Inclusion and Hegemony: Reading Salmān al-Fārisī's Conversion Story

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Abstract: In the otherwise expansive medieval Arabic literature, the scarcity of information concerning the conversion process of the early Islamic community piques interest in the handful of existing conversion narratives. One particular narrative that stands out is the conversion story of Salmān al-Farisi, recounting his transformation from a devout Zoroastrian to a dedicated companion of Prophet Muhammad. In the compilation of stories of Salmān al-Farisi by Louis Massignon named "Khabar Salmān," the persistence of many plot elements across different accounts of the story suggests a deliberate process of repetition and canonization. Recognizing the Salmān al-Farisi story as a site of memory, curation, and elite intentions, this paper considers the purpose of the story in forging Muslim identity, managing intergroup dynamics, and maintaining political power within the early Islamic community.

Introduction

In his "Conversion Stories in Early Islam," Richard Bulliet notes the glaring absence of information about conversion in the otherwise abundant medieval Arabic literature on the Islamic community. Then, he asks, "How can one explain the peculiar types of information that do appear?"[1]

Salmān al-Farisi's story is a rare and especially prominent conversion narrative widely circulated in the early Muslim community. Having grown up as a devout Zoroastrian, Salmān was recorded to be an early companion of Prophet Muhammad and played a prominent role in helping to defend Muslims in the Battle of the Trench.[2] As a result of its rarity, uniqueness, and wide circulation, Salmān's conversion story invites reflections about the placement and functions of conversion in early Islam. For example, how might we interpret the story's account that Salmān had converted to Christianity prior to Islam, but never Judaism? Why was his only encounter with Judaism through the enslavement of a Jewish person? What might this imply about the intergroup dynamics in the Early Islamic community?

To interpret the story's functions, this essay treats the composition of Salmān's conversion story as a result of curation. Louis Massignon compiled several existing accounts of Salmān's life and conversion to Islam, which he named the "Khabar Salmān."[3] He finds that these accounts only differ in slight details and share the general outline: Salmān's origin as a Zoroastrian; his encounter with an apostle, who on his deathbed encourages him to seek a new mentor; the process of seeking new mentorship repeats; and the last of his mentor tells him of the arrival of a

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[1] Richad W. Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam," in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, eds. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 2020), 123.

[2] Montgomery W. Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 168.

[3] Louis Massignon, *Salmān Pāk and the Spiritual Beginnings of Iranian Islam* (Bombay: J.M. Unvala, 1955), 7.

new prophet and ways to identify him. The story also includes Salmān's enslavement by a Jewish person, which ended when Muhammad and his companions helped to purchase his freedom.[4]

This lack of variation in different accounts of Salmān's story suggests some process of repetition and canonization by people across time and space. Thus, repeating elements in the Khabar Salmān must have been seen as important and worthy of recording and circulation, which was often controlled by the bureaucrats and literati elite in early Islamic communities. As Arietta Papaconstantinou argues, any interpretation of late antique sources, such as Salmān's conversion story, must recognize the intentional roles of the governing elite in shaping the story to define their community and religion.[5] Salmān's conversion story is rather unknown in Persian sources compared to its wide circulation in Arabic sources. Thus, the story's wide circulation in Islamic communities suggests that the stories were frequently used and retold by Muslims who found certain value in Salmān's story. As a result, it's unlikely that elements and details that reappear across the Khabar Salmān, such as Salmān's encounter with slavery, were accidental.

Scholars like Savant and Magnusson have suggested looking at highly curated texts related to early Islam as "sites of memory," where people throughout time *choose* to remember certain things and forget other things.[6] The function of forgetting in sites of memory is often done, not by erasure of elements, but by superimposition of new elements. Salmān's conversion story could be read as such a site of remembering, forgetting, and even shaping the evolving Muslim-Zoroastrian relationship during and after conquests. Considering Salmān's story as a "site of memory" calls for interpretations of why these elements were preserved: What functions

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[4] Ibid, 8. Also referred to in Andrew D. Magnusson, *Zoroastrians in Early Islamic History: Accommodation and Memory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 85.

[5] Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Introduction," in *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond, eds.* Arietta Papaconstantinou, Neil McLynn, Daniel Schwartz (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 24-25.

[6] Sarah Bowen Savant, "Muḥammad's Persian Companion, Salmān Al-Fārisī." Chapter. In *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion*, 61-89. (New York, NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015). Also Magnusson, *Zoroastrians*, 78-80.

did the elements serve? How could they be interpreted by different groups of people in conquered Persia, where the text was circulated? What can the story of Salmān tell us?

An understanding of the Salmān's story as both a site of memory and manifestation of elites' intentions gives us a framework to learn about the religious and political identities and communities in early Muslim conquests. Before going into that, we look at what we know about conversions in Islam to better understand the context and spot irregularities in Salmān's conversion story.

Conversions in Early Islam

Studies of conversion have sought to understand temporal and geographical trends of conversion as well as causes for individual or mass conversions.[7] Generally, religious conversion to Islam was usually not coerced, nor was it binded to acceptance of Arab rule for the conquered communities.[8] In fact, mass conversions to Islam in most communities did not occur for a few decades under Arab rule, and many elected to pay the non-Muslim tax instead.[9] Richard W. Bulliet theorized that conversions to Islam after Muslim conquests followed an S-shaped "conversion curve."[10] According to the curve, the rate of conversion immediately after conquests was low and increased slowly; after the converted population reached a critical mass, conversion rate increased dramatically. Bulliet suggests that early converts were often those of lower class that had less to lose in terms of social status and familial connections.[11]

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[7] Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation: Zoroastrian Subalterns and Muslim Elites in Medieval Iranian History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 9-10.
[8] Papaconstantinou, "Introduction," 1-3.
[9] Choksy, *Conflict*, 75.
[10] Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Books on Demand, 2006).
[11] Ibid.

Reasons for conversions in early Islam were various and could depend heavily on the time of one's conversion relative to the conversion curve. Scholars have suggested that conversions to Islam at this time were often more of a social behavior than a shift in religious belief, motivated by potential social and economic benefits of lessened taxation, social mobility, increased social status, and even manumission from bondage.[12] Simultaneously, the disincentives for conversions were also often socially related. Conversions early in the conversion curve usually meant severing ties with one's existing political and religious communities. Choksy also found that early Zoroastrian converts to Islam often found themselves still not as equals with Arabs in the Islamic society and often subjected to discrimination, which further discouraged conversions.[13]

While scholars have inferred that both non-Muslims and Muslims likely understood conversions in this social context at the time, we do not know much about the actual process of conversion: how does one declare their conversion, what was required of one to convert, how were the converted and unconverted differentiated in society, etc.

After reviewing our knowledge of conversion, we move to look at Salmān's story.

Rewriting Memories of Conquests

As seen from earlier, most conversions in early Islam have been motivated by social reasons and rarely were conversions out of "genuine faith" recorded. However, the story of Salmān especially emphasizes the spiritual conviction that drove Salmān's self-directed journey from Zoroastrianism to Islam. I argue that the emphasis on Salmān's motivation could have helped to reinterpret the role of Islam as a religion in Muslim conquests and justify its violence.

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[12] Bulliet, "Conversion Stories," 125-127. Choksy, *Conflict*, 75-80.
[13] Choksy, *Conflict*, 79.

Similar to other accounts in the Khabar Salmān, Ibn Ishaq recorded that Salmān's initial divergence from Zoroastrianism comes when he instinctively "felt drawn to [the Christians'] worship."[14] Salmān jumped through many hurdles in seeking the true Abrahamic religion: fleeing from his father's "detainment," repeatedly looking for new Christian mentors, and toiling through his enslavement. Salmān's willing acceptance and conviction of Islam comes into comparison with Zoroastrians' experience of Islamic conquests and conversions. Of course, conversions were rarely coercive; many people converted for social reasons out of their own volition. However, with their conquests of Persia and the fall of the Sassanian empire, Islam and Arab rule was likely still associated with violence, suffering, and drastic cultural and political changes in the collective memory of the newly conquered people. These experiences and memories likely impacted the ways Muslims and Zoroastrians' understanding of their political relationships and the nature of their community.

Read in this context, Salmān's conversion story could have helped to justify Muslims' conquests to both its Muslim and non-Muslim audiences and superimpose memories of the violence through a narrative that emphasizes the justice and triumph of Muslim conquests. In the story, Salmān *chose* Islam despite having lived in perfect peace as a highly-trained Magian. Salmān's spiritual conviction and natural attraction to Islam also establishes the obviousness of the superior message of Islam. The story likewise hinted at the pagan nature of Salmān's Zoroastrian origins by evoking imagery of "the sacred fire," further emphasizing a dramatic religious progression from Zoroastrianism to Islam. Emphasis on Salmān's spiritual connection can indeed be understood as a message to promote genuine faith rather than social pressures as causes for conversion. However, the tight connections it draws between Islam and divine truth,

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[14] Ibn Isḥāq, "How Salmān Became a Muslim," essay, in *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 95–98, 95.

and between Zoroastrians and religious untruth, more likely was intended to help shape memories about Muslim conquests and Persia's pre-Islamic past. In a study of memory of the former Sasanian capital, Ctesiphon, Sarah Bowen Savant argued that the pre-Islamic past of Ctesiphon and Persia was actively erased from Arabic sources, and that the cause of Ctesiphon's fall was often reduced to the superiority of caliphs over Iran's ancient kings.[15] Salmān's ready motivation to move away from Zoroastrianism thus served a similar purpose of estranging Zoroastrians' pre-Islamic past while justifying Muslim conquests. If Islam was considered clearly superior and liberates those who convert, Muslim conquests could be considered as triumphs of religious truth and as punishment for those who refused to accept Islam. For Arab Muslims and the new converts, Salmān's story did not simply erase the violence in Muslim conquests but superimposed their memories by conversely celebrating and reinterpreting violence as an epic tale of the divinely guided defeating the religiously insubordinate.

Appeals for Conversions

Salmān's literature perhaps also sought to address Arab anxiety of asserting legitimacy and hegemony of their rule to the monotheist communities in Persia. Positioned along the Abrahamic tradition, Islam runs into the theological problem of explaining the decline of Judaism and Christianity and the very practical problems of convincing monotheists to convert. Hence, Salmān's literature can be seen as walking a fine line between explaining the corruption of the monotheists' faith without alienating the monotheists themselves.

In the conversion narrative, Salmān initially was attracted to Christian prayers and was subsequently mentored by a series of Christian monks, who eventually pointed him to Prophet

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[15] Sarah Bowen Savant, 'Forgetting Ctesiphon: Iran's Pre-Islamic Past, c. 800–1100', in *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*, *ed*. Philip Wood (Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Muhammad and Islam. Among the three Christian teachers that Salmān had, his first Christian teacher was described as "a bad man" that embezzled alms for himself.[16] Jaakko Hammen-Anttila pointed to the corruption of this teacher and analyzed that it provides a paradigm for interpreting Christian corruption.[17] Interestingly, however, when Salmān revealed his corruption to other Christians after the death of the corrupt teacher, the Christians agreed in unison to stone and crucify the teacher instead of a proper burial. Here, we see that the lay Christians recognized the corruption of their previous teacher and decided to punish evil, demonstrating their orientation toward what is Good. Salmān's story thus explains Christian corruption through the depletion of faithful and worthy Christian leaders. However, it emphasizes Christians' capacity for and theological proximity to Truth. By distinguishing corrupt Christian leadership and faithful lay Christians, Salmān's story provides both reasons and space for monotheists to convert to Islam.

Salmān's story further helps appealing monotheists to convert by providing a paradigm of rethinking "conversions" as "transitions." Montgomery M. Watt has shown that during Prophet Muhammad's time, "conversion" as we understand it did not yet exist in Islamic thought.[18] Instead, new religious affiliation with Islam was described as *islām* (surrender to God) and *ihtidā* (following guidance). Thus, the relevant question, Watt says, was whether one will respond or fail to respond to God's message. Compared to Watt's investigation of religious change during the life of the Prophet, religious change in Persia after Muslim conquests was of course, at a different time and place. With the clear violent nature of conquests and political hegemony of Arab Muslims, there's little doubt that tensions existed between Muslims and non-Muslims. As

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[16] Isḥāq, "How Salmān became a Muslim," 95-96.
[17] Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila. "The Corruption of Christianity: Salmān Al-Fārisī's Quest as a Paradigmatic Model," *Studia Orientalia Electronica* (2014).
[18] Montgomery W. Watt, "Conversion in Islam at the Time of the Prophet," essay, in *Early Islam: Collected Articles* (Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1990), 34.

mentioned earlier, earlier conversions after Muslim conquests were often indeed understood as "abandonment" of one's community and carried risks of severing social ties. Salmān's story can be seen as an attempt to re-interpret "conversion" as a response to God's message, similar to the paradigm Watt describes as the default during the Prophet's time. This reinterpretation could reduce the social risks of conversion to Islam and make it an imperative for monotheists to convert.

Consider Salmān's progression from Christianity to Islam: After finding wisdom from his Christian teachers, Salmān was told that there are no more worthy Christian teachers. However, the last Christian teacher also possessed knowledge of and pointed Salmān to the rise of Prophet Muhammad who supposedly, would carry the baton of true Abrahamic faith. In the story, Islam is seen as succeeding the declining Christianity in passing on God's message, and Salmān's religious change from Christianity to Islam as continuation, transition rather than conversion. By emphasizing the continuity between the two religions, Salmān's story perhaps aimed to change Christians' conceptions of Islam, not as an alternative or compromise to their truth, but as a continuation of true God's words. If this were the case, conversion to Islam can be considered an imperative for Christians if they were to truly follow God's words, rather than its relic form of Christianity.

Of note, the story is titled "How Salmān became a Muslim," rather than "How Salmān converted to Islam." In other words, Salmān did not simply sign up for something abstract called Islam, he as a person was changed (to a Muslim) in the process of seeking Islam. We also do not know exactly when Salmān became a Muslim. Was it when he began following the Prophet? Was it when he began learning from the Christian teachers? As a result, the title provides the space where Muslim identity is relatively fluid, and that it is generally inclusive of non-Arabs. The title

also emphasizes Salmān's personal transformation over Islam's religious superiority. But what exactly constitutes a personal transformation? Is it genuine faith? If Bulliet is right that most conversions in Early Islam were motivated by social and economic reasons, why would the storyteller want to emphasize personal transformation as an important component of being a Muslim?

It's hard to tell if generations of readers later on find genuine belief to become an important component of the Muslim identity. However, like the story's distinction of Christian teachers and lay Christians, the emphasized terminology of "Muslim" over "Islam" helps to detach individuals from their religious, ethnic, or general community affiliations—despite clear religious hierarchy, it's up to the *individual* to detach themselves and to form a better relationship with God. This title could thus serve two functions for two different audiences: expressing to Arab Muslims and new converts that more personal work must be done beyond affiliation with Islam, and empowering individuals to convert by allowing their capacity to transcend beyond the affiliation and identity they were born with, regardless of how "religiously inferior" that identity might be. Regardless of the function of the title, the terms hint at attempts to think and define the identity of "Muslim" that's ethnically inclusive and demands personal faith.

Treatment of Judaism

One might think that Islam's positioning in the Abrahamic tradition makes Muslims naturally more friendly to both Christians and Jews. However, the two groups of monotheists seem to receive vastly different portrayals in Salmān's conversion story. While one Christian teacher out of the three that Salmān encountered was corrupt, the other two Christian monks were described as virtuous and in clear possession of truth (especially the last monk's knowledge of the arrival of a prophet). Christian prayers also were portrayed to have an innate beauty that

attracted Salmān initially. However, in Salmān's truth-seeking journey from Zoroastrianism

through Christianity to Islam, Judaism seemed to have been oddly cast out of Salmān's

progression. In fact, Salmān's only encounter with Jews was when he was betrayed by his

Kalbite companions and sold to and enslaved by a harsh Jewish owner.

It might be tempting to conclude from the position of Jewish actors in Salmān's story

that, for whatever reasons, the early Islamic community was hostile to Judaism. Considering the

historical context, how unfavorable of a portrayal of Jews did the Salmān's story really give its

audience? Slavery in its form at the time was likely not considered a moral failure by both its

Muslim and non-Muslim audience. Furthermore, the Jewish owner was not at fault for the

Kalbites' betrayal of Salmān and his unfortunate fate in enslavement. However, the text still

clearly described the Jewish owner in a negative light — it included details of the ill treatment of

Salmān by his Jewish owner and, as Hämeen-Anttila noted, the Jew's exaggeration of the three

hundred palm-trees and forty ounces of gold needed to purchase Salmān's freedom.[19] While

slavery was likely not directly viewed adversely, the Jewish enslaver's obvious mistreatment of

Salmān and greed in exaggerating the worth of Salmān's freedom show intentional efforts in

painting Jews poorly. What could this mean?

A likely explanation is that the story's targeted audience was largely Zoroastrians, and

Jews' lower status in Salmān's story was exploited to appeal to local Zoroastrians who held more

social and political power. Under Sassanian rule in the early Islamic period, Jewish communities

held a subalternized status. Subjugated to Sassanid rulers, Jewish communities were largely

suppressed while several Jewish religious figures were executed.[20] Because of this, Jews in

Persia likely welcomed Arab rule in the area. If this was the case, Muslims did not need to spend

[19] Hämeen-Anttila," The Corruption of Christianity," 120.
[20] Michael G. Morony, "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17, no. 2 (1974): 113, https://doi.org/10.2307/3596328.

as much effort trying to convert the already-subalternized Jews as converting the Zoroastrians who still wielded much power. The lowered status of Judaism is also contrasted with Zoroastrianism's placement as Salmān's religious background. His Zoroastrian origins, despite being portrayed with its pagan nature, could show that Zoroastrians do have a place in the Islamic society and religion, which seem less clear for the Jews according to this narrative. Possibly a political move by the Muslim rulers, this contrast between Jewish subaltern status and Salmān's elevated portrayal as a Zoroastrian could convey to the Zoroastrian elite their hierarchical positions over Jews within the Islamic community. This could reassure them their power and legitimacy in their local communities, whether they convert to Islam or remain Zoroastrians. In fact, Jamsheed K. Choksy explains that the Muslim bureaucrats ensured relative harmony by granting magi authority over other Zoroastrians after the conquests.[21] In their poor treatment of Judaism, Muslim elite might not have meant explicit hostility to Judaism. Instead, it might have been a political chess move to stabilize the expanding empire by keeping the subaltern marginalized and allowing the powerful to hold onto much of their power.

Conclusion

     Salmān's story reflects the elite's careful management and political balance of the conquered territories. While Muslim identity seemed highly inclusive, non-Muslim religious communities were clearly demarcated and retained a hierarchical relationship. Salmān's conversion story perhaps gives us little accurate information about the actual process of conversion. However, the story served to define Islamic identity and community to both Muslims and non-Muslims and hint at the elite's political maneuvers to justify and maintain Islam's hegemony. Moreover, by employing religious language to define and justify political dynamics,

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[21] Choksy, *Conflict*, 30-35.

Salmān's story shows us the rhetorical power of the elite to operate between political and religious definitions of Islam and Muslim identity.

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