Being a Sabian at Court in Tenth-Century Baghdad

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Thābit b. Qurra (d. 288/901), a Sabian of Ḥarrān, and his descendants remained in their ancestral religion for six generations. Why did they persist despite pressure to convert? This article argues that religious self-identification as a Sabian could be a distinct advantage in Baghdad's elite circles. It focuses on Thābit's great-grandson Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl al-Ṣābī (d. 384/994) and his poetry as collected by al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038). Two members of the family who did convert are also considered by way of contrast.

Ever since the great patron of the sciences Muḥammad b. Mūsā b. Shākir (d. 259/873), passing through Ḥarrān in northern Mesopotamia on his return from Byzantine lands, had plucked the young Thābit b. Qurra like a new Matthew from his money-changing table to work as a physician, astronomer, and translator in Baghdad, Thābit (d. 288/901) and his descendants had lived and labored in high circles in the capital of the Abbasid caliphate, holding posts as physicians to the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid (r. 279–289/892–902) and his successors.[1] Consistent with cosmopolitan attitudes among Baghdad's ruling elite, it does not seem to have bothered Thābit's patrons that he was a Sabian, adherent of a small cult that existed in some form prior to Islam but seems to have crystallized anew around the obscure Quranic term *ṣābiʾūn* as a star-worshipping religion (*dīn*) with a prophet and a book.[2] During al-Qāhir's short-lived caliphate (320–322/932–934), Thābit's son Sinān (d. 331/943) was coerced into converting to Islam,[3] but this did little to weaken the family's commitment to the rituals and beliefs that associated them with the Sabian community: Sinān's sons Ibrāhīm b. Sinān (d. 335/946) and Thābit b. Sinān (d. 365/976) remained Sabian, and one of Sinān's daughters married a Sabian of another family.[4]

Their son, Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl b. Ibrāhīm b. Hārūn al-Ṣābī (b. 5 Ramaḍān 313/925; d. 12 Shawwāl 384/994), great-grandson on his mother's side of Thābit b. Qurra and a renowned secretary and littérateur, repeatedly resisted conversion to Islam, politely but firmly.[5] In his anthology of tenth-century poetry *Yatīmat al-dahr fī maḥāsin ahl al-ʿaṣr*, Ibrāhīm's younger contemporary Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038) writes of him:

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1. IAU, 295. Birth, death, and regnal dates are drawn from *EI*² unless otherwise noted.

2. For Ḥarrānians, Sabians, and their prophet, see K. van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), chs. 3 and 5. For "religion" and premodern terms with some shared features (e.g., M.Pers. *dēn*, Syr. *deḥltā*, Ar. *dīn*), see A. H. Becker, "Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and 'Fear' as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire: The Case of the *Martyrdom of Gregory* and the *Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh*," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2.2 (2009): 301–4, 325, 336.

3. See section v below.

4. His name was Hilāl b. Ibrāhīm b. Hārūn. For further details about this Sabian family with references, see F. C. de Blois, *EI*², s.v. Ṣābiʾ.

5. Discussed by van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 105–8.

> It is said (*yuḥkā*) that the caliphs, kings, and viziers very much wanted him to become Muslim (*arādūhu kathīran ʿalā l-islām*) and surrounded him with every trick and splendid enticement, to the point that ʿIzz al-Dawla Bakhtiyār offered him the vizierate if he would become Muslim (*in aslama*). But God Most High did not guide him to Islam as he guided him to excellent speech. He was intimate and on the best of terms with the Muslims, serving the greatest among them most loftily, assisting them in the Ramadan fast, and memorizing the Quran such that it was always at the tip of his tongue and the nib of his pen. The proof of that is the selection from his writings that I quoted in *Kitāb al-Iqtibās* [The Book of Citation], in which he excelled in all ways and which he adorned (*ḥalāhā*) with verse from the Quran.[6]

Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābī and his intimacy with Muslims have been noted by those seeking either to reconstruct pre-Islamic Ḥarrānian Sabianism and disentangle it from other phenomena to which the name "Sabian" was applied, or to chronicle the decline and fall of the last pagan cult of Syria-Mesopotamia to succumb to the monotheist tide.[7] Building upon recent work on the significance attached to cultural and religious conversion and ambiguity in early Abbasid culture,[8] I propose here to explore how one elite Sabian—Ibrāhīm—maneuvered in his social role as an intimate of Muslims but adhering to a "pagan" cult with few adherents, in order to recover part of what it meant to remain Sabian in tenth-century Baghdad and how Sabian religious persistence was justified and appreciated in his case. The aim is not to uncover the "true" motives for conversion or non-conversion among Sabians (or Ibrāhīm in particular);[9] rather, explanations given by those who faced the decision to convert (such as Ibrāhīm), their peers, and their biographers will occupy the foreground. I will mainly restrict myself here to

6. Thaʿālibī, 2: 288 (much of the passage employs *sajʿ*). The reference is to al-Thaʿālibī's *al-Iqtibās min al-Qurʾān al-karīm*, ed. I. M. al-Ṣaffār and M. M. Bahjat, 2 vols. (al-Manṣūra: Dār al-Wafāʾ, 1992), 1: 150, 216–17; 2: 86–102, 117, 119–21, 136–37. Al-Thaʿālibī's intent in his *Yatīma* was to gather together works by his underrepresented "contemporaries" (*ʿaṣriyyūn*), a category that stretched back about a century from his time. See E. K. Rowson and S. A. Bonebakker, *A Computerized Listing of Biographical Data from the* Yatīmat al-dahr *by al-Thaʿālibī* (Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1980), 7–8.

7. D. Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus* (Petersburg: Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1856), 1: 588–604; de Blois, *EI²*, s.v. Ṣābiʾ; van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 106. For an overview of the literature on Ḥarrānian Sabians and the motives for studying them, see van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, ch. 3, esp. 66–70.

8. M. Cooperson, "'Arabs' and 'Iranians': The Uses of Ethnicity in the Early Abbasid Period," in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. B. Sadeghi et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 364–86. This approach to ethnic identity (often coupled with religious identity) draws upon studies of other times and places, for example, late antique "barbarians"; see W. Pohl, "Introduction," in *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, ed. W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (Leiden: Brill, 1998). Peter Heather's article in that volume (pp. 95–111) studies members of minority ethnicities who clung to their identities despite their marginality. See also R. Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004). For these and other references, see Cooperson, "'Arabs' and 'Iranians'," 364–68.

9. This would require a separate study that should probably focus on converts' (and non-converts') investment of time and energy in social ties and religious cultures (even if converts' own narratives stress doctrinal conviction or supernatural intervention) since these are crucial parameters in the theory of conversion put forth by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (*Acts of Faith* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2000], ch. 5) on the basis of historical data and first-hand observation of converts in nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States. (I thank Kevin van Bladel for pointing me to Stark's work on this subject.) This would be consistent with Richard Bulliet's observation (*Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979]), based on onomastic data, that conversion to Islam in the first four centuries of Islamic rule can plausibly be modeled as a gradual stochastic process analogous to the diffusion of information. See also M. Gervers and R. J. Bikhazi, eds., *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), especially the chapters by Bulliet, M. Morony, and W. Z. Haddad; and R. W. Bulliet, "Conversion-Based Patronage and Onomastic Evidence," in *Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam*, ed. M. Bernards and J. Nawas (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 246–62.

the image of Sabians and of himself that Ibrāhīm constructs in his writings, as selected and introduced by al-Thaʿālibī in the chapter (*bāb*) devoted to Ibrāhīm (I–IV below). In order to place Ibrāhīm's choice to continue being a Sabian in some relief, I will also briefly consider Ibrāhīm's grandfather and grandson who did convert, and their treatment in the Muslim biographical literature (V below).

I. AL-THAʿĀLIBĪ'S CHAPTER ON IBRĀHĪM AL-ṢĀBĪ

Al-Thaʿālibī's entry on Ibrāhīm, entitled *Fī dhikri Abī Isḥāq al-Ṣābī wa-maḥāsini kalāmihi* (On Abū Isḥāq al-Ṣābī and Fine Examples of His Speech), opens with his name, including the two *nisba*s al-Ṣābī al-Ḥarrānī, and describes him as a renowned, eloquent man who served the powerful and whom the poets of Iraq praised.[10] It then treats his peculiar religious affiliation and others' attempts to convert him from it, the especial favor he found with the vizier al-Muhallabī, and his arrest (*iʿtiqāl*) upon the vizier's death.[11] After his release, Ibrāhīm kept rising and falling in favor, "until he was propelled in the days of ʿAḍud al-Dawla to the weightiest misfortune and greatest calamity," for the "rancor in his heart" got the better of him.[12] This refers to the subsequent story of how ʿAḍud al-Dawla ordered Ibrāhīm to write a history of the Būyids, *al-Kitāb al-tājī*; the calamity came when the amir heard that the disgruntled writer had called the whole project a pack of lies. The amir decided to have Ibrāhīm trampled by elephants (*amara bi-an yulqā*[13] *taḥta arjuli l-fiyalati*), but three men—Naṣr b. Hārūn, al-Muṭahhar b. ʿAbd Allāh, and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Yūsuf—interceded on his behalf with such intensity that the amir relented. Ibrāhīm remained in prison until ʿAḍud al-Dawla's death and returned to favor under the patronage of the vizier Ibn ʿAbbād, known as al-Ṣāḥib.[14] Al-Thaʿālibī then quotes a passage he "found very refined" (*istaẓraftuhu jiddan*) from Ibrāhīm's letter to al-Ṣāḥib regarding a present that the latter had sent him. On the authority of a close companion of al-Ṣāḥib, al-Thaʿālibī relates that the vizier considered Ibrāhīm to be among the top four writers of the age, a list that included the vizier himself.[15]

And with that introduction, he moves to anthologizing Ibrāhīm's writings, beginning with epistles and other prose writings (2: 293–303): selections from letters from Ibrāhīm, letters written by him for others, and writings on specific topics. Then follow al-Thaʿālibī's selections of Ibrāhīm's poetry, the bulk of the chapter. The selections are divided into the following sections: erotic (*ghazal*, 303–7), "on wine and the like" (*fī l-khamr wa-mā yuḍāf ilayhi*, 308–11), epideictic (*fī l-awṣāf wa-l-tashbīhāt*, 311–17), on Baṣra (317–18), on his mother and sons (318–21), vainglorious (*fakhr*, 321–23), panegyric (*madḥ*, 323–27), holiday and gift messages (*fī l-tahānī wa-l-tahādī*, 327–36), defamatory (*hijāʾ*, 336–41), on poetry (*fī l-shiʿr*, 341–42), censorious (*ʿitāb*, 342–44), on complaints and imprisonment (*fī l-shakwā wa-l-ḥabs*, 345–51), and on wisdom (*ḥikma*, 352–53).

10. Thaʿālibī, 2: 287 (*juzʾ* 2, *bāb* 3).

11. Ibid., 288–90.

12. Ibid., 290: *ilā an dufiʿa fī ayyāmi ʿAḍudi l-Dawlati ilā l-nakbati l-ʿuẓmā wa-l-ṭāmati l-kubrā idh kānat fī ṣadrihi ḥazāzatun kabīratun*.

13. My emendation of *yulqā*; Beirut ed. has *yulqī*.

14. Thaʿālibī, 2: 291; de Blois, *EI*², s.v. Sābiʾ, who, unlike al-Thaʿālibī, gives dates: from 978 to 981 Ibrāhīm was writing "under house arrest" for ʿAḍud al-Dawla, who died in 983. On this episode and Ibrāhīm's historical work, see W. Madelung, "Abū Isḥāq al-Ṣābī on the Alids of Ṭabaristān and Gīlān," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26 (1967): 17–21. On Ibn ʿAbbād and the political history of this period more generally, see M. A. Pomerantz, "A Political Biography of al-Ṣāḥib Ismaʿīl b. ʿAbbād (d. 385/995)," *JAOS* 134.1 (2014): 1–23, where Ibrāhīm is mentioned on pp. 14 n. 85, 15 n. 92, 18.

15. Thaʿālibī, 2: 292.

The last two sections of the entry consist primarily of full-length poems exchanged between Ibrāhīm and his friend Abū l-Ḥasan Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī, known as al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1016), a prominent ʿAlid descended from Mūsā b. Jaʿfar al-Kāẓim, the seventh Imam of the Twelver Shiʿa. These poems are drawn from a collection of the two men's correspondence.[16] In the first section, *Mā ukhrija min shiʿrihi fī l-shayb wa-l-kibar wa-dhikr ākhir amrihi* (Selections from His Poetry on Gray Hair and Old Age and Mention of His Last Days, pp. 353–62), are four poems: Ibrāhīm's complaint about his own terminal illness (354–57), al-Raḍī's reply (357–59), Ibrāhīm's reply, "which may have been the last of his poetry" (*wa-laʿallahu ākhir shiʿrihi*, 359–60), and al-Raḍī's reply to those final words (360–62). The final section, *Dhikr wafāt Abī Isḥāq wa-mā rathāhu bihi l-Mūsawī* (Mention of the Death of Abū Isḥāq [Ibrāhīm] and [al-Raḍī] al-Mūsawī's Elegy for Him, pp. 362–68), contains two poems: al-Raḍī's 83-line elegy for Ibrāhīm, who died in 384/994, and his poem on a visit to Ibrāhīm's grave (362–66 and 366–68 respectively). Al-Thaʿālibī ends his entry with al-Raḍī's final line: "I know that weeping is no use / to you, and yet I stir these longings up."[17]

II. ASSIMILATION

In addition to the passage quoted above, al-Thaʿālibī offers several indications of Ibrāhīm's conformity to Muslim notions of piety. He relates that a certain Abū Manṣūr Saʿīd b. Aḥmad al-Barīdī told him in Bukhārā "that Abū Isḥāq [Ibrāhīm] al-Ṣābī was one of the pietists (*nussāk*) of the people of his religious practice (*dīn*), strict in his religious doctrine (*diyāna*) and in protecting his religious way (*madhhab*) and guarding against that to which desire (*hawā*) called him."[18] This description, with the weight of a transmitted report, portrays Ibrāhīm's insistence upon remaining a Sabian as a virtue by using a term like "piety" (*nusk*), often applied by Muslims to pious Muslims (or, occasionally, non-Muslims) or by Christians to their saints. Furthermore, while *dīn* and *diyāna* are neutral, the report construes Ibrāhīm's defense of the Sabian religion as part of his piety, thus making it analogous to defense of the *dīn* of the Believers.[19] Al-Thaʿālibī's willingness to report these things shows the great success of the process of constructing and legitimating, in a Muslim context, a Sabian identity tied not only to Hermes but also to Abraham the *ḥanīf* (who had once lived in Ḥarrān), a process that Kevin van Bladel has argued is behind several Arabic texts on Hermes.[20] It also shows how eager some Muslims were to accept this repackaged and touched-up Sabianism.

16. M. Y. Najm, ed., *Rasāʾil al-Ṣābī wa-l-Sharīf al-Raḍī*, al-Turāth al-ʿarabī, vol. 6 (Kuwait: Dāʾirat al-Maṭbūʿāt wa-l-Nashr, 1961).

17. Thaʿālibī, 2: 368: *wa-aʿlamu anna laysa l-bukaʾu bi-nāfiʿin * ʿalayka wa-lākinnī umannī l-amāniya*.

18. Ibid., 288. Al-Thaʿālibī quotes the same informant one other time (as one of two authorities for the report, mentioned above, that Ibrāhīm had dismissed his own pro-Buyid history as mendacious); see B. Orfali, "The Sources of al-Thaʿālibī in *Yatīmat al-Dahr* and *Tatimmat al-Yatīma*," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 16.1 (2013): 30.

19. Cf. Q 2:132: Abraham and Jacob announcing to their sons that "God has chosen for you a *dīn*"; 2:217: the enemies of Muslims will fight the Muslims until "they make you turn from your *dīn* [. . .] and he among you who turns from his *dīn* and so dies an unbeliever" has lost everything in this world and the next. On the other hand, *dīn* can be used to describe Meccan religious practice (Q 3:24), but then it is not something worth defending. *Nusk*, or *nusuk*, is a positive trait in the Quran—for example, in *sūrat al-Anʿām* (6:161–62), where it is associated with Abraham: "Say: As for me, my Lord has guided me to a straight path, a right religion (*dīnan qiyaman*), the community (*milla*) of Abraham, the *ḥanīf*, who was no idolater. / Say: My prayer and my devotion (*nusukī*) and my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the Worlds" (Pickthall, modified).

20. Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, §5.2.

Ibrāhīm's pious image, appropriate for a Ḥarrānian *ḥanīf* with his name ("Abraham father of Isaac"), is occasionally reflected in his own words, as selected by al-Thaʿālibī.[21] Part of what lent him a pious air to Muslims no doubt was how he mimicked—or rather, displayed—Muslim pious characteristics throughout his letters and poems. Alongside the reflexive references to God that are typical of Muslim writing, he also made a point of describing himself as making requests of God, in one case even describing his posture.[22] His greeting cards on the occasion of the breaking of the fast celebration (*ʿīd al-fiṭr*) are apt and display awareness of Muslim sensibilities about fasting, fast-breaking, the piety with which they were associated, and the reward the Muslim hoped to receive for his piety.[23] On one occasion he censured a Muslim for failing to live up to the piety that the fast entailed, becoming the judge of a Muslim's righteousness and effortlessly wielding the appropriate terms (*ẓulm*, *ithm*) with which to address the Muslim wrongdoer:

O you who abstained (*ṣumta*) from tasting food,
if only you'd abstained from doing wrong!
Does fasting (*ṣawm*) help the wrongdoer
whose innards are replete with sin?[24]

In times of need, Muslim-style piety is particularly salient in his self-description. In prison Ibrāhīm writes,

In fire of grief I was roasted and so became more pure,
as unadulterated gold is purified through smelting.

This metallurgical image of purification through fire echoes Quranic descriptions of hellfire, even if this is not exclusively a Muslim trope.[25] In another poem, Ibrāhīm's reference to the Quran is more transparent as he laments,

There is no helper for me in the cares
I face, except for Him who knows and hears.

In this image of reverent isolation, he referred to God by two Quranic names (*al-ʿalīm al-samīʿ*) associated with offerings accepted and requests for protection fulfilled.[26]

21. An example is Ibrāhīm's repentant poem that al-Thaʿālibī (2: 288) quotes immediately after calling Ibrāhīm pious.

22. For example, after the *qāḍī l-quḍāt* Abū Muḥammad ʿUbaydallāh b. Aḥmad b. Maʿrūf (a Muʿtazilī, d. Saturday, 21 Ṣafar 381/9 May 991; see KhB, 10: 366–68, esp. 367.22; and, for the present context, Yāqūt, 135 and n. 4) visited him in prison (Thaʿālibī, 2: 348), he appealed to God (*fa-daʿawtu llāha taʿālā*) and used a pious interjection (*fa-huwa ayyadahu llāhu*). On another occasion (ibid., 292.6) he asked God to requite his addressee for his generosity (*saʾaltu llāha an yuṭīla lahu l-baqāʾa ka-ṭūli yadihi fī l-ʿaṭāʾ*). In his new year's greetings to ʿAḍud al-Dawla (ibid., 293), he wrote, "I ask God Most High, supplicating in His presence, extending my hands toward Him" (*asʾalu llāha taʿālā mubtahilan ladayhi māddan yadayya ilayhi*). It is not atypical for Arabophone non-Muslims to follow God's name with *taʿālā*; cf. the Arabic translations of Greek Patristics produced by the Chalcedonian-Christian deacon ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Faḍl al-Anṭākī (fl. ca. 1051 C.E.).

23. Thaʿālibī, 2: 327.

24. Ibid, 337: *yā dhā lladhī ṣāma ʿani l-ṭaʿmi * laytaka qad ṣumta ʿani l-ẓulmi / hal yanfaʿu l-ṣawmu mraʾan ẓāliman * aḥshāʾuhu malʾan mina l-ithmi*.

25. Ibid., 347.12: *ṣalītu bi-nāri l-hammi fa-zdadtu ṣafwatan * ka-dhā l-dhahabi l-ibrīzi yaṣfū ʿalā l-sabki*. For the language of hellfire in the Quran, see, e.g., Q 4:30 (*fa-sawfa nuṣlīhi nāran*), 56; 56:94 (*wa-taṣliyatu jaḥīm*); 88:4 (*taṣlā nāran ḥāmiyatan*). Ibrāhīm's "cares" (*hamm*) may echo the sorrowful faces on the day of the calamity in Q 88:1–3 (*al-ghāshiya / wujūhun yawmaʾidhin khāshiʿa / ʿāmilatun nāṣiba*) that are roasted in 88:4.

26. Ibid., 347.2: *laysa lī munjidun ʿalā mā uqāsī * min kurūbī siwā l-ʿalīmi l-samīʿi*. The two names are associated with God's assistance, for example, in Q 12:34.

In other words, in his self-presentation Ibrāhīm often made himself out to be just like the elite Muslims with whom he associated, especially when he sought favor or assistance. Not only did he exhibit a piety palatable to cosmopolitan elite Muslim men, but he also wrote poetry of the sort a Muslim gentleman of his day would write, in all the set genres, ranging from playful flirtation—"The bitter (*murru*) in what happened (*marra*) to me for your sake is sweet, and my suffering (*ʿadhāb*) in the likes of loving you is agreeable (*ʿadhb*)"[27]—to bawdy description: of a brazier (*madkhana*) he writes, "Her insides distressed, her moaning rings out and the scent of perfume gusts between her openings (*furūjihā*); / if it refreshes her soul by exiting her (*khurūjihā*), then I bring relief for the soul in entering her (*wulūjihā*)."[28] Hence the impression that he was, though in name still a Sabian, Muslim in most essential aspects. As François de Blois has summed up: "Though he resisted to the end the temptation of conversion, Ibrāhīm was in all other regards a typically Muslim man of letters whose elegant Arabic epistles and poems were greatly admired by his contemporaries."[29]

This impression fails to make sense, however, of how the famous Sabian was viewed by himself and his contemporaries, which was as anything but a Muslim. In al-Thaʿālibī's description of Ibrāhīm's refusal to convert, above, we were told that God did not guide him to Islam—so he was not a Muslim—and that he was on intimate terms with Muslims, which is only a striking fact if he was not one of them.

Indeed, if we look closer at Ibrāhīm and at what al-Thaʿālibī has told us, we see that the refined secretary was up to the delicate task of maintaining distinction while actively cultivating cultural assimilation. Even in his expressions of piety, he played with Muslim tropes. For instance, his line that ends with the words *al-ʿalīm al-samīʿ* (the All-Knowing, All-Hearing) inverts the order of every verse in the Quran in which these epithets appear together.[30] To swap around the words of God—of which al-Thaʿālibī has told us Ibrāhīm was well aware—to fit his poem's rhyme perhaps suggests (even if it hardly proves) a playfulness, rather than mere deference, in the Muslim-friendly persona he cultivated. In a similar way, one of his wisdom poems plays with another Quranic epithet for God:

The whole of man's a rotten corpse,
  his matter's wretched stuff.[31]
So why, oh why
  is the soul called high?
In him that (fact) is nothing but
  the gracious work of God.[32]

God is kind or gracious (*laṭīf*), but the best of his creation, made up of body and soul, "is a rotten corpse." This first line plays on the standard wisdom theme of mortality and so invites the second line: why should the soul be considered noble if it is part of a mortal creature

27. Ibid., 304: *murru mā marra bī min ajlika ḥulwun * wa-ʿadhābī fī mithli ḥubbika ʿadhbu.*

28. Ibid., 312: *wa-makrūbatu l-aḥshāʾi yaʿlū zafīruhā * wa-taʿṣifu rīḥu l-ṭībi bayna furūjihā / idhā rawwaḥat ʿan nafsihā bi-khurūjihā * fa-li-l-nafsi minnī rāḥatun fī wulūjihā.*

29. De Blois, *EI*², s.v. Sābiʾ.

30. Fifteen verses end in *al-samīʿ al-ʿalīm*: Q 2:127, 137; 3:35; 5:76; 6:13, 115; 8:61; 10:65; 12:34; 21:4; 26:220; 29:5, 60; 41:36; 44:6.

31. The adjective *sakhīf* (here translated "wretched stuff") may be applied to low-quality cloth and connotes baseness. All translations of terms are taken from *Lisān al-ʿarab* unless otherwise noted.

32. Thaʿālibī, 2: 352: *jumlatu l-insāni jīfa * wa-hayūlāhu sakhīfa / fa-li-mādhā layta shiʿrī * qīla li-l-nafsi sharīfa / innamā dhālika fīhi * ṣanʿatu llāhi l-laṭīfa*. *Jīfa* is a corpse, often a rotten one. It is tempting to construe *dhālika* as referring to the soul, but the gender of *nafs* (feminine in the previous line, even if the word can be masculine) would seem to rule that out.

destined to become a foul-smelling cadaver in a grave? At this point, the poem appears to imply that the soul dies with the body, requiring the final line to clarify: the soul's nobility is not predicated on man's being anything other than a corpse, but rather comes from God's kind act of creation. He made the soul noble, and so, despite its earthly vessel, it is.

A parallel reading of the last line is possible—after all, it is not God who is described as *laṭīf* but his handiwork, the soul. In philosophy *laṭīf* is a technical term meaning "fine" or "subtle" (Gk. λεπτός, opposite of "thick," *ghalīẓ*, παχύς), used to describe physical bodies (e.g., air is "subtler" than water). In various ancient theories reviewed by Aristotle in his treatise *De Anima*, the soul is posited to be a "subtle body"—the Arabic translation of this treatise by Isḥāq b. Ḥunayn (d. 289/910f.) renders this phrase using the term *laṭīf*.[33] In light of this background it is quite natural to call the soul God's "subtle handiwork" (*ṣanʿatu llāhi l-laṭīfa*). This reading adds an additional layer of meaning: while man may be a "corpse," debased by his material substrate (*hayūlā* < ὕλη), his God-given soul is immaterial (or nearly so) such that it may be noble, sublime (*sharīfa*), despite its association with a corpse. One might even be tempted to read the first line of the poem in a similar light, taking *sakhīf* in its technical philosophical sense of "light," "porous," or "soft" (Gk. μανός, opposite of *kathīf*) as it is used by the same Isḥāq b. Ḥunayn in his translation of Aristotle's *Physica*.[34] Man's matter (i.e., body) is soft and porous, not hard like iron, which explains its propensity to decay: "The whole of man's a rotten corpse, his matter makes him soft." It is still the soul's "subtleness" that redeems.

The poem thus exploits philosophical theories about the soul's, and possibly the body's, materiality, along with the Quranic association of God's creation with his kindness.[35] The overall conceit is not particularly Quranic (resurrection, as in Christianity, includes the body) but rather resonates better with *falsafa* (especially the Neoplatonic tendency to prefer the immaterial to the material) and *ḥikma* and may derive from one of the many wisdom collections in circulation at the time.[36]

I do not mean to exaggerate the separation between Muslim (Quranic) culture and philosophy, or to suggest that a Muslim would never paraphrase a wisdom saying. There was a whole genre of wisdom poetry (*ḥikma*), which is al-Thaʿālibī's heading for the section in which these lines appear. Rather, these examples show that a Sabian *adīb* could freely use Quranic vocabulary for his own purposes. For if Sabianism was the preserved form of the religion that Abraham first received from God, then was not Quranic language, in its Abrahamic *ḥanīfiyya*, Sabian as well?[37]

33. Aristotle, *De anima*, §1.5, 409a–b: according to one theory, the soul is "some kind of subtle body" (σῶμά τι λεπτομερές, *jism laṭīf al-ajzāʾ* in translation: *Arisṭūṭālīs fī l-nafs*, ed. ʿA. R. Badawī [Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1954], 22). Others (§1.2, 405a–b) believed that the soul is made of the "most subtle-parted" (λεπτομερέστατον) element; here Isḥāq b. Ḥunayn does not use the term *laṭīf* but *daqīqat al-ajzāʾ* (ed. Badawī, 10).

34. For example, Aristotle, *Phys.* §4.9, 216b22; *Arisṭūṭālīs, al-Ṭabīʿa*, ed. ʿA. R. Badawī, 2 vols. (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1964–65), 1: 385; cited by the "Glossarium Graeco-Arabicum" (http://telota.bbaw.de/glossga/glossary.php?id=129682). Aristotle discusses the various senses in which *sakhīf*/μανός can be understood, e.g., "porous" (216b30) and "light" (*khafīf*; 216b33–217a1); ed. Badawī, 1: 386.

35. God is described as *laṭīf* (gracious, subtle) seven times in the Quran (6:103; 12:100; 22:63; 31:16; 33:34; 42:19; 67:14); in four (22:63; 31:16; 42:19; 67:14) this gracious subtlety is associated with God's acts of creation and providence, and in one (33:34), a verse addressed to the wives of the Prophet, God is called *laṭīf* in association with the verses and wisdom of his revelation (*āyāt allāh wa-l-ḥikma*).

36. On the Platonic background of ambivalent attitudes toward the body, see J. M. Dillon, "Rejecting the Body, Refining the Body: Some Remarks on the Development of Platonist Asceticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. V. L. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 80–87.

37. Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 65–66. The Syriac moniker given to them by Christians was *ḥanputā* "paganism"; for the evolving meanings of the cognates *ḥanpā* and *ḥanīf*, see F. C. de Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζαραῖος) and *ḥanīf*

Ibrāhīm's assimilation was thus partial and controlled. He did not slip dangerously close to conversion with each new Quranic verse he memorized, with each Ramadan greeting card he penned. He was a gentleman, yes, but a Sabian gentleman.

III. DISTINCTION

Because Ibrāhīm did not become a Muslim, his assimilation to Muslim cultural norms in most things gave him the license to label himself as a believer, separate from those around him, with several marks of distinction. It is no coincidence that al-Thaʿālibī chooses to tell of Ibrāhīm's refusal to eat fava beans in the presence of his patron, the vizier al-Muhallabī, for it makes sense of how one could be accepted as different and legitimate at the same time. On the authority of Abū Naṣr Sahl b. al-Marzubān (d. before 429/1037), a major source for his anthology, al-Thaʿālibī relates,

> One day [Ibrāhīm] al-Ṣābī was present at al-Muhallabī's table, but then declined to eat, on account of some fava beans (*bāqillāʾ*) which were on [the table], since they are forbidden to Sabians (*muḥarramun ʿalā l-ṣābiʾa*), along with (*kayfa mā kāna min*) fish, pork, camel-meat, dove-hens, and locusts (*jarād*). Al-Muhallabī said to him, "Don't be tedious (*lā tabrud*), eat these fava beans with us." But [Ibrāhīm] replied, "O vizier, I do not wish to disobey God in anything I eat (*fī maʾkūlin*)," which pleased [the vizier].[38]

Ibrāhīm's refusal to eat al-Muhallabī's beans (or anything else on that table) initially irritates the vizier, but his displeasure melts into approval when he hears the explanation: that Ibrāhīm is avoiding disobedience toward God even at the risk of appearing rude to his powerful host. It seems that protected peoples (*ahl al-dhimma*) won the respect of Muslim rulers by taking their own religious rules seriously; elite Muslims were pleased to see those whose cults they and God permitted cleave to their cults. Just as Muslims could approve of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's Zoroastrian prayer on the night before he became a Muslim (to avoid being without religion for even one night);[39] as al-Manṣūr could appreciate his Christian physician's refusal of "three beautiful Byzantine (*rūmiyyāt*) slave-girls" on the grounds that his wife, though she was too old to accompany him to Baghdad, was the only wife he, as a Christian, was permitted;[40] and as al-Mutawakkil could punish the Nestorian Christian Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq for violating Christian norms as articulated by the Nestorian *katholikos* (even though Ḥunayn's aniconic stance arguably brought him closer to the Muslim position

(ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65.1 (2002): 16–25 (note the comparison of typical Christian and Muslim usage, p. 19); summarized by van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 190–91.

38. Thaʿālibī, 2: 288–89; this story also appears in one manuscript of IKh (see 1: 392). The *isnād* ends with hearsay (*ḥaddathanī Abū Naṣr . . . qāla: balaghanī anna . . .*), but its inclusion, in a chapter with few *isnād*s, emphasizes al-Thaʿālibī's trust in the story. On al-Thaʿālibī's use of the *isnād*, see Orfali, "Sources," 9–11; for Ibn al-Marzubān as a source, p. 44. For the story, and a passage from Ibn Waḥshiyya's *al-Filāḥa al-nabaṭiyya* on Hermes's prohibition of fava beans, see also van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 96 n. 144. I owe the translation of *lā tabrud* to Michael Cooperson, who suggested that this Sabian dietary restriction may be related to the ban on (fava) beans that Aristotle ascribed to Pythagoras (on which, see C. Huffman, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* s.v. "Pythagoras" [2005; rev. 2014], §4.3, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pythagoras/).

39. M. Cooperson, "Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ," in *Arabic Literary Culture, 500–925*, ed. idem and Sh. M. Toorawa, Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 311 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 160.

40. IAU, 184–85. Similarly, when the physician, Jūrjiyūs, fell ill in 152/769f. (IAU, 185), he begged the caliph leave to return to his home town of Jundishapur to see his people and be buried among his forefathers. The caliph replies, "Jūrjiyūs, fear God and become a Muslim (*aslim*), and I guarantee paradise to you (*wa-anā aḍmanu laka l-janna*)." But Jūrjiyūs refuses: "I will die in the religion of my forefathers, and wherever they are I wish to be." Al-Manṣūr is amused.

on icons);[41] so, too, was al-Muhallabī impressed with Ibrāhīm's refusal to eat what Sabianism forbade (even though this distanced him from the Muslim position on permissible and forbidden foods).

This anecdote is the strongest evidence of Ibrāhīm's open religious difference, but his Sabian distinctiveness can be discerned at a number of points throughout al-Thaʿālibī's chapter on him. The most prominent is a poem—quoted and analyzed by Kevin van Bladel—that considers how members of five different religious groups each regard the poet's beloved, seeing her through the lens of their own visions of divine beauty:

Each mortal, Muslim and confederate,
  has you as justest witness to his *dīn*.
When Muslims see you they believe in all
  the houris of the gardens of eternal ease.
When Christians see in you a young gazelle
  who lifts her full moon over bending branch,
they praise their trinity and call on you
  as proof, since you have bound up three in one.
And when the Jews see how your forehead shines,
  they'll tell their *dīn*'s abjurer and denier:
"This is the lightning-flash that the Merciful One
  displayed to His praying prophet-confidant Moses."
The Magians see your face's light, and then,
  above, black hair like darkness motionless,
and in between this light and darkness stand
  the proofs they prep for every challenger;
You are their sun, how many bend to you
  in prayer when darkness falls and bow!
And Sabians see that you're alone in grace
  and so acknowledge One, Magnificent.
Like Venus luminous are you to them,
  propitious when with Jove and Mercury.
So by your hand they all can see the *dīn*,
  both he who strays and he who walks the path.
You made them righteous, but me you seduced and left
  to strive apart from them with a *dīn* corrupt.[42]

I will not rehearse van Bladel's sound arguments for this poem's premises, namely, that the different religions regard the same God but from different points of view, that Ḥarrānian Sabianism is a normal and legitimate religious position, that Sabians are dhimmis, that the Sabian religion is more strictly monotheistic than Christianity or Zoroastrianism while

41. M. Cooperson, "Two Abbasid Trials: Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal and Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq," *Al-Qanṭara* 22.2 (2001), esp. 381–82.

42. Thaʿālibī, 2: 307; my translation is based on van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 107–8. The text: *kullu l-warā min muslimin wa-muʿāhidin * li-l-dīni minhu fīki aʿdalu shāhidi / fa-idhā raʾāki l-muslimūna tayaqqanū * ḥūra l-jināni ladā l-naʿīmi l-khālidi / wa-idhā raʾā minki l-naṣārā ẓabyatan * taʿṭū bi-badrin fawqa ghuṣnin māʾidi / athnaw ʿalā tathlīthihim wa-stashhadū * biki idh jamaʿti thalāthatan fī wāḥidi / wa-idhā l-yahūdu raʾaw jabīnaki lāmiʿan * qālū li-dāfiʿi dīnihim wa-l-jāḥidi / hādhā sanā l-raḥmāni ḥīna abānahu * li-kalīmihi Mūsā l-nabīyi l-ʿābidi / wa-tarā l-majūsu ḍiyāʾa wajhiki fawqahu * muswaddu farʿin ka-l-ẓalāmi l-rākidi / fa-taqūmu bayna ẓalāmi dhāka wa-nūri dhā * ḥujajun aʿaddūhā li-kulli muʿānidi / aṣbaḥti shamsahumu fa-kam laki fīhimu * min rākiʿin ʿinda l-ẓalāmi wa-sājidi / wa-l-ṣābiʾūna yarawna annaki mufradun * fī l-ḥusni iqrāran li-fardin mājidi / ka-l-Zuharati l-zahrāʾi anti ladayhimu * masʿūdatun bi-l-Mushtarī wa-l-ʿUṭāridi / fa-ʿalā yadayki jamīʿuhum mustabṣirun * fī l-dīni min ghāwī l-sabīli wa-rāshidi / aṣlaḥtihim wa-fatantinī wa-taraktinī * min baynihim asʿā bi-dīnin fāsidi.*

placing an emphasis upon the stars.[43] I will elaborate instead on the second point—that this poem emphatically asserts the distinctiveness and legitimacy of the Sabian religion.

In a way that might not have been expected, distinction here derives from an implicit proximity of Sabianism to Islam, expressed in the poem's emphasis on Sabian belief in the oneness of God.[44] Furthermore, while Jews and Magians are made to see the beloved as the deity (Jews say her forehead is God's forehead, she is the Magians' sun and darkness to which they pray) and Christians see her as comparable to the deity (she is a trinity like the holy trinity), only Sabians and Muslims compare her to manifestations of divine benevolence represented by a female entity associated with erotic pleasure (Venus, houri). This implies a shared Sabian-Muslim belief in God's transcendence, or at least his incomparability (*laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ*).[45]

This common ground is what allows the Sabian confederate (*muʿāhid*, i.e., dhimmi) to preserve his separate identity. If the Sabian and the Muslim share the fundamentals of religion, then they, along with other true religions, are on (or straying from) essentially the same path. For Sabians to look to the planets for guidance (or even venerate them) as part of their *dīn* is no more erroneous than for Muslims to follow their *dīn*'s prescriptions in hope of winning a place among the voluptuous women of paradise—in other words, not at all. It is this commensurability that allowed Ibrāhīm to set himself so strikingly apart at the vizier's dinner table. This is not confidence in numbers: Sabians were by all accounts a tiny minority. But a member of this minority living in tenth-century Baghdad could refuse the vizier's fava beans and playfully adapt the Arabic *ghazal* tradition in a poem that presupposed the truth and equivalence of his religion to Islam.[46]

Was this confidence a Sabian fantasy? Al-Thaʿālibī did not seem to find the assumption of Sabian legitimacy invalid, or if he did, he kept it well hidden. The coexistence of all these religions appears here as the stable order of being. Moreover, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī's elegy for Ibrāhīm suggests Muslim recognition of Sabian legitimacy, as, for instance, when he declaimed:

> They said he obeyed and in death's bonds was led:
> the hands of fated death take hold of any halter.
> It would have been hard, had his God not led him to his decree,
> for him to have been led [by anyone].[47]

By saying that Ibrāhīm's God (*ilāhuhu*) took him away, these lines at once affirm the commensurability of Sabianism and Islam and their difference; "his God" rather than simply "God" (*allāh*) distances al-Sharīf al-Raḍī from Ibrāhīm's religious experience, while the implication that Ibrāhīm's God is identical with him "who created you from clay, then decreed a term [for you]" has the opposite effect.[48] More pointedly, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī stresses his friendship with Ibrāhīm despite the differences in their station:

> By virtue we were bound together, since
> no bond (*munāsabatan*)[49] was my nobility or birth.

43. Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 108.

44. Cf. Q 112:1–3: *qul huwa llāhu aḥad, allāhu l-ṣamad, lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*.

45. Q 42:11; cf. 112:4: *wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad*.

46. For the sort of elite cosmopolitanism in which such attitudes might thrive, see J. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), e.g., 13.

47. Thaʿālibī, 2: 362.17 (ll. 8–9 of elegy).

48. Q 6:2 (trans. Pickthall, modified).

49. Perhaps *munāsibuhu*, as in Najm (*Rasāʾil* [n. 16 above], 53); the meaning (and the rhythm) are the same.

Though you were not my family or my tribe,
you hold my love the tightest of them all,
and though your origins were not so high,
great auspices (*judūd*) replaced strong ancestors (*ajdād*).
May I be cursed should I put off giving you protection (*dhimma*),
secretly in absence or openly.
For loyalty is as you put it once;
if still alive you wouldn't add a word.
Our rivalry (*tanāfus*)[50] is not to be resumed
again, nor will our era be re-lived.[51]

Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, the descendant of ʿAlid imams, asserts his closeness to Ibrāhīm despite the latter's unquestionably lower station and status as a dhimmi. Their friendly competition (*tanāfus*) puts them on the same level—immediately after open acknowledgment of difference.[52]

Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī's promise to uphold the Sabian right to protection can be read as a response to Ibrāhīm's appeal, in the course of the poetic correspondence between the two: "Preserve in my sons my rights (*adhimma*)."[53] This request may allude in part to Ibrāhīm's dhimmi status and the rights of protection thus due to him, which his sons are to enjoy after his death. At stake in Ibrāhīm's request is not the possibility that his sons might slip across the boundary dividing Muslims and Sabians—whether by converting or by losing all recognizable signs of being Sabian—but that they might be pressured to convert or be otherwise deprived of their rights, in violation of their *dhimma*, as the caliph al-Qāhir had coerced their great-grandfather Sinān b. Thābit b. Qurra.

IV. A HEAVENLY BRAND

If Sabianism in tenth-century Baghdad was a robust tradition that presented itself to Muslims as religiously distinct, what did this Sabian distinctiveness entail?

In the century and a half since D. A. Chwolsohn's groundbreaking work on Sabians and Sabianism, which collected the sources on Ḥarrānians and Sabians in Islamic society and sought to reconstruct the pagan Ḥarrānian religion, a number of scholars have weighed in on the question of just who these tenacious pagans were and what exactly they believed.[54] Van Bladel's critical review of these discussions concludes that on the basis of our sources little can be known about pre-Islamic Ḥarrānian paganism; at the same time he provides the foundation for investigating what the Sabian religion and identity became under Muslim rule.[55] He initiates his investigation by analyzing a number of texts, including the Arabic "Testament of Hermes to King Ammon" (which he argues postdates ca. 840–860), in which Hermes appears as a law-giving, book-bearing prophet whose laws, derived from various wisdom collections, bear strong resemblance in content to Quranic injunctions. This, van Bladel argues, strongly suggests authorship by a Sabian living among Muslims.[56]

50. Perhaps *tanāfuth*, as in ibid., 54.

51. Thaʿālibī, 2: 366.1–6 (ll. 67–72 of elegy); Najm, *Rasāʾil*, 53–54 (ll. 66–71).

52. It is possible that we should read *tanāfuth* ("whispering"), that is, mutual confiding, rather than al-Thaʿālibī's *tanāfus*, but the result is still to level the difference in status between them.

53. Thaʿālibī, 2: 356.10.

54. Chwolsohn, *Ssabier und der Ssabismus*; M. Tardieu, "Ṣābiens coraniques et 'Ṣābiens' de Ḥarrān," *Journal Asiatique* 274 (1986): 1–44; for further references, see van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, ch. 3.

55. Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, ch. 3.

56. Ibid., 211–19. The text is included in al-Mubashshir b. Fātik's *Kitāb Mukhtār al-ḥikam* (written in 440/1048f.) among wisdom sayings attributed to Hermes; Ibn al-Qifṭī also transmits a version of the text.

Ibrāhīm's writings as selected by al-Thaʿālibī are quite different from the "Testament of Hermes" in that they do not claim to be ancient texts with normative authority; and while both sets of texts might have been intended for consumption by Muslims, those by Ibrāhīm were intended to be consumed by Muslims on their own terms. Most importantly, they were more often meant to represent who Ibrāhīm was as a Sabian, not what Sabianism was.

Van Bladel argues that Ibrāhīm's *ghazal* on how various religions view the beloved suggests that Sabians like Ibrāhīm still considered the planets to be an important part of the Sabian religion, analogous to Jewish law, Magian dualism, Christian trinitarianism, and the Muslim's promised paradise.[57] I will argue here that Ibrāhīm's references to the planets are an integral component of his persona as a Sabian.

Ibrāhīm's family had long been in the twin business of astronomy and medicine. Although Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa depicts Ibrāhīm's maternal great-grandfather Thābit b. Qurra as a physician, his writings, extant and otherwise, suggest that some of his most important work was as a mathematician and astronomer.[58] While Ibrāhīm's paternal side of the family is more obscure, both father and uncle were physicians for Buyid amirs. Ibrāhīm was brought up to succeed his forefathers, but his fame was won through his literary talents. In boasting that he is the ruler's companion and guide, he writes: "The sultan knows that I am his tongue / and his secretary: skilled, to the point, and granted success."[59]

References to the stars, the moon, and astral phenomena are very common in medieval Arabic poetry, so their appearance in Ibrāhīm's poetry is not surprising.[60] When considered alongside his more pointed references, however, these astral commonplaces suggest that Ibrāhīm, though more *adīb* than *ḥakīm*, used astral tropes to project an image of himself—with elite Muslim complicity in the form of al-Thaʿālibī's choices—that associated him with astral expertise.

Moons and other heavenly bodies are sprinkled throughout al-Thaʿālibī's chapter on Ibrāhīm. Full moons and the sky play across one line of *ghazal*;[61] one begins

> I speak now having stripped her from her clothes
> embracing her like the moon on its fullest night.[62]

and another with "O moon! like the young gazelle in its glance."[63] In yet another he proclaims "the full moon is my guest, and his affairs are in my hands."[64] In an epideictic poem on a wax candle (*shamʿa*), he speaks of

> many a dark night of monthly moonlessness
> without a star to guide one's trek, nor moon.[65]

57. Ibid., 108.

58. A. I. Sabra, "Thābit Ibn Qurra on Euclid's Parallels Postulate," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 31 (1968): 12–32; R. Morelon, "Ṯābit b. Qurra and Arab Astronomy in the 9th Century," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 4 (1994): 111–39; Roshdi Rashed, ed., *Thābit ibn Qurra* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009). Thābit recorded his own astronomical observations, as well as those of the Banū Mūsā, in one book (IAU, 299.21) and was the author of an astrological treatise "on the natures of the planets/stars and their influences" (IAU, 299.29–30).

59. Thaʿālibī, 2: 321: *wa-qad ʿalima l-sulṭānu annī lisānuhu * wa-kātibuhu l-kāfī l-sadīdu l-muwaffaqu*.

60. Ibn Bassām (*apud* IKh, 3: 178) said of al-Thaʿālibī that "his *dīwān*s have ascended in the East and the West as the star ascends in darkness" (*ṭalaʿat dawāwīnuhu fī l-mashāriqi wa-l-maghāribi ṭulūʿa l-najmi fī l-ghayāhib*).

61. Thaʿālibī, 2: 305.9.

62. Ibid., 306.2: *aqūlu wa-qad jarradtuhā min thiyābihā * wa-ʿānaqtuhā ka-l-badri fī laylati l-tammi*; Ibn Khallikān (1: 392) also records this poem.

63. Thaʿālibī, 2: 306.11: *yā qamaran ka-l-khashfi fī naẓratihi*.

64. Ibid., 306.17: *wa-l-badru ḍayfī wa-amruhu bi-yadī*.

65. Ibid., 315.8: *wa-laylatin min maḥāqi l-shahri mudjinatin * lā l-najmu yahdī l-sarā fīhā wa-lā l-qamaru*.

The Būyid amir Ṣamṣām al-Dawla (d. 388/998) is like a moon and like a sun; the Sasanian-named vizier Shāpūr b. Ardāshīr is "a shining full moon, since he disappeared as full moons disappear."[66] These compliments would have resonated with contemporary Arabic dream books, in which the moon and sun usually represented the vizier and caliph (or king), respectively.[67] The amir was indeed both like a moon (ostensibly second to the caliph) and like a sun (*de facto* ruler).

Other poems look to the stars. After a night of drinking,

The morning star came into sight,
 arising as the rooster crowed.[68]

Addressing al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, Ibrāhīm makes reference to a star and compares him to the sky.[69] In his elegy al-Sharīf al-Raḍī himself compares Ibrāhīm to a star or planet (*kawkab*) in three lines, each time repeating the opening "How hard it is for me" (*aʿziz ʿalayya*); these lines lament that gatherings (*majālis*) no longer take place around Ibrāhīm, that he is in a place where the noble and the scoundrels are all the same, that the poet can no longer see "the glow of that brilliant star."[70]

These are standard terms of praise. It is possible that in Sabian hands, or when applied to a Sabian, astral metaphors took on added significance,[71] but tenth-century *udabāʾ* were in the habit of comparing each other and their patrons to stars as a cliché for greatness, with no special astrological connotations intended—much as little interest in actual heavenly bodies appears to be implied in the "stargazing" of Hollywood tourism.

More tellingly in the case of Ibrāhīm, al-Thaʿālibī's chapter provides a number of more pointed indications linking Ibrāhīm with astrology. A great concentration of these references to astrology appear in his well-wishing holiday greetings addressed to Muslims. Ibrāhīm sent holiday greetings to al-Muṭahhar b. ʿAbd Allāh (one of the three who prevented ʿAḍud al-Dawla from unleashing the elephants upon Ibrāhīm) wishing him well-auguring ascendants.[72] In a poem to Ṣamṣām al-Dawla, which opens with three lines of well-wishing, he writes: "May our lord's good fortunes (*saʿādāt*) continue uninterrupted, forever, again and again."[73] In the next poem, sent to the same along with an astrolabe, the first line may be read as a pun on "bad luck" (*naḥāsa*) or "misfortune" (*naḥs*) and "copper" (*nuḥās*):

It weighs on me to give a gift of copper
 to one from whose palm flows pure gold!
But time has swept away my circumstance,
 and when it wrongs me you are my protector.[74]

66. Ibid., 330.18 (Ṣamṣām al-Dawla); 336.6 (Shāpūr: *ṣaḥḥa anna l-wazīra badrun munīrun * idh tawārā kamā tawārā l-budūru*; the second *tawārā* is a shortened form of *tatawārā*).

67. As attested by the Greek *Oneirocriticon of Achmet*; see M. Mavroudi, *A Byzantine Book on Dream Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 208–22.

68. Ibid., 308.3: *kawkabu l-iṣbāḥi lāḥa * ṭāliʿan wa-l-dīku ṣāḥa*.

69. Ibid., 356.2 and 4.

70. Ibid., 363.8–10 (ll. 18–20 of elegy): *lamaʿānu dhāka l-kawkibi l-waqqādi*.

71. Al-Thaʿālibī is not the only one to showcase Ibrāhīm's astral verses; al-Tanūkhī (d. 384/994) cites several lines of *ghazal* by Ibrāhīm that play with the idea of the *badr* (*Nishwār al-muḥāḍara wa-akhbār al-mudhākara*, ed. ʿA. al-Shāljī, 8 vols. [Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1971–73], 8: 232).

72. Thaʿālibī, 2: 329.2–3: *ṭawāliʿin awqātuhunna suʿūdu*.

73. Ibid., 333.13: *dāmat li-mawlānā saʿādātuhu* [Damascus ed.; *saʿādatuhu* Beirut ed.] * *mawṣūlatan* [my correction; *-un* ed.] *dāʾimatan* [my correction; *-un* ed.] *tatarrā* [= *tatatarrā*].

74. Ibid., 334.3–4: *yaʿizzu ʿalayya an ahdī nuḥāsan * ilā man fayḍu rāḥatihi nuḍāru / wa-lākinna l-zamāna jtāḥa ḥālī * wa-anta ʿalayhi lī idh jāra jāru*. I owe my reading of the fourth hemistich to Michael Cooperson.

Although the poem does not require the pun (since the copper–gold opposition works), the gifted astrolabe (an object closely associated with astrologers) invites it.[75] The instrument is made of copper, but it also aids in the assessment of one's fortune, good or bad. The gift and the implication that it is all he is in the position to give suggest astrology and its implements as a key component of his public persona.

Ibrāhīm's astral associations are even more emphasized in three poems addressed to ʿAḍud al-Dawla, each accompanying an astrological gift. In the first, three lines that "he wrote on the day of Mihrajān accompanying an astrolabe,"[76] he presents himself as capable of giving a very special gift, which other courtiers cannot give:

The hopeful (*banū l-āmāl*) gave you gifts today and held
 festivities anew on Mihrajān, whose examiner you are.
But Ibrāhīm your slave, when he discerned
 your loftiness beyond all that pretends to be comparable,
was not content to give the earth to you,
 but gave the highest heaven and what it holds.[77]

Only the gift of the cosmos itself is worthy of such a transcendentally lofty patron, and only Ibrāhīm is in the position to give such a gift. In the second poem, two lines accompanying a *zīj* (an astronomical book containing tables of solar, lunar, and planetary positions, as well as other lists like trigonometric tables, to allow for the calculation of past and future configurations),[78] Ibrāhīm accentuates the temporal aspect of astronomy:

To celebrate I gave a *zīj* whose charts
 are like the measuring vessels by which the span of life exacts its due.
With them assess the spinning heavens (*al-falak al-dawwār*) and proceed
 as it proceeds, without a feared, awaited end (*ajal*).[79]

The heavens, like a clock, turn calmly and relentlessly, marking time in the silence of the night sky. As they turn, lives become ever shorter, but Ibrāhīm advises his patron to face time's passage with the cool forbearance of the cosmos, which neither fears nor awaits its own end (whether because the world is eternal or simply because it does not fear, Ibrāhīm does not say, though his wording may imply the former). The comparison is flattering to the ruler, who is invited to see himself in the mold of the revolving spheres, extramundane, overseeing God's creation, and coterminous with time itself (whether eternal or not).

His third gift for ʿAḍud al-Dawla, given on the occasion of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, is a treatise on geometry (*risāla handasiyya*)—the mathematics used in astronomy—that he had compiled (*min istikhrājihi*).[80] In the accompanying poem of five lines, he addresses the amir as "king of the earth" (*malik al-arḍ*), thus incorporating a similar cosmic aggrandizement of his patron. He then returns to the first poem's theme of other courtiers' gifts, observ-

75. For the close cultural association of astrolabes and astrologers, see G. Saliba, "The Role of the Astrologer in Medieval Islamic Society," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 44 (1992): 50, 56, 61, 63, 65.

76. Thaʿālibī, 2: 331.4; quote: *wa-kataba fī yawmi mihrajān maʿa asṭurlāb ahdāhu ilā ʿAḍud al-Dawla*.

77. Ibid., 331.5–7: *ahdā* [my correction; *ʾhdy* ed.] *ilayka banū l-āmāli wa-ḥtafalū * fī Mihrajānin jadīdin anta mublīhi / lākinna ʿabdaka Ibrāhīma ḥīna raʾā * ʿaluwa qadrika ʿan shayʾin yudānīhi / lam yarḍa bi-l-arḍi muhdātan ilayka fa-qad * ahdā* [my correction; *ʾhdy* ed.] *laka l-falaka l-aʿlā bi-mā fīhi*. The conceit of the second and third lines pivots around the consonant phrase *lam yarḍa bi-l-arḍ*.

78. F. C. de Blois et al., *EI*[2], s.v. Zīdj.

79. Thaʿālibī, 2: 331.9–10: *ahdaytu muḥtafilan zījan jadāwiluhu * mithla l-makāyīli yastawfī bihā l-ʿumru / fa-qis bihi l-falaka l-dawwāra wa-jri kamā * yajrī bilā ajalin yukhshā wa-yuntaẓaru*.

80. Ibid., 331. *Handasa* and *nujūm* often go hand in hand; for example, Ibn al-Qifṭī (IQ, 442) calls Muḥammad b. Mūsā b. Shākir "abundantly gifted in geometry (*handasa*) and the stars (*nujūm*)."

ing that “those with hopes” (*dhawī l-āmāl*) give gifts that “delight the eyes” (*yarūqu l-ʿuyūn*) and are then locked up in treasuries (lines 1–3), but his gift is different for it is to be regarded and treasured by the mind:

But I have given learning most refined
delightful to the minds (*yarūqu l-ʿuqūl*) which probe its hidden meanings,
the finest of our gifts, which—if you should accept—
none but your heart’s amphora (*tāmūr*) would store up.[81]

The occasion of Nowruz called for an astrologer to cast the new year’s horoscope and here Ibrāhīm poses as a provider of relevant knowledge.[82] His gift, the treatise, can be stored in his patron’s heart rather than his treasury, and benefits the mind, not just the eyes. The mathematical knowledge that it conveys, moreover, has esoteric components (*bawāṭin*), which are the mind’s true delight; that is, the treatise—given its subject and the context in which al-Thaʿālibī places it—is understood to provide access to mathematical, astronomical, or perhaps even astrological insights.

These three poems portray Ibrāhīm as a courtier who stands out among his peers on account of his access to knowledge of cosmological motion and its effect on earthly affairs, whereby he provides to his patrons the loftiness of the heavens to which Hermes-Idrīs was said to have risen and the foreknowledge that astrology, the noblest of the divinatory arts and “the queen of all knowledge,” could bring to those who applied themselves to it.[83] As crucial and desirable as medicine, astrology was Ibrāhīm’s distinctive selling point, the factor by which he outshone other eloquent secretaries.

His poem to al-Muṭahhar b. ʿAbd Allāh, which refers to each of the wandering stars by name, contributes to our sense of astrology’s importance in Ibrāhīm’s image, while adding a further dimension:

Obtain your fate on your Best Day,
seeking success by the luckiest ascendant;
rise like Saturn’s rising, climbing high
most nobly to the greatest heights;
pour forth as Jupiter pours forth with generosity
when perched in his furthest mansion;[84]
be readier than Mars to pounce upon
whatever haughty king[85] should be your foe;
ascend as the morning Sun ascends
eclipsing black obscurity of night;[86]

81. Ibid., 331.14–15: *wa-lākinnanī ahdaytu ʿilman muhadhdhaban * yarūqu l-ʿuqūla l-bāḥithāti bawāṭinahu / wa-khayru hadāyānā lladhī in qabiltahu * fa-laysa siwā tāmūri qalbika khāzinahu*. The word *tāmūr* can mean a wine vessel or the wine (or blood or saffron) stored in it, but also “vizier” or, as seems intended here, “soul.”

82. For this custom under ʿAḍud al-Dawla, see Saliba, “Role of the Astrologer,” 60.

83. For Hermes’ ascent, see van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, §5.1. For Theophilos of Edessa’s application of the epithet πάσης ἐπιστήμης δέσποινα (“queen of all knowledge”) to astrology, see M. Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 277; A. M. Roberts, “The Crossing Paths of Greek and Persian Knowledge in the 9th-Century Arabic ‘Book of Degrees’,” in *Le vie del sapere in ambito siro-mesopotamico dal III al IX secolo*, ed. C. Noce et al. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2013), 279 and n. 1.

84. “Mansion” (*burj*) is one of the twelve equal sections of the zodiac.

85. *Aṣyad* is a word for “king” from the basic sense “the one who does not turn his head” (*LA*).

86. The Arabic plays with the word *kāsifa*, which has the double meaning “to be eclipsed” or “to eclipse,” so that as the second hemistich begins it sounds as though the sun is overcome by darkness, but by the end the reader knows that on the contrary, the sun’s light has overcome darkness.

imitate the deeds of Venus
  in your pleasing prime of life;
resemble with your flowing pen in hand
  the magisterial writer Mercury;
in aspect vie with the full Moon at dusk[87]
  and best him in resplendence and outdo.
Be safe from fate's setbacks and do not fear
  its adversities of the evening or the morning,
as one whose life-blood is safe against perdition,
  as long as the life-blood of the Calf-star guards him.[88]

With this list of comparisons, Ibrāhīm speaks with authority in the idiom of astrology.[89] He indulges in four synonyms for "to rise" as a star or planet might (*ṭalaʿa*, *ṣaʿida*, *raqiya*, *iʿtalā*), uses the technical term for zodiacal mansion (*burj*), and shows sensitivity to the planets' changing effects when their position relative to the zodiac changes. The planetary attributes as he describes them match the ones that normally appear in astrological treatises in the Greco-Roman tradition, as does the order of the planets.[90] His poem also constructs the planets as a set of exemplary persons whom his addressee would do well to imitate, in consonance with a cosmology that associated an "intellect" (*ʿaql*) with each planet. The last line seems to impute life, or perhaps even a soul, to a star, if that is what Ibrāhīm meant by *muhja*.[91] This would have resonated with contemporary Arabic philosophy,[92] and with the depiction of Sabian beliefs in Muslim sources.

87. Lit. full moon of dusk (i.e., the full moon when it rises, which is always at dusk).

88. Thaʿālibī, 2: 335: *nali l-manā fī yawmika l-ajwadi * mustanjiḥan bi-l-ṭāliʿi l-asʿadi / wa-rqa ka-marqā Zuḥala * ilā l-maʿālī ashrafa l-maṣʿadi / wa-fiḍ ka-fayḍi l-Mushtarī bi-l-nadā * idhā ʿtalā fī burjihi l-abʿadi / wa-zid ʿalā l-Mirrīkhi saṭwan bi-man * ʿādāka min dhī nakhwatin aṣyadi / wa-ṭluʿ kamā taṭluʿu Shamsu l-ḍuḥā * kāsifatan li-l-ḥindisi l-aswadi / wa-khudh mini l-Zuharati afʿālahā * fī ʿayshika l-muqtabali l-arghadi / wa-ḍāhi bi-l-aqlāmi fī jaryihā * ʿUṭārida l-kātiba dhā l-suʾdudi / wa-bāhi bi-l-manẓari Badra l-dujā * wa-fḍulhu* [my correction; *wa-afḍilhu/afḍaluhu* ed.] *fī bahjatihi wa-zdadi / wa-slam ʿalā l-dahri wa-lā takhsha min * makrūhihi l-rāʾiḥi wa-l-mughtadī* [correction M. Cooperson; *wa-l-muʿtadī* ed.] / *dhā muhjatin āminatin li-l-radā* [Damascus ed.; *li-l-lādī* (*sic*) Beirut ed.] * *mā ammanathu muhjatu l-farqadi*. The two bright stars of Ursa Minor β and γ are known as the Two Calves (*al-farqadān*).

89. There are again resonances with Arabic dream books (dream interpretation and astrology were not unrelated divination practices), which identify the planets with members of the administration in ways that correspond fairly well to the qualities Ibrāhīm assigns to them; for example, Mercury is identified as the vizier's or king's secretary. See Mavroudi, *Byzantine Book*, 223–24.

90. See, for instance, the lists of traits in Ptolemy's *Almagest*; or in Abū Maʿshar, *The Abbreviation of the Introduction to Astrology*, ed. and tr. Ch. Burnett et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 61–67; or in *Kitāb al-Daraj* (a.k.a. *Aḥkām al-daraj li-l-mawālīd*) translated by (or for) the Banū Mūsā (ninth century), Princeton, Garrett Islamic 501H (thirteenth century), 4a-7a (see Roberts, "Crossing Paths").

91. A line in al-Mutanabbī's poem at once praising and censuring Sayf al-Dawla (*wā-ḥarra qalbāhu. . .*) also displays concern for the safety and destruction of "life-blood" (*muhja*): *wa-muhjatin muhjatī min hammi ṣāḥibihā * adraktuhā bi-jawādin ẓahruhu ḥaramu*. In his commentary (*Dīwān Abī Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī*, ed. F. Dieterici [Berlin, 1861], 483), al-Wāḥidī explains: "[al-Mutanabbī] is saying: Many a life-blood the aim of whose possessor [i.e., the person whose life-blood it is] is my life-blood, that is, my killing and destruction, his [that is, the life-blood's possessor's] life-blood have I overtaken upon a horse, one which whoever rides it is safe from being reached, such that it is as if his back were a sanctuary because of the safety of its rider." In al-Wāḥidī's understanding, then, al-Mutanabbī refers to enemies whose life-blood he overtook (i.e., whom he killed) even as they sought his. Likewise, *muhja* in the context of Ibrāhīm's poem may refer to one's living spirit, which can be put at risk of violent destruction or be kept safe. In his comment on the same line (*Muʿjiz Aḥmad*, ed. ʿA. M. Diyāb, 4 vols. [Cairo, 1986–1988], 3: 254), Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī seems to take *muhja* more figuratively, glossing it as *nafs* (soul).

92. E.g., al-Fārābī, *Ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*, §14, ed. F. Dieterici, *Alfārābī's Abhandlung der Musterstaat* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1895), 24.

Mercury's line may be of particular significance. Al-Masʿūdī notes that Ḥarrānian Sabians equated Enoch (himself equated with the Quranic Idrīs) with Hermes (*Hirmis*) and that Hermes is another name for the planet Mercury (*ʿUṭārid*).[93] This makes Ibrāhīm's line about Mercury a line about Hermes as well, the Sabian prophet. Mercury has a number of positive attributes, including intelligence, technical aptitude, and love of traveling. But Ibrāhīm chose to focus on a single aspect, calling him a "writer" or "secretary" (*kātib*). This accords with the "good handwriting" that a ninth-century Arabic astrological treatise translated by or for the Banū Mūsā, patrons of Thābit b. Qurra, associates with Mercury.[94] It also happens to be Ibrāhīm's own profession. By wishing that his addressee write as well as Mercury, Ibrāhīm might be understood to be implying that, as a follower of the prophet Hermes (Mercury), Ibrāhīm himself could claim to be well positioned, by virtue of his *dīn*, to be the perfect secretary.

But if Sabianism—Hermes, the stars, and all that came with them—was a central part of Ibrāhīm's image among Muslims, he was not by trade an astrologer. On the occasion of the new year, he wrote a letter to "an astrologer friend," asking for a horoscope.[95] Why did he not cast it himself? The letter shows off his knowledge about astrology and refined understanding of its implications, but he avoids coming across as undertaking the observations and calculations himself. One gets the sense that he had given much thought to what others in his courtly circles might think of astrology and its religious permissibility and little to the mechanics of the process. If Ibrāhīm was accustomed to gifting astrolabes, *zījāt*, and treatises on the relevant calculations, chances are that he did in fact practice astrology to some extent. Even if the letter was never sent and the new year's setting was a mere pretext for this little essay on divination's consistency with God's preordaining (*sābiq qaḍāʾ allāh*) and foreknowledge (*mutaqaddim ʿilmihi*), it is a testament to how Ibrāhīm wanted to be seen.[96] For his self-image, whether he practiced astrology himself may have been beside the point. With the proper training anyone could be an astrologer, but a Sabian could claim to have a special understanding of the stars by virtue of a divinely sanctioned prophetic tradition.[97] This, as it seems, would have been a good part of the Sabian brand.

V. FORCED AND TRUE CONVERSION

I will now consider how the Muslim biographical tradition handled two members of Ibrāhīm's family who did convert to Islam.[98] The first is Ibrāhīm's grandfather, Sinān b. Thābit b. Qurra, a successful physician in the service of successive caliphs, who was coerced to convert to Islam by the caliph al-Qāhir. Versions of this story are preserved by

93. Cited by van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 96.

94. *Lahu jūdatu l-ʿaqli wa-ḥusnu l-bāli wa-sāʾiru l-ṣanāʾiʿi l-daqīqati wa-l-jalīlati wa-jūdatu l-raʾyi wa-ḥusnu l-khaṭṭi wa-l-hayʾati . . . wa-maḥabbatu l-asfār* (*Kitāb al-Daraj*, Princeton, Garrett Islamic 501H, 6[b]). Among Mercury's attributes, Abū Maʿshar lists *wa-l-shiʿr wa-l-kitāba wa-l-dawāwīn* (*Abbreviation of the Introduction to Astrology*, 5.26 = p. 66). Astrological manuscripts portray Mercury as a scribe (as Kevin van Bladel kindly told me).

95. Thaʿālibī, 2: 294: *ṣadīq* [my correction; *ṣdq* ed.] *lahu munajjim*.

96. Ibid., 294–95.

97. Much as elite Christians in Baghdad (such as the Bukhtīshūʿ family) benefited from the stereotype that Christians made good physicians. Part of the rationale behind a perceived link between Christianity and healing is suggested by the anecdote in which (the Sabian) Thābit b. Qurra cured a butcher who was thought dead; when the caliph got wind of it, he confronted Thābit (IAU, 296): *Yā Thābit, mā hādhihi l-masīḥiyyatu llatī balaghatnā ʿanka?* (Thābit, what's this Christ-ing around I hear you've been up to?).

98. My discussion avails itself of, parallels, and builds upon that of van Bladel (*Arabic Hermes*, 104–9). Given the aims of the present essay, I place more emphasis on the various alternative representations of the episodes in question and the significance attached to them by each.

Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995) and Ibn al-Qifṭī (d. 646/1248);[99] Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa (d. 668/1270) and Yāqūt al-Rūmī (d. 626/1229) quote Ibn al-Nadīm essentially verbatim. Ibn al-Nadīm's account of the conversion is brief and unsatisfying:

> Al-Qāhir bi-llāh wished for [Sinān] to become a Muslim (*arādahu ʿalā l-islām*), so he fled (*fa-haraba*) and then became a Muslim; and he was afraid of al-Qāhir, so he proceeded to Khurāsān; and he returned (*wa-ʿāda*) and passed away in Baghdad a Muslim.[100]

This is the full entry under medicine; Ibn al-Nadīm also includes a brief cross-reference under mathematicians (*aṣḥāb al-taʿālīm al-muhandisīn*) that mentions only that "he died a Muslim."[101] Clearly Sinān's conversion was important, but this version of the story is frustratingly vague. What made the caliph decide that he wanted his physician to become a Muslim when he did? Why did Sinān both flee and convert to Islam? Did he really convert after fleeing? Ibn al-Qifṭī clarifies a number of these points:

> [Sinān] was al-Muqtadir's private physician. Then he served al-Qāhir, who would consult him and depend upon what he prescribed, for his soul had faith in him and he trusted in him for treatment. Because of al-Qāhir's abundant satisfaction with him, [the caliph] wished him to become a Muslim (*arādahu ʿalā l-islām*), but [Sinān] repeatedly refused. Then al-Qāhir threatened him, and [Sinān] feared the severity of [the caliph's] might, so he became a Muslim (*fa-aslama*). He remained [in Baghdad] for a while, [but] then he realized that whenever al-Qāhir gave him an order it filled him with fear, so he withdrew to Khurāsān. He returned and passed away in Baghdad a Muslim in the year 331. He had first come to prominence in the days of al-Muqtadir, and his reputation grew to the point that he became chief of the physicians.[102]

From this account it emerges that the very fact of Sinān's closeness to al-Qāhir led the caliph, an impulsive and undiplomatic sovereign to judge from his brief and tumultuous reign,[103] to put pressure on his physician to convert.[104] The initial importuning parallels the appeals that Ibrāhīm faced from his Muslim patrons. Only Sinān's patron had the audacity to belie God's declaration that "there is no compulsion in religion."[105] Indeed, Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) emphasizes "compulsion" (*alṣeh*) and "force" (*qṭirā*) in his one-line account of the

99. In his *Tārīkh al-ḥukamāʾ* as epitomized by al-Zawzanī in 647/1249.

100. IN, 2: 313 (Fl. 302). Ibn al-Nadīm continues with Sinān's death date, 1 Dhū l-Ḥijja 331 (6 August 943). Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa (300–301) begins with: *wa-kāna fī khidmati l-Muqtadir bi-llāh, wa-l-Qāhir, wa-khadama ayḍan bi-ṣināʿati l-ṭibbi l-Rāḍī bi-llāh; wa-qāla Ibn al-Nadīm al-Baghdādī al-kātib fī Kitāb al-Fihrist: inna l-Qāhir bi-llāh arāda Sinān b. Thābit b. Qurra ʿalā l-islām*, then follows Ibn al-Nadīm verbatim from *fa-haraba*. Yāqūt (1405, no. 575) has the same except for *khāfa l-Qāhir* (for *khāfa min al-Qāhir*) and *thumma ʿāda* (for *wa-ʿāda*).

101. IN, 2: 229 (Fl. 272). The full entry reports that he was a Ḥarrānian, refers to his father's entry for his genealogy, notes that he was an excellent physician (*ṭabīban muqaddaman*), then offers the account of the conversion. The entry originally contained a booklist, but in Ayman Fuʾād Sayyid's edition (2: 313) it ends abruptly: *wa-lahu min al-kutub: kitābu* [blank space] (Flügel [302] omits the final *kitāb*). Sayyid appears to indicate that the lacuna is only part of a line.

102. IQ, 190–91.

103. D. Sourdel, *EI*², s.v. al-Ḳāhir bi'llāh.

104. Perhaps al-Qāhir was inspired by the report that al-Manṣūr "had in his retinue the astrologer Nawbakht the Zoroastrian, who converted to Islam upon his instigation" (al-Akhbārī speaking to al-Qāhir *apud* al-Masʿūdī, tr. D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* [London: Routledge, 1998], 30).

105. Q 2:256. For the range of interpretations applied to this verse, see P. Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004), 373–82, esp. 377–79. See also Y. Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), ch. 3 (I owe this reference to an anonymous *JAOS* reviewer).

same event.[106] Al-Qāhir justified his actions by commissioning a fatwa that labeled Sabianism as infidelity (*kufr*). The resulting erosion of trust only worsened once Sinān converted, as we learn from Ibn al-Qifṭī. Coerced conversion was nothing to celebrate.

Was this the beginning of the end for Sabians? I do not believe so. As van Bladel points out, the fatwa was not carried out by subsequent caliphs, and Sinān's descendants continued to be honored at court. The affirmation of Sabian dhimmi status written on behalf of the caliph al-Ṭāʾiʿ (r. 363–381/974–991) by Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm himself, in his capacity as secretary, may be read as a sign that violations of Sabian protection were taking place or even increasing, as van Bladel seems to imply, but it may also be understood as part of the general phenomenon that protections and privileges of all communities (not only small minority groups like the Sabians) needed to be repeatedly affirmed in order to last. Through influential representatives like Ibrāhīm, the Sabians were still in a strong position to obtain this affirmation.

The conversion to Islam of Ibrāhīm's grandson Hilāl b. al-Muḥassin b. Ibrāhīm (d. 448/1056) was apparently voluntary, as we read in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's (d. 463/1071) *Tārīkh Baghdād*.[107] After giving Hilāl's genealogy, al-Khaṭīb adds "the secretary"[108] and names scholars with whom Hilāl studied: Abū ʿAlī al-Fārisī, ʿAlī al-Rummānī, Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. al-Jarrāḥ al-Khazzāz. Al-Khaṭīb continues:

> We have transmitted his words in writing (*katabnā ʿanhu*), for he was extremely truthful (*ṣadūqan*). His grandfather is Abū Isḥāq [Ibrāhīm] al-Ṣābī, author of the letters (*ṣāḥibu l-rasāʾil*). [Hilāl's] father al-Muḥassin was a Sabian, too. As for Abū l-Ḥusayn [Hilāl], he became a Muslim (*aslama*) at last (*bi-akharatin*), heeding the advice of (*wa-samiʿa min*) the scholars concerning his state of infidelity (*ḥāli kufrihi*) because he was seeking cultural refinement (*adab*).[109]

Purporting to quote this passage verbatim, Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282) rearranges it slightly and further emphasizes Hilāl's Sabianism by noting that he was "following the same religion as [Hilāl's] grandfather Ibrāhīm." Some manuscripts of Ibn Khallikān's text narrate that Hilāl converted "at the end of his life" (*fī ākhiri ʿumrihi*) rather than "at last." In an abridgement of this passage, Yāqūt also places Hilāl's conversion "at the end of his life."[110] Al-Khaṭīb indicates that he knew Hilāl personally: "I asked him when he was born and he replied, Shawwāl of 359 [August–September 970]."

Al-Khaṭīb thus emphasizes Hilāl's Sabian past, giving the impression that he spent most of his life in the Sabian religion of his forefathers. His conversion is mentioned as if in

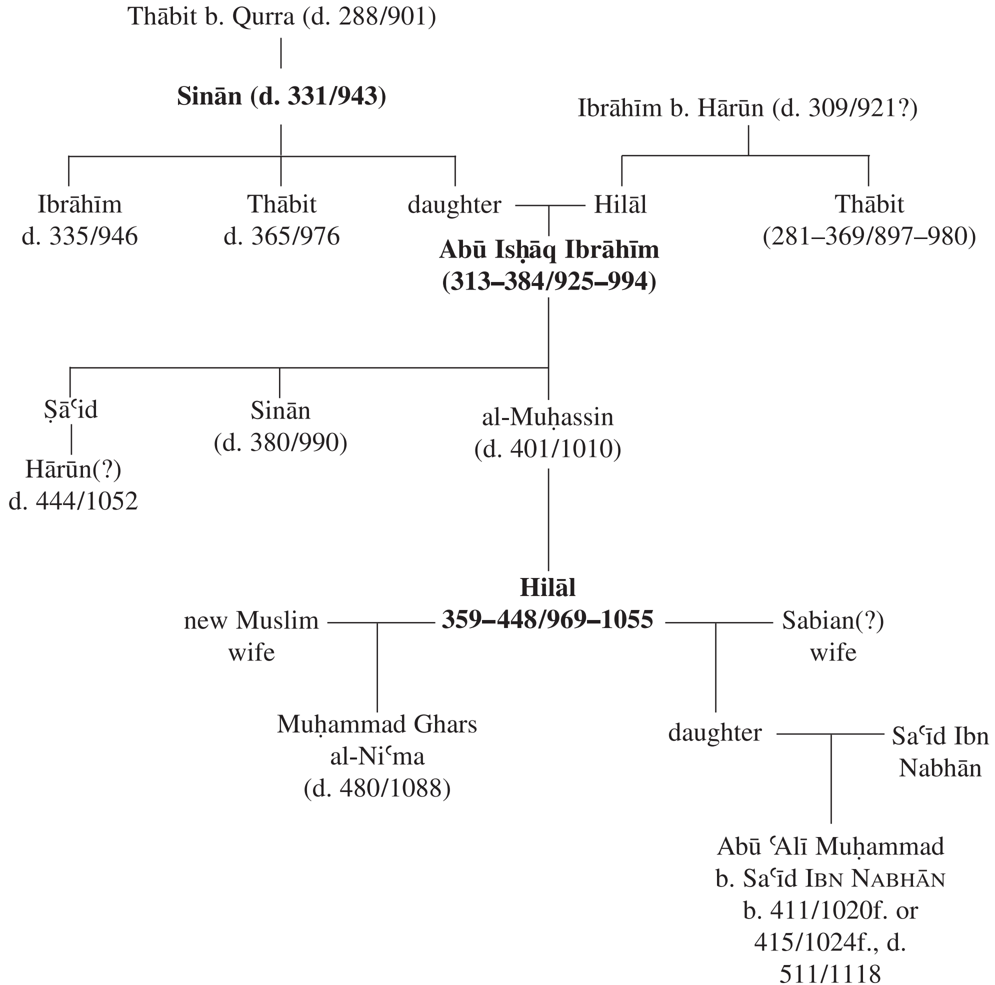
106. Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon syriacum*, ed. P. Bedjan (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1890), 176: *l-hānā Sinān alṣeh kālipāh Qāher, wa-ʿbreh men ḥanpūtā l-tawditā d-ṭayyāye ba-qṭirā*; tr. E. A. W. Budge, *The Chronography of Gregory Abû'l Faraj*. . . (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), 1: 159.

107. KhB, 14: 76, no. 7428. The entry on Hilāl formed the basis for Ibn Khallikān (IKh, 6: 101–5, no. 785) and Yāqūt (2783, no. 1211), who both additionally include long excerpts from a book of amusing anecdotes by Hilāl's son Ghars al-Niʿma.

108. Ibn Khallikān ("the Sabian Ḥarrānian secretary") and Yāqūt ("the Sabian Ḥarrānian") add here that Hilāl was "the grandson of Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl al-Ṣābī" (Ibn Khallikān adding "author of the famous letters"; Yāqūt adds "the famous one"). Yāqūt then writes that "this Hilāl was a learned littérateur and secretary, knowledgeable in Arabic and philology."

109. I take the parataxis *fa-aslama* . . . *wa-samiʿa* to be expressing a similar semantic correlation (whether causality or contemporaneity) as the English hypotaxis by which I translate it.

110. *Wa-kāna ṣābiʾan thumma aslama fī ākhiri ʿumrihi wa-ḥasuna islāmuhu wa-kataba ʿanhu l-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī wa-qāla kāna thiqatan ṣadūqan*. I follow van Bladel's translation of *ḥasuna islāmuhu* as "his conversion was proper" (*Arabic Hermes*, 109 n. 192).



Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābī's family tree.
Based on the genealogical table in F. C. de Blois, *EI*[2], s.v. Sābiʾ.

passing, then partially explained: as he sought to cultivate Arabic literature and refined manners, scholars, presumably including his teachers, had urged him to relinquish his ancestral religion, apparently (though this may be the narrator's choice) calling it *kufr*—which was not covered by protection. The term *kufr* echoes the anti-Sabian fatwa al-Qāhir had commissioned; pronounced by Hilāl's interlocutors, it would have been at least vaguely menacing. Still, these were not caliphs or magistrates but scholars: it seems more likely that repeated appeals from men whom he respected led Hilāl to act, in a sense, of his own volition.

Al-Khaṭīb's account does not address questions of historical causality that may interest the modern reader. Had the Sabian brand by the fifth/eleventh century begun to lose its appeal? Was Hilāl simply a different man than his grandfather had been, less committed to the *dīn* of his forefathers, less tied to his coreligionists, brought up in an environment where

Muslims were the overwhelming majority of the elite?[111] Instead, al-Khaṭīb's interest is in the circumstances of conversion; the conversion itself comes across as almost inevitable. The subsequent biographical tradition would shift the focus away from social and scholarly circumstances to the motives and validity of Hilāl's conversion—both guaranteed by the Prophet himself.

Later sources portray Hilāl's conversion as genuine and entirely voluntary. The Ḥanbalī jurist and historian Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) records a full-length conversion story in which Hilāl is induced to embrace Islam by repeated visions of the Prophet Muḥammad.[112] True to Ḥanbalī style, the account, over two pages in the printed edition, is presented as Hilāl's first-person account narrated to his grandson, "the secretary" Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad b. Saʿīd Ibn Nabhān (d. 511/1118), who transmitted it orally to Muḥammad b. Nāṣir (Abū l-Faḍl, d. 550/1155), who in turn transmitted it to Ibn al-Jawzī himself.[113]

In this story, Hilāl recounts that in the winter of 399/1008f. (when he was about thirty-eight years old), the Prophet came to him in a dream; he instructed him to perform ablutions, led him in Muslim prayer, and said, "You're a smart man of attainment, and God wishes the best for you. Why do you leave Islam to one side, which has been furnished with signs and proofs, and remain instead in your [religion]? Come, take my hand." Hilāl continues: "So I gave him my hand, and he said: Say: I have submitted (*aslamtu*) my face to God, and I bear witness that God is the One, the *Ṣamad*, who has no consort or son,[114] and that you, Muḥammad, are his Messenger to his slaves (*ʿibād*), bringing arguments and guidance. So I said it." Hilāl awakens with a shout, bringing his family to see what was the matter. Hilāl recounts the dream, stunning his family, except his father, who acknowledges the validity of the dream but counsels against "suddenly moving from one religious law (*sharīʿa*) to another," advising him to take time to prepare. Then, "some time later," Hilāl has a second vision, this time by the Tigris. The Prophet chastises him for not following through with his commitment, but Hilāl objects that he believes what the Prophet told him to believe and has been performing the Muslim prayers as instructed. The Prophet replies, "I think some doubt has remained in you," and brings him to a mosque nearby where he cures a Khurasānī's swollen belly, hands, and feet, confirming Hilāl's faith. Then, in 403/1012f. (after his father's death),[115] the Prophet appears to him again at night, urging him to make his new faith public. Hilāl wakes up, performs the Muslim prayer in public, narrates his dream to the vizier Fakhr al-Mulk (who came when he heard about the Sabian secretary's changed public behavior), and gracefully turns down a monetary reward for his conversion. Hilāl ends his narrative with a dream "recounted to me" by "a woman I married after I became a Muslim," in which the Prophet, his Companions, and ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib assure her that Hilāl is high in their and God's esteem (higher than she) and that their wedding is valid; she concludes, "And then I woke up, with all my doubt and uncertainty gone."

111. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam*, 80–91; Morony, "Age of Conversions," in *Conversion and Continuity*, ed. Gervers and Bikhazi, 136–40. Stark and Finke (*Acts of Faith*, 118–24) might hypothesize that Hilāl's investment in Muslim "religious capital" and Muslim "social capital" (scholarly and professional ties) began to outweigh the social capital he gained from ties to the Sabian community.

112. Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī tārīkh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, vols. 5–10 (Haydarabad: Maṭbaʿat Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1357–59*h*), 8: 177–79; cited and discussed by van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 108–9 and n. 192.

113. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, 8: 177. For the transmitters, see Dhahabī, 19: 255–57 (Abū ʿAlī Ibn Nabhān) and 20: 265–71 (Abū l-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Nāṣir). Ibn al-Jawzī (10: 162–63) contributed to the reputation of his teacher Muḥammad b. Nāṣir as a highly reliable transmitter: cf. Dhahabī, 20: 267.

114. Cf. Q 112, referenced in nn. 44 and 45 above.

115. As van Bladel notes (*Arabic Hermes*, 108).

Whereas Hilāl's contemporary al-Khaṭīb explained Hilāl's conversion as the result of gradually coming to heed Muslim scholars over a lifetime, Ibn al-Jawzī, writing around a century later, describes direct and repeated contact with the Prophet himself. Hilāl becomes not only a Muslim but a truly excellent Muslim of unassailable good faith. Even his father, who died a Sabian, admits that Hilāl has received a true vision. The narrative is clearly meant to address the suspicion that Hilāl's conversion was not genuine but only calculated to bring him gain.

Was this whole story an invention, perhaps a concoction of his grandson Ibn Nabhān, intended to remove all doubt about the validity of Hilāl's conversion and his descendants' legitimacy as high-ranking Muslims? Dream visions are certainly a stock motif of Arabic biographical literature, often as a device whereby authoritative knowledge can be passed from beyond the grave.[116] Perhaps it was a later elaboration based on a core story that Hilāl told, a somewhat more modest account of why he became a Muslim. Or perhaps it was what it purported to be—Hilāl's own tale, told to his grandson, passed on to an important scholar of Baghdad, and recorded by that scholar's student Ibn al-Jawzī. However that may be, it was received as a standard account of his conversion. In his entry on Hilāl's son Ghars al-Niʿma, al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) also turns his attention to the latter's ancestors:

> [Ghars al-Niʿma was] from a house famous for its power (*riʾāsa*), learning (*faḍl*), preeminence (*taqaddum*), prestige (*wajāha*), writing (*kitāba*), and eloquence (*balāgha*); his grandfather al-Muḥassin was learned (*fāḍil*) and wrote in a fine calligraphy, while *his* father Ibrāhīm is the one endowed with renowned learning (*ṣāḥib al-faḍl al-mashhūr*) and preeminence in verse (*naẓm*) and prose. He adhered to the religion of the Sabians (*wa-kāna ʿalā dīni l-ṣābiʾa*). As for [Ghars al-Niʿma's] father . . . Hilāl, he converted to Islam (*aslama*) because of a dream vision (*ruʾyā*) in which he saw the Prophet, God's blessing and peace upon him. His conversion to Islam was proper (*ḥasuna islāmuhu*).[117]

As in the long version, so in this brief reference to the story, conversion by dream vision accorded well with the narrative elite Muslims (including Hilāl after his conversion) might have wished to tell about the gradual process of conversion to Islam—that this famous Sabian family remained Sabian until one of them was given irrefutable evidence of the truth, whereupon he became a Muslim, by an emphatically proper conversion.[118] Where Sinān had converted out of compulsion and Ibrāhīm had resisted what powerful Muslims urged him to do, Hilāl freely heeded the call to Islam.

If Hilāl converted in 403*h* (as Ibn al-Jawzī would have it), he would have been over forty-one years old, perhaps explaining al-Khaṭīb's expression "at last." Ghars al-Niʿma was born only in 416/1025f.,[119] when Hilāl was over fifty-four years old. There is, then, a gap in the narrative as transmitted: did Hilāl have no other children or wife before his conversion? If he did, did they convert, too? The narratives gloss over such questions although an anxiety about a previous wife or wives might explain Hilāl's phrase "a woman I married after my conversion," and perhaps also that woman's "doubt and uncertainty."

116. For example, Ibn al-Jawzī (*Muntaẓam*, 10: 163.15–17) reports Ibn al-Ḥuṣrī's account that when Muḥammad b. Nāṣir died, Ibn al-Ḥuṣrī saw Ibn Nāṣir in a dream, asked how God had treated him, and learned that God had forgiven Ibn Nāṣir.

117. Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-Wāfī bi-l-wafayāt*, ed. H. Ritter et al., 30 vols. (repr., Beirut: al-Maʿhad al-Almānī li-l-Abḥāth al-Sharqiyya, 2008–10), 5: 168, no. 2200.

118. There is no particular reason to doubt that such dream visions were narrated in earnest, much as when the caliph al-Mutawakkil dreamt that Jesus asked him to forgive Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq his crime of spitting on an icon; see Cooperson, "Two Abbasid Trials," 381.

119. Ṣafadī, *Wāfī*, 5: 168.14–15.

Biographical information about Ibn Nabhān, one of the transmitters of Ibn al-Jawzī's conversion story, sheds some light on the matter. Hilāl was Ibn Nabhān's "maternal grandfather."[120] Since Ibn Nabhān was born about eight years after Hilāl's conversion,[121] his mother (Hilāl's daughter) had to have been born before it.[122] If she was raised a Sabian and did not convert (but married a Muslim), that might go some way toward explaining why Ibn Nabhān would be eager to transmit an apologetic report stressing the authenticity of his maternal grandfather's conversion.[123] As if the conversion story did not contain enough proof of divine impetus, Ibn Nabhān, as Ibn al-Jawzī reports, appended to the narrative his own comment that the Prophet had predicted that Hilāl's child by his new Muslim wife would be a boy, whom he was to name Muḥammad.[124] This Muḥammad would earn the *laqab* Ghars al-Niʿma, but his forefathers' legacy was still with him, for he was "known as Ibn al-Ṣābī."[125]

VI. CONCLUSION

We may know little about the Sabian religion of Ḥarrān, but we can at least study the six generations of Sabians who gained prominence in ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-century Baghdad. The example of one Sabian secretary of Buyid Baghdad and his poetry as anthologized by a scholar of Nīshāpūr would suggest that it was not a foregone conclusion that this family of Sabians would eventually convert to Islam. Theirs was a robust tradition that consolidated itself around a repackaging of its cultural heritage as a religion (*dīn*) in the Muslim sense: with a book and a prophet.[126] But with its links to Abraham's Ḥarrān and the prophet of wisdom to whom God had revealed the whole cosmos, the Sabian *dīn* had a distinct advantage in a cosmopolitan milieu where astrology and other foreign sciences were fashionable and their anticipated payoff immense. In such a context, the Sabian courtier might well be the envy of his Muslim counterpart, not the other way around. This dynamic means that cultural assimilation was not necessarily one step away from conversion. In 994, when an ʿAlid poet spoke at Ibrāhīm's funeral, there was little reason to believe that Baghdad would ever be devoid of Sabians.

This is not to claim that all non-Muslims reacted this way to Islam. The family of Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (d. 188/803f.), for example, as studied by Michael Cooperson, is quite a different

120. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, 8: 179; Dhahabī, 19: 256: *jaddihi li-ummihi*.

121. Al-Dhahabī's entry on Ibn Nabhān preserves the report (19: 256) that Ibn Nabhān gave conflicting testimony concerning his birth date, first stating that it was in 415 but when pressed by Ibn Nāṣir (the report's transmitter), admitting that the real date was 411—he had named the later date to avoid attracting the evil eye (presumably because his longevity would arouse envy). Ibn Nāṣir (*apud* Dhahabī, 19: 257) inclines toward 415.

122. This is likely even true had Ibn Nabhān been born in 415, for Hilāl's daughter would have been no older than twelve if she was born at or after Hilāl's conversion.

123. Although Ibn Nabhān's father's name is ambiguous as to religion (Saʿīd b. Ibrāhīm b. Saʿīd: Dhahabī, 19: 255), Nabhān was an old Arab tribe, which lends weight to the possibility that his ancestors were Muslims (or that Ibn Nabhān's family wished to give that impression).

124. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Muntaẓam*, 8: 179. For "the popularity of the five distinctively Muslim names" in this period, at least in Iran, see Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam*, 67–69.

125. Ṣafadī, *Wāfī*, 5: 168.9.

126. In this sense, elite Sabians were like elite Christians of Baghdad, who, even as they came to resemble Muslim gentlemen (and vice versa), considered it important and advantageous to remain within their own religious communities. See Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa and Ibn al-Qifṭī on Ḥunayn, the Bukhtīshūʿ family, and others; Cooperson, "Two Abbasid Trials," esp. p. 381. On Syriac-speaking Christians' substantive commitment to their own cultural, religious, and intellectual traditions, see J. Tannous, "Syria between Byzantium and Islam: Making Incommensurables Speak" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Univ., 2010). For the possibly parallel case of elite Jewish culture, see R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), index s.vv. "Kalam," "Muslim culture, exposure to."

case. The son of a *dihqān* of Fārs who had moved to Kūfa, this Persian Ibrāhīm was given by his family into the care of a Muslim family and raised as a Muslim. He thus slipped quietly into Islam's ranks, apparently with no conversion ever taking place.[127] Thābit b. Qurra's family followed a model of assimilation and cultural continuity related to but distinct from that of Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī. Like the latter's family, Thābit and his descendants brought with them a proud cultural tradition, but they remained non-Muslims much longer, and even once converted maintained a more explicit identification with that tradition (al-Ṣābī, Ibn al-Ṣābī).

It should be stressed that Muslims were complicit in the continuity and longevity of this religious and cultural tradition. It was only possible and advantageous to remain a Sabian openly because elite Muslim society had a place for the adherents of book-religions. This, in turn, had its own logic: to accept Hermes as a prophet meant welcoming him and his followers into the ranks of the righteous and taking an expansive view of Islamic universalism. Once Sabianism was accepted as a religion of the book, Sabians were to be judged according to the extent to which they measured up to their own laws, whatever those might be. If they chose to avoid the forbidden fava bean, this was not only to be tolerated, in the view of some powerful Muslims, but praised as well. It was understood by Muslims at court, often Muʿtazilīs like Ibrāhīm's friend and patron Ibn ʿAbbād al-Ṣāḥib, that Islam drew strength from the presence of cultivated members of the protected religions as proof of its catholic scope embracing all truth everywhere. To keep the company of Christians, Jews, and Sabians was to know the heirs of Quranic prophets.[128]

This symbiosis suggests that conversion to Islam could have serious repercussions for an individual's standing, not only in one's own community but also in the view of Muslims. According to the admittedly partial twelfth-century patriarch Michael the Syrian (d. 1199), it could lead not only to God's anger but also to a fall in the caliph's esteem. In Michael's telling, Ignatios bar Qiqi, an eleventh-century bishop of Tikrīt, took a consort, which scandalized the people of Tikrīt. The deacons gathered to persuade him to desist from his scandalous behavior, but the bishop was angered and struck one of them, whereupon they drove him from the city. He fled to Baghdad hoping to find a relative who was the caliph's secretary, but the man had died. Learning that residents of Tikrīt (*bnay Tagrit*) had followed him to the Abbasid capital, he feared for his life and so took refuge with "the caliph, king of the Arabs (*Ṭayyāyē*)." Hoping to protect himself and make it easier to take vengeance upon the people of Tikrīt, Bar Qiqi converted to Islam, whereupon the caliph ceased to honor him. For as the caliph explained, in honoring Bar Qiqi previously he had been honoring his whole community; now that Bar Qiqi was a Muslim, he represented only himself, and why did Bar Qiqi deserve to be honored more than any of the caliph's Muslim courtiers? And with that, the former bishop was expelled from the caliph's presence.[129]

This is the converse of the vizier's pleasure at Ibrāhīm's refusal to eat fava beans: just as Bar Qiqi ceased to stand for his community, Ibrāhīm's refusal brought a whole community of God's protected peoples to the high table. In al-Thaʿālibī's account, Ibrāhīm would not have faced ignominy had he converted; on the contrary, he would have been made Bakhtiyār's vizier. Yet the comparison to Michael the Syrian's polemical account is still apt, for it points to what Ibrāhīm would have lost had he converted—and why his grandson Hilāl needed to proceed with such caution when he did convert.

127. Cooperson, "'Arabs' and 'Iranians,'" 368–73.

128. The phrase "heirs of the prophets" is from M. Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Maʾmūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).

129. Michael the Syrian, *Chronique*, ed. and tr. J. B. Chabot, 4 vols. in 7 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899–1910), 3: 134 (= 4: 558), see also 3: 137 (= 4: 560).

In the fifth century a Zoroastrian asked a Christian convert from Zoroastrianism what the convert stood to gain by rejecting "our *dēn* (piety)."[130] Here a related question has been considered: what did a Sabian stand to gain by declining the *dīn* of his patrons? He certainly earned himself favor and celebrity in his own religious community; Ibrāhīm's intercession at court for the Sabians of Ḥarrān and its environs can hardly have gone unnoticed in Ḥarrān.[131] I have argued that it also brought him a special status at court, as a representative of his community and the access to divine truth that lay in its tradition of esteeming the stars.

ABBREVIATIONS

Dhahabī	Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī. *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, gen. ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ, 2nd ed. Beirut, 1982–1988.
*EI*²	*The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill, 1960–2004.
IAU	Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa. *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ*, ed. N. Riḍā. Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, (1965).
IKh	Ibn Khallikān. *Wafāyāt al-aʿyān wa-anbāʾ abnāʾ al-zamān*, ed. I. ʿAbbās. Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1968–72.
IN	Ibn al-Nadīm. *Fihrist*, ed. A. F. Sayyid, 2 vols. in 4. London: al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2009. Page numbers of Fl(ügel's) edition are also given.
IQ	Ibn al-Qifṭī. *Tārīkh al-ḥukamāʾ*, ed. J. Lippert. Leipzig, 1903.
KhB	Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī. *Tārīkh Baghdād*, 14 vols. Cairo, 1931; repr. Beirut, 1968.
LA	Ibn Manẓūr. *Lisān al-ʿarab*. www.baheth.info.
Thaʿālibī	Al-Thaʿālibī. *Yatīmat al-dahr fī maḥāsin ahl al-ʿaṣr*, ed. M. M. Qumayḥa, 6 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2000. On occasion I refer to the "Damascus ed.": Damascus: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Ḥifniyya, [1885].
Yāqūt	Yāqūt al-Rūmī. *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ: Irshād al-arīb ilā maʿrifat al-adīb*, ed. I. ʿAbbās, 7 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993. Continuous pagination.

130. Discussed by Becker, "Martyrdom" (n. 2 above), 321–23, quote (including the gloss "piety") at 322 (*dēn* is discussed on p. 325).

131. Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 106.