians are extinct (*inqaradū*) (al-Baghawī 1988, I, 102).

Although this wide variety of identifications was possible because of the underlying uncertainty about who the Sabians were, the uncertainty itself does not fully explain why the exegetes offer such diverse identifications of the Sabians across their works. While this question would require further study based on a large corpus of *tafsīr* works, this article tentatively suggests that one direction such study could follow could be to trace a possible correlation between the commentators' identifications of the Sabians and others of their concerns, for example about the legal status of the Sabians or their fate in the Hereafter. Several cases appear to display such a correlation, especially when the description of the Sabians

as monotheists (or polytheists) is linked to their legal status; these cases, wherever they are observed, will be highlighted in the discussion of the three remaining themes.

Etymology, variant readings and syntax

The commentators' treatment of the Qur'ānic Sabians was also influenced by the conventions of the genre of *tafsīr* – they discussed the word '*al-ṣābi'ūn*' from the perspective of the traditional Qur'ānic disciplines:¹⁴ the etymology of the Qur'ānic words (*ishtiqaq*), variant readings of the text (*qirā'āt*), and grammatical syntax (*i'rāb*).¹⁵ However, their discussions are not always purely philological, and as will be seen from some examples below, they are also sometimes interconnected with the question of the identity of the Sabians, or the function that their name has in the overall message of the Qur'ān, or even the issue of the perfect style of the Qur'ānic text.

The exegetes' discussion of the origin of the word '*al-ṣābi'ūn*' follows similar discussions about the etymology of the names of the Jews and the Christians, but in the case of the Sabians it is also related to the variant readings of this word. Most commentators explain that there are two ways of reading the word 'Sabians': one is with ḥamza '*al-ṣābi'īn*'; the other without. Taking into account these variants, the commentators also suggest two different possibilities as to the origin of the word. One of them is that the word derives from the root *ṣ-b-*' ('to go forth') and the meaning of

14) On the Qur'ānic disciplines, see Claude Gilliot, "Traditional Disciplines of Qur'ānic Studies." In *EQ*.

15) Other categories, such as *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) and *naskh* (abrogation), with regard to these verses, are mentioned below.

‘a sabian’ is ‘one who leaves his religion for the other’. The second possibility is that the word derives from the root *ṣ-b-w* (‘to incline to’, ‘to feel desire for’) and the meaning of ‘a sabian’ in this case is ‘one who is inclined to another religion’ (al-Ṭabarī 2001, II, 34). Al-Rāzī adds to his exposition of the etymology that out of the two suggested roots, the root *ṣ-b-* (‘to go forth’) is to be preferred, because it corresponds to the predominant reading of the word with ḥamza, and also because it is closer to the interpretation that ‘a sabian’ is the one who left his religion for another (al-Rāzī 1981, III, 111), presumably as compared to the somewhat inconclusive meaning of the ‘one who is inclined to another religion’. While making clear later in his commentary his position that the Sabians are not People of the Book, al-Ṭūsī gives an early hint at this when discussing the etymology of the word ‘*al-ṣābi’ūn*’, explaining that in the case of the Qur’ānic Sabians, who left their religion for a new one, the reference implies that they changed their religion from monotheism to star-worshipping (al-Ṭūsī n.d., I, 282).

Another issue that required comment from the exegetes was the inflectional ending and position of the word ‘Sabians’ in verse 5:69. In contrast to verse 2:62 where this word is in the accusative case (*al-ṣābi’ūn*) as required by the particle *inna* (‘verily’, ‘truly’) and is placed after the word ‘Christians’, in 5:69 the word ‘Sabians’ is given in the nominative case (*al-ṣābi’ūn*) and placed before the word ‘Christians’.

To explain this case, al-Zamakhsharī says that in 5:69 the word ‘*al-ṣābi’ūn*’ is a subject which has an implied predicate that should be postponed, so that the verse should be read as “those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians – this is a verdict about them (*ḥukmuhum*)... and [about] the Sabians as well” (al-Zamakhsharī 2012, 344; McAuliffe

1982, 102). He further explains the benefit of such a change by connecting it to the rhetorical style of the Qur'ān, saying that the intention behind this is to draw (the listeners') attention (*tanbīh*) to the Sabians, whom God will restore to His grace if, as the verse suggests, they believe and work righteousness, even though they are "more evidently in error and their transgression is stronger than that of the others mentioned" (al-Zamakhsharī 2012, 345; McAuliffe 1982, 102). In this example, one can observe how al-Zamakhsharī's description of the Sabians as the 'strongest transgressors' is employed to emphasize the extent of divine grace.

In al-Rāzī's treatment of the question about the inflectional ending and position of the word '*al-ṣābi'ūn*', al-Rāzī is asked by a real or imagined interlocutor about the benefit of the change in the word's inflectional ending and its position. This question could have been a matter of curiosity, but also could be interpreted as a subtle questioning of the perfection of the Qur'ānic style. To this question al-Rāzī replies that since the speaker (God) is the Wisest of the wise it is inevitable that there is wisdom and benefit behind such changes, but continues, "if we have grasped this wisdom we have attained perfection, and if we have not grasped this wisdom we should assign the deficiency to our own intellects rather than to the speech of the Wise, and God knows better" (al-Rāzī 1981, III, 113; McAuliffe 1982, 102-3).

Finally, the modern exegete Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), in commenting on the issue of the inflectional ending of '*al-ṣābi'ūn*', explicitly points to the 'enemies of Islam' who dared to claim that there were grammatical errors in the Qur'ān, one of them being the nominative case of the word '*al-ṣābi'ūn*' in 5:69. He calls this claim a combination

of nonsense and ignorance, and proceeds to refute it (Rashīd Riḍā n.d., 478; McAuliffe 1982, 103).

The legal status of the Sabians: are they People of the Book?

The commentators' discussion of the legal status of the Sabians, namely the question of whether they belong to the category of the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*), might have been prompted by the fact that in the Qur'ānic verses the Sabians are mentioned alongside the Jews and the Christians, who belonged to this category. However, their references to the verdicts of the jurists and occasional mentions of the historical precedents concerning the treatment of the communities known as Sabians could indicate that the commentators' interest in this question was not completely detached from the historical reality of there being communities who self-identified or were called the Sabians.¹⁶ In engaging with the question of the legal status of the Sabians, the commentators gave the opinions of earlier exegetical authorities, and sometimes also gave an indication of their reasoning. It is in their reasoning, drawing on the identity and religious beliefs of the Sabians, that a correlation between the emphasis on the monotheistic (or polytheistic) character of the Sabian religion and their legal status sometimes becomes apparent. For instance, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) mentions in his *tafsīr* that Mujāhid, al-Ḥasan, and Ibn Abī Najīḥ maintained that the Sabians are those who are between the Jews and Zoroastrians and that one should not eat the meat they slaughter, while Ishāq, considering Sabians as People of the Book, held the opposite opinion (al-Qurṭubī 2006, II, 161). Al-Ṭabarī also mentions several reports

16) On the position of various jurists on this question, see Friedmann (2003), 80-6.

stating that the Sabians are a group from the People of the Book: for example, a report from Abū l-‘Āliyya who said that the Sabians are a sect (*fīrqa*) from the People of the Book who recite the Psalms (*yaqra’ūna al-zabūr*) (al-Ṭabarī 2001, II, 37).¹⁷ Al-Ṭūsī includes in his commentary some reports about the Sabians being the People of the Book, and says that there is a consensus among the jurists that it is permissible to levy a poll tax (*al-jizya*) on the Sabians. However, he adds that it is not possible ‘according to us’ because they are not People of the Book (al-Ṭūsī n.d., I, 283).¹⁸

Ibn Kathīr lists in his work an explanation according to which the Sabians are a sect from the People of the Book who recite the Psalms, and because of that Abū Ḥanīfa and Ishāq considered that it is permissible to eat the meat they slaughter and to marry their women (Ibn Kathīr 1985, 187). Ibn Kathīr also gives two other references to the reasoning behind the legal rulings concerning the Sabians. One of them mentions that although the Sabians are monotheists, they believe in the influence and agency of the stars, and for this reason the Shāfi‘ī jurist Sa‘īd al-Iṣṭakhrī (d. 328/939-940) issued a legal opinion (*fatwā*) about their unbelief at the request of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Qāhir Billāh, who ruled from 932 to 934 CE (for identification of al-Iṣṭakhrī see Friedmann 2003, 83). Another

17) For the link between the possession of a revealed book and the status of *ahl al-kitāb* and *ahl al-dhimma*, see Friedmann (2003), 80-3.

18) It is not clear from the text whether this refers to al-Ṭūsī’s own view or is a predominant position among the Twelver Shī‘a. The connection between the identification of the Qur’ānic Sabians and the discussion of the status of Buddhists in modern Twelver Shī‘ite legal thought is posited in Taymaz G. Tabrizi (2012), “Ritual Purity and Buddhists in Modern Twelver Shī‘a Exegesis and Law.” *Journal of Shi‘a Islamic Studies* 5 (4): 455-71.

reference mentions Ziyād ibn Abī Sufyān (d. 53/673), an Umayyad governor of Irāq, who was informed that the Sabians prayed in the direction of the *qibla* and that they prayed five times a day, and wanted to levy a tax poll on them (*arāda waḍ' al-jizya 'anhum*) until he was informed that they (also) worshipped the angels (Ibn Kathīr 1985, 188).

Theological implications: salvation for non-Muslims

The verses mentioning the Sabians also have implications for the question of the fate of non-Muslims in the Hereafter. On this matter, three positions have been distinguished among the Muslim scholars of the past and modern Muslim intellectuals (Khalil 2012). These are: 1) the exclusivist position that implies that only Muslims will be saved; 2) the pluralist position that argues that other religious traditions are also salvific; and 3) the qualified/restrictive inclusivist position, according to which salvation is restricted to those non-Muslims who either have not been exposed to the message of Islam, or have not been exposed in the ‘right way’, or that salvation is restricted to those who followed monotheistic faiths before the prophetic mission of Muḥammad. To support their positions, the proponents of each view sought evidence from the Qur’ān, including the ‘Sabian verses’, especially Qur’ān 2:62, described as a “key passage that the pluralist camp often invokes” (Qadhi 2013, 116):

Qur’ān 2:62:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالنَّصَارَى وَالصَّابِئِينَ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

Those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians,

– any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.¹⁹⁾

The literal meaning of this verse raises a question of whether the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians will be among the saved ones on the Day of Judgement. In the exegetes' commentaries on this verse it is possible to find materials that reflect different answers to this question.

For instance, an exclusivist position that denies a possibility of salvation to non-Muslims is manifest in the discussion about the abrogation of this verse. In the *tafsīr* of Ibn 'Aṭīyya (d. 541/1147) the following statement regarding the abrogation of 2:62 is ascribed to Ibn 'Abbās: "This verse [2:62] was revealed at the beginning of Islam (*fī awwal al-islām*), and through it God affirmed (*qarrara bi-hā*) that those who believed in the prophetic mission of Muḥammad and who continued to adhere to [the practices] of Judaism, Christianity, and Sabianism while believing in God and the Day of Judgement would receive their reward. Then God abrogated what He had affirmed [in 2:62] by His saying in sūra 3 (*Āl 'Imrān*), verse 85: *Should anyone desire a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted and in the Hereafter he will be among the lost*. Thus, all the previous religious laws have been abrogated by the law (*sharī'a*) [brought] by Muḥammad" (Ibn 'Aṭīyya 1974).

On the other hand, the commentaries include various arguments which furnish evidence for the restricted inclusivist reading of Qur'ān 2:62. Ibn al-Jawzī, for example, juxtaposes the view of some commentators that

19) For a detailed analysis of the interpretation of this verse, on which the following discussion draws, see Jane Dammen McAuliffe (1991), *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2:62 has been abrogated by 3:85, with the views of Mujāhid and al-Ḍahḥāk both of whom maintained that 2:62 has not been abrogated (*muḥkama*) and that the meaning of the verse was “those who believe and those who believe *from among* the Jews...” (Ibn al-Jawzī 1964, 92).

Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Ṭūsī also disagreed that 2:62 has been abrogated, their commentaries on this verse reflecting a qualified/restricted inclusivist view on salvation for non-Muslims. Al-Ṭūsī suggests that 2:62 implies that God would give equal reward to those who accepted Islam from the very beginning, and to those who became believers only after their initial opposition and hypocrisy, because, according to him, some Muslims used to say that “those who embraced Islam after their [initial] opposition and hypocrisy would have a smaller reward and recompense” (al-Ṭūsī n.d., I, 285).

An important issue for a compelling qualified/restricted inclusivist reading of 2:62 appeared to be the interpretation of the syntactic relationship between the first four communities mentioned in the verse, and the clause “who believe in God, and the Last Day, and work righteousness”. This was read as a restrictive clause, rendering the meaning of the verse as “[only] those [among] the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians who believe in God, and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (al-Ṭabarī 2001, II, 38).

Such a reading, however, also required clarification of ‘the belief in God and the Last Day’, as this could potentially be interpreted as referring to the belief already held by the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians. It was interpreted as turning to Islam. Al-Ṭabarī says that this belief implies “belief in the [prophethood] of Muḥammad and in what was revealed to

him” (al-Ṭabarī 2001, II, 39 and 44-5), thus suggesting that the mentioned non-Muslim communities will only be able to receive their reward once they have embraced Islam. However, such an interpretation of ‘belief’, in turn, could raise a question about the first group whom the verse mentions – ‘those who believe’. How would they fit into the argument, since they are already described as believing?

Several answers have been offered by the commentators. Al-Ṭabarī, who identified ‘those who believe’ with the Muslims, explains that their ‘belief’, in contrast to the ‘belief’ of the other mentioned communities, implies being firm and persistent in their belief (al-Ṭabarī 2001, II, 38). Others suggested different identifications of ‘those who believe’: as hypocrites (*al-munāfiqūn*) who only say that they believe but do not have faith in their hearts (al-Rāzī 1981, III, 112), or as those individuals who truly believed before the prophetic mission of Muḥammad but were neither Christians nor Jews, like Waraqa ibn Nawfal, or as those who believed in Mūsā (Moses) and ‘Isā (Jesus) before the prophetic mission of Muḥammad (Ibn al-Jawzī 1964, 91).

Furthermore, a qualified/restricted inclusivist reading of the verse is reflected in the occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) supplied by the commentators on this verse. They place the revelation of this verse in the context of the story of the Prophet Muḥammad’s Persian Companion Salmān al-Fārisī. The story says that while Salmān al-Fārisī was telling the Prophet about his Christian companions (who told him about the appearance of the Prophet), and how sincere they were in their religion, the Prophet commented that they would be in Hell; then verse 2:62 was revealed as if to give a verdict about their circumstances (al-Ṭabarī 2001, II, 40-4).

Among the modern commentators, Sayyid Qutb seems to adhere to the same restricted inclusivist reading of 2:62 which according to him “affirms that all of those religious communities who believe in God and the Last Day shall obtain their reward with God and may rest assured that they will be saved. The main criterion is religious belief rather than ethnic or national affiliation. With the advent of Islam this comes into sharper focus, because the final version of divine faith has been established” (Qutb 2001, 79).

However, the key phrase in verse 2:62 for drawing a conclusion about the salvation for non-Muslims – “who believes in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness” could potentially also be read as a non-restrictive clause describing the preceding four groups, so that the meaning of the verse would be ‘those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, who [already] believe in God...’, or even as a sequence, rendering the meaning of the verse as ‘those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, [anybody else] who believes in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve’, thus supporting a pluralistic view on salvation for non-Muslims.

Whereas among the selected commentaries consulted for this article, such interpretations are not clearly articulated, certain materials in these commentaries could be read as echoing the pluralistic interpretations. For instance, in al-Māturīdī’s commentary (al-Māturīdī 2005, 484) one finds an anonymous statement according to which it is possible (*jā’iz*) that the literal meaning of the verse refers to the Jews, and the Christians, and those others (*la-hum ta’alluq bi-zāhir hādhihi l-āya*), because they were saying ‘we believe in God and in the Day of Judgement, and on us shall be no fear, nor shall we grieve.’ Al-Māturīdī then says that there are

several replies to this claim. These replies focus on the definition of 'belief' which is taken from Qur'ān 2:285 "*The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, as do the men of faith. Each one (of them) believes in God, His angels, His books, and His messengers....*" It is then argued that 'belief' presupposes 'believing' in all the messengers and all the revealed books, as does 'working righteousness' and that this is not the case with the mentioned communities. Al-Māturīdī concludes this discussion by saying that for these reasons the claim about the verse's reference to those communities is invalid, and God knows better.

The pluralist view could also perhaps be read into the following commentary on verse 2:62 by the Ṣūfī exegete Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (465/1074), "The differences in paths, with the oneness of origin, does not hinder the beauty of acceptance. Whosoever affirms [God] the Real in His signs and believes in the truth of His Qualities – then the difference in religious paths or laws and the difference in the appellation of names do not impinge on the realization of the good pleasure [of God]" (al-Qushayrī as quoted in *The Study Qur'ān* 2015, 31).

But a pluralist reading of Qur'ān 2:62 is explicit in the works of some modern Muslim intellectuals. Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) (Rahman 1980, 166), for instance, says about this verse:

In conformity with this strong rejection of exclusivism and election, the Qur'an repeatedly recognizes the existence of good people in other communities – Jews, Christians, Sabaeans – just as it recognizes the people of faith in Islam [...] the vast majority of Muslim commentators exercise themselves fruitlessly to avoid having to admit the obvious

meaning: that those – from any section of humankind – who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds are saved.

Two additional arguments in favour of a pluralistic reading of 2:62 are supplied by the commentators of *The Study Qur'ān* (The Study Qur'ān 2015, 32). They notice that when someone embraces Islam one becomes Muslim and thus stops being a Jew, a Christian, or a Sabian, yet the verse mentions those communities, and also that “in no other instance is [the word] ‘believer’ used [in the Qur'ān] as a name for a hypocrite.”²⁰⁾

In the discussion regarding the possibility of salvation for non-Muslims as arising from the ‘Sabian verses’, the Sabians are only occasionally addressed. They are briefly mentioned, for instance, in the report ascribed to Qatāda which seems to address the religions mentioned in Qur'ān 22:17. This verse mentions six religious communities – “*those who believe, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Zoroastrians, and the polytheists*”, and states that God will judge between these communities on the Day of Judgement. The report from Qatāda, as if clarifying this judgement, says “The religions are five – four for Satan and one for God: the Sabians who are worshipping the angels; the Zoroastrians who are worshipping the fire; the polytheists who are worshipping the idols, and Jews and Christians” (al-Rāzī 1981, III, 112-3). Implying that the religion of the believers, that is to say Muslims, is the one for God, this report appears to deny the possibility of salvation for the other communities, thus

20) The opposite view, that the pluralistic tradition is not defensible by reference to the Qur'ān, and furthermore that it would contradict the very purpose of the prophetic mission of Muḥammad, is put forward by Yasir Qadhi (Qadhi 2013). However, according to him, rejection of soteriological pluralism should not prevent Muslims from fostering good relations with non-Muslims in their day-to-day interactions.

offering an exclusivist reading of 22:17. The reference to the Sabians 'worshipping the angels', followed by references to the Zoroastrians 'worshipping the fire' and the polytheists 'worshipping the idols', appears to justify such an exclusivist reading by emphasizing the 'polytheistic' practices of these communities.

The position of the Sabians is also discussed by Rashīd Riḍā in his interpretation of 2:62. Rashīd Riḍā adheres to the view that people who have not been exposed to the prophetic teaching because they lived at the time of the interval (*fatra*) between the missions of the two prophets could be forgiven, but denies this status to both Christians and Jews. Regarding the Sabians, however, he says that their status would depend on whether one considers them to be close to or part of Christianity – then their status would be similar to that of the Christians – or whether they are to be considered as an independent religion, similar to the Arab *hanīfs* – in this case their status would also be similar (Rashīd Riḍā n.d., 338).

The role of the Qur'ānic Sabians, however, becomes crucial for a pluralistic reading of the 'Sabian verses', especially 2:62 and 5:69, as through the Sabian community, whose identity remains uncertain, the possibility of salvation is extended to non-Muslims beyond the Christians and the Jews.

4. Conclusion

This article began with the hypothetical conclusions that a reader who relied exclusively on the literal meaning of the Qur'ānic text might reach concerning the enigmatic community of the Sabians. Highlighting how

different these conclusions could be from the readings of the ‘Sabian verses’ offered in the Islamic exegetical tradition, the article focused on exploring how Muslim commentators, medieval and modern, have engaged with the Sabians of the Qur’ān. It set out the diversity of issues that the commentators addressed regarding the Sabians, ranging from their identity, religious beliefs, and legal status, to the origin of their name and the message conveyed by the mention of this community in the Qur’ān. In the process, the article also sought to highlight various considerations that directed and defined the treatment of the Sabians in Qur’ānic exegesis. While the commentators grappled with the implications of the literal meaning of the verses mentioning the Sabians, their engagement with the Sabians was also influenced by the conventions of the genre of *tafsīr*, and the lack of consensus among the Muslim scholars regarding the identity of the Qur’ānic Sabians; but also by their awareness of the existence of historical communities referred to as Sabians, and, finally, by the theological implications of the ‘Sabian verses’ for the question of salvation for non-Muslims. Furthermore, in relation to the phenomenon of the ‘bewildering variety’ of identifications of the Sabians in the works of *tafsīr*, as observed in several studies but yet to be explained, the article raises a question about the role that the identification of the Sabians and the representation of their religion could possibly have had in advancing the commentators’ various agendas.

Abbreviations

- EI2* = *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs. First available online 2012. Consulted online at <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com>
- EQ* = *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. General Editor Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Consulted online at <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com>

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초 록

‘텍스트상의 만남’

— 꾸란 주석에 나타나는 사비안

알레나 콜리니치*

꾸란의 세 구절(2장 62절, 5장 69절, 22장 17절)이 사비안이라 불리는 수수께끼의 종교집단을 언급한다. 유대인, 기독교인, 조로아스터교인과 함께 언급된 그들의 정체는 중세 무슬림 저자들과 근대 학자들 사이에서 공히 논란의 대상이 되었다. 무슬림 꾸란 주석가들은 이 구절들에 대해 견해를 밝힐 때 사비안에 대해서도 논의해야 했다. 이 논문은 주석가들이 사비안에 대해 제기한 의문들과 거기에 제공한 답에 초점을 맞추어 그들이 꾸란의 사비안을 어떻게 다루었는가를 살펴본다. 그러한 과정에서 이 논문은 꾸란 주석 안에서의 사비안 관련 논의를 형성한 여러 요소들, 즉 논의되는 구절들의 축자적 의미, 꾸란 주석(타프시르) 장르의 전통, 사비안의 역사적 정체에 대한 불확실성 등과 같이 논의를 형성한 여러 요소들, 스스로 사비안이라고 주장하거나 사비안이라 불린 역사적 집단들의 존재, 또한 비무슬림의 구원과 관련해 ‘사비안 구절들’이 갖는 함의를 부각시킨다.

* 서울대학교 인문대학 아시아언어문명학부 조교수