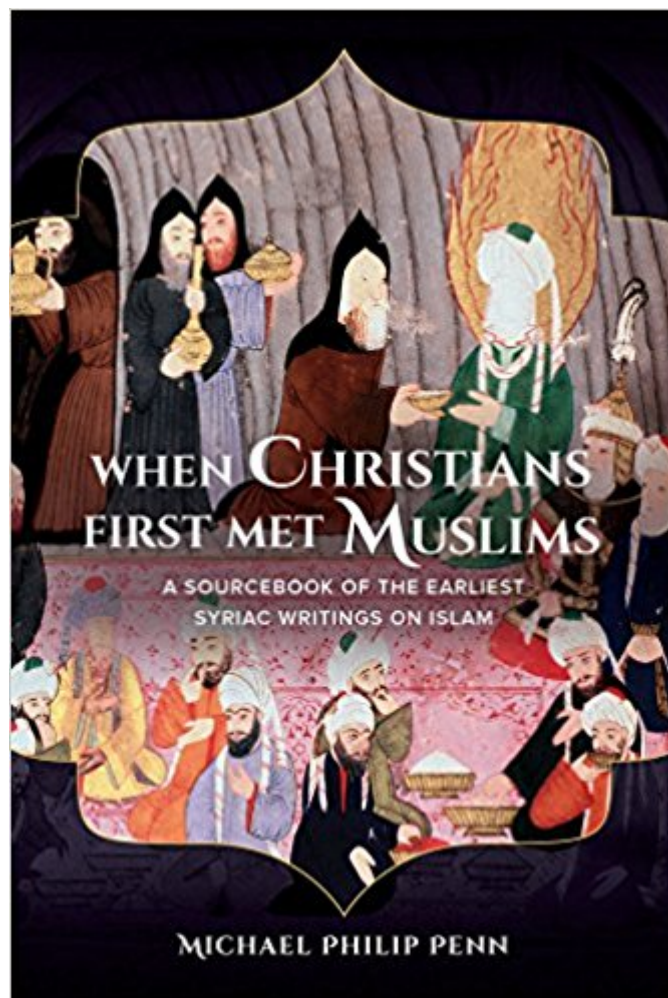


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# When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook Of The Earliest Syriac Writings On Islam



## Synopsis

The first Christians to meet Muslims were not Latin-speaking Christians from the western Mediterranean or Greek-speaking Christians from Constantinople but rather Christians from northern Mesopotamia who spoke the Aramaic dialect of Syriac. Living under Muslim rule from the seventh century to the present, Syriac Christians wrote the first and most extensive accounts of Islam, describing a complicated set of religious and cultural exchanges not reducible to the solely antagonistic. Through its critical introductions and new translations of this invaluable historical material, *When Christians First Met Muslims* allows scholars, students, and the general public to explore the earliest interactions between what eventually became the world's two largest religions, shedding new light on Islamic history and Christian-Muslim relations.

## Book Information

Paperback: 280 pages

Publisher: University of California Press (March 21, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520284941

ISBN-13: 978-0520284944

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #515,619 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #64 in [Books > History > Middle East > Syria](#) #3148 in [Books > History > Ancient Civilizations](#) #3330 in [Books > History > World > Religious > Christianity](#)

## Customer Reviews

"Michael Philip Penn's *When Christians First Met Muslims* is an extremely important text. The sources Penn collated in Syriac are among some of the earliest reports we have about the emerging community there. Scholars of the latest of 'late antiquity,' of early Byzantium, and of the early community of believers around Muhammad will benefit from having these sources in English. Penn's scholarship is truly superior." —Ellen Muehlberger, author of *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*; Syriac sources preserve our earliest historical information for Christian-Muslim encounters, written by Christian contemporaries who experienced firsthand the massive changes brought by the Arab conquests of the seventh century and thereafter in the Middle East. This volume offers a new collection of vivid and lucid translations that open to the reader new

vistas on how religions interact, adapt, and flourish, even under circumstances of inexorable change. Michael Penn is a religion scholar of rare dexterity in handling primary sources, secondary scholarship, and cutting-edge critical theory, all with equal command. Here is a volume for scholars and students of religion, history, and culture. It will matter enormously for all who share an interest in Christianity or Islam. —Susan Harvey, Willard Prescott and Annie McClelland Smith Professor of Religious Studies at Brown University "As a source for the early Islamic period and for the earliest responses of Christians to the new historical conditions of the post-conquest period this collection is a useful tool for both scholarly research and classroom teaching. Even those few of us who work on Syriac sources do not commonly have an immediate grasp of the range of texts covered in *When Christians First Met Muslims*. This handy book will contribute to a further appreciation for the unique variety of perspectives Syriac Christians had on early Islam." —Adam H. Becker, Associate Professor of Classics and Religious Studies at New York University

Michael Philip Penn is William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Religion at Mount Holyoke College and the author of *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians in the Early Muslim World* and *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church*.

I bought this book yesterday and read it in one day. Right now I plan to buy copies for several people I believe would benefit from the information contained in this volume. This book provides a translation and a contextualized summary of each of the written references to early Islam by Syriac Christians, in chronological order. This book is suitable for specialists and non-specialists alike, but those familiar with 7th century Middle Eastern History will derive the most benefit from this work. Much of the scholarship on Muslim-Christian interaction is based on Byzantine or Frankish sources and the history of Islam is written using sources written in Arabic. By translating the early Syriac sources, Penn provides an overlooked point of view in early Islamic history and Muslim-Christian interaction, of Christians who lived within the caliphate as Islam developed in the Rashidun and Umayyad caliphates.

This is a gem. A very interesting fact was pointed by the author in the introduction: In the first two centuries of the existence of Christianity, if you added up all the non-Christian references (by Greek or Latin historians and commentators) to Jesus Christ and the religious movement that was forming around his legacy, you would have a few pages. In contrast, if you take all the Syriac writings about

Mohammed and the religious movement that was forming around his legacy from the first two centuries after Mohammed's life and career, you would have hundreds of pages. That is incredible, though not surprising. This collection of translations of comments made by Syriac Christians who were witnesses to the birth of Islam is an absolute gem. If you are interested in the origins of Islam and the history of Christian/Islamic relations, this book is a must-read. Michael Philip Penn had a brilliant idea when he decided to do these translations. His work will benefit everyone who wants to broaden their perspective on the earliest era of Islamic history. What Pliny the Younger, and Flavius Josephus, and Cornelius Tacitus, and Suetonius, and Lucian of Samosata are to the historical study of early Christianity, these Syriac writers are to the historical study of early Islam. What a delight, and a treasure, to have a collection of writings from such an early period of a world-changing movement from a perspective outside that movement! This collection of translations is by no means complete, according to the author. He thinks they are the most important and most informative. But they are a fraction of that "hundreds of pages" of comments on the movement started by Mohammed by Syriac Christians. It amazes me that there is such a wealth of information about Islam from outside Islam, and that it survived. Again, it is staggering when compared to the relatively gaunt (yet massively significant) writings about Christianity by non-Christian Greek and Latin writers. Please, by this book and donate it to your local library. This is a treasure chest of rare perspectives on world-changing events. If you only read ONE historical book in the next ten years, please read this one. Wouldn't you love to read a book by Iroquois authors who were writing about the Pilgrims? Wouldn't you love to read a book by Aztec authors who were writing about the Conquistadors? Wouldn't you love to read a book written by Canaanites in Jericho where they talked about the Hebrews and their God Yahweh? History is not always written by the victors. In this case, it is written by the subjugated and the conquered. That dynamic alone, apart from its relevance to early Christian/Islamic relations, makes this the rarest of the rare historical gems. It is amazing that this collection is just now coming out, at this point in history. How are all these things not already translated and compiled and widely distributed as are all the early non-Christian comments on Christianity? Evidently Islam has not been studied and combed over with as fine a comb as its fellow Abrahamic faith. I really do hope you read this book, whether you are Christian or Muslim or not a person of faith. Whatever your beliefs are, history is history; testimony is testimony. It may be true, it may be false. It may be honest, it may skew the facts. It may be impossible to tell whether or not it is a reliable testimony. But that is beside the point. The testimony must be heard. You decide whether they are villains or victims. You decide whether those who spoke are bigots or brothers. But please do listen to what they have to say. I wish some archeologist would dig up a library

somewhere where there was this much talk (whether it's gossip or gospel) about the origins of Christianity, or of Buddhism, or of Hinduism, or Ba'al worship. If you have any interest in history or religion, this will be your favorite find of the year. Thank you, Professor Penn, for this wonderful contribution to historical literature.

Great book for it is for the first time those who can't read Syriac have one volume that provides them with historical background that has been neglected

More knowledge about the bloody history of Islam approved by historic documents.

This was a good book. I agree with A.J. though, on his review points, however I must also admit I read most of A.J.'s papers available on academia so I may be a bit biased. Overall though it was a good read and great for someone getting started in this subject area.

Beautiful work!

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