

**ŞĀBĪ MATTER**  
**–The Issue of Whether the Concept Şābī in the Qurʾān Signifies**  
**Şābīʾī/Şābīʾa–**

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**Abstract**

In this article, we examine whether there is a contextual similarity between the expression “şābī”, a concept in the Qurʾān, and “Şābīʾī”, which is used as the name for a member of a particular religious group. Even though “şābī”, which we find three times in the Qurʾān, is used as an adjective concerning religious conversion, it has been alleged that the word “şābīʾa” is the name of a religious group used first for the Mandaeans and later for a Ḥarrānian pagan society and that the word in the Qurʾān refers to this religion. Our study finds that there is neither a similarity nor an association between the “şābī” in the Qurʾān and the religious group “Şābīʾa (Sabians)” and that an artificial naming has emerged within history. Because the concept “şābī” was Arabic, and it was originally used for people who left the prevalent belief. Nonetheless, the expression “Şābīʾī” was used after the arrival of Islam on the assumption that it was the name given to the religion of the Mandaeans and the Ḥarrānians.

*Key Words:* Qurʾān, şābī, convert, Şābīʾī, Mandaeans, Ḥarrānians, polytheists, Magians, Jews, Christians.

## Introduction

The word *şābī*<sup>1</sup> in the Qurʾān is based on the root *ş-b-ʿ* (simple present tense: *yaş-ba-ʿu*, infinitive: *şubūʿ*), whose verb form means “the rising of the sun” or “the baby’s cutting teeth” but is more commonly used to mean “leaving the religion to convert to another religion”. Accordingly, because the Prophet had left their religion, the polytheists (*musbriks*) called him *şābī* and called the other people who converted to Islam *maşbuuw*. It is noted that Arabs expressed their acceptance of Islam as “*şabaʿnā*”. In fact, the famous linguist al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923) argued that the word “*şābīʿin/şābīʿūn*” in the Qurʾān means *the ones who have left a religion to convert to another*; whereas al-Farrāʿ (d. 207/822) interpreted the same expression as *the ones who form a new religion*.<sup>2</sup>

There are many reports of ḥadīth that show that the word “*şābī*” was commonly used by Arabs in this way. Such narrations show that the Prophet was called *şābī* both inside and outside Mecca, and this expression became a kind of fame for him. Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (d. 32/653), who heard about the Prophet and came to Mecca to study him, asked the Meccans “to show him the person they called *şābī*”.<sup>3</sup> When ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph of Islam (d. 23/644), converted to Islam, the Meccans said, “ʿUmar has also become a

<sup>1</sup> The expression *şābī* is the adjective derived from the Arabic verb *şa-ba-ʿa*. It has a *hamza* at the end. In order to translate this *hamza* in the Latin alphabet, there is a need to add an apostrophe to the end, to make it *şābīʿ*. However, in Arabic, the *hamza* can be occasionally transformed into *y* or *ī*; thus, it is possible to read and to write it as *şābī*. Accordingly, the word *qārī*, which is the adjective derived from the verb *qa-ra-ʿa*, is read and written in the same way. Throughout this text, we will follow this method and use *şābī*. However, we will preserve the word *şābīʿī* that is used with an *ī* (possessive suffix) for the name of the tribe or religion.

<sup>2</sup> Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Nisābūrī al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa l-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, (ed. Sayyid Kasrawī Ḥasan; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2004), I, 128; Abū l-Qāsim al-Rāghib Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad b. Mufaḍḍal al-Işbahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qurʾān*, (Istanbul: Kahraman Yayınları, 1986), 405; Abū l-Faḍl Ibn Manẓūr b. Mukarram Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Anşārī al-Mişrī, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, (Beirut: Dār Şādir, 1990), I, 108; Mutarjim Aḥmad ʿAşim Efendī, *al-Uqyānūs al-basīṭ fī tarjamat al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, (Istanbul: n.p., 1268), I, 35; Ayyūb b. Mūsā al-Ḥusaynī Abū l-Baqāʿ al-Kafawī, *al-Kulliyāt*, (ed. ʿA. Darwish and M. al-Mişrī; Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 1992), 432.

<sup>3</sup> Muslim, “Faḍāʿil al-şahāba”, 132.

şābī”.<sup>4</sup> ‘Uqba b. Abī Rabī‘a, who had converted to Islam upon the call from Muḥammad, was pressured by Ubayy b. Khalaf by the phrase, “Did you too become a şābī?”, and ‘Uqba had to give up Islam.<sup>5</sup> During a campaign, a country woman who was asked for water to give to the Prophet asked, “Is the person you call the Prophet he whom they call şābī?”. The şahāba affirmed this, saying, “Yes, he is the one you mean”.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Khālid b. al-Walīd (d. 21/642) was sent by the Prophet to invite the Banū Jazīma tribe to Islam. Because the tribe could not appropriately pronounce the word *aslamnā* (We have become Muslims), they twice said *şaba’nā* (We became şābī), whereupon Khālid killed some of the tribe, captured some others, and ordered the şahāba near him to kill the captives, but the companions did not obey this command. When this event was told to the Prophet, he raised his hands and prayed twice, saying, “O Allah, I seek refuge in you for what Khālid has done”.<sup>7</sup> The meaning of şābī probably seemed strange to al-Imām al-Bukhārī as well; so when he first encountered the word, he felt the need for an explanation, and he revealed that şābī means, “One who has left a religion and converted to another”.<sup>8</sup>

According to al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922), one of the early exegetes of the Qur’ān, the expression “şābī’in” in the Qur’ān is the plural form of “şābī”, which is “ism al-fā‘il” (in Arabic grammar, a name derived from a verb) of the verb *şa-ba-‘a*. Like the concept *murtadd* (apostate), it means *the conversion of a person to a religion after leaving his own*. As proof, al-Ṭabarī points out that the Arabians call a person who has left a religion and converted to another “şābī”. Then he

<sup>4</sup> al-Bukhārī, “Manāqib al-anşār”, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, (ed. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2003), XVII, 441; Abū Manşūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt Abl al-sunna*, (ed. Fāṭima Yūsuf al-Khaymī; Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 2004), III, 501; Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Nisābūrī al-Wāḥidī, *al-Wasīṭ fi tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-majīd*, (ed. ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1994), III, 339; Abū l-Qāsim Jār Allāh Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ḡhawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa ‘uyūn al-aqāwīl fi wujūb al-ta’wīl*, (ed. Muḥammad al-Sa‘īd Muḥammad; Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiyya, n.d.), III, 312.

<sup>6</sup> al-Bukhārī, “Tayammum”, 6.

<sup>7</sup> al-Bukhārī, “Maghāzī”, 58; “Aḥkām”, 35.

<sup>8</sup> al-Bukhārī, “Tayammum”, 6.

states that people discuss whether this concept is an adjective or a name.<sup>9</sup> Its meaning as an adjective signifies leaving a religion and converting to another, while it as a noun is the name of a community or religion. We understand that during those days, its meaning as an adjective signifying the converted was still used. In fact, the comparison by al-Ṭabarī between *ṣābī* and *murtadd* is an important indicator: *murtadd* is an adjective meaning “apostate”, for a person who converted from his religion. This sense of the concept is accepted by most exegetes. Nevertheless, as the Mandaeans in the Wāsiṭ region gradually became known as Ṣābīʿīs (Sabians), the meaning of the adjective has evolved to be used as the name of a tribe. Thus, there has been a difference in the level of expression. While the expression in the Qurʾān was *ṣābī*, the version attributed to the Mandaeans has become *Ṣābīʿī*, with the addition of an *ī* to form an adjective.

### Contact between the Community Called Ṣābīʿīs and Muslims

It can be said that during the reign of the Prophet, there was no contact between the Muslims and a community called “Ṣābīʿīs (Sabians)”. For example, the Prophet ordered some of his companions, particularly Zayd b. Thābit, to learn the languages of many nations, including the languages of the Jews, Greeks, Persians, Abyssinians, Copts and Syrians of the surrounding region. However, the language of a community called Ṣābīʿī was not among them. As for the *jizya*, the tax gathered from non-Muslims, it was collected from Jews, Christians and fire-worshippers (Magians), as far as is known. During the era of the Prophet, no community called Ṣābīʿī is mentioned as a taxpayer.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. 331/942) asserts that words from fifty different languages appear in the Qurʾān, and he lists them. Many of them are Arabic dialects such as Quraysh, Hudhayl and Kināna, while the foreign languages include Persian, Greek, Coptic, Abyssinian, Berber, Syrian and Hebrew. The language of the so-called Ṣābīʿī community is not among these.<sup>11</sup> This fact supports the idea that the word *ṣābī* in the Qurʾān is a noun derived from a verb, and it is used as a general adjective for the convert rather than as the name of a certain tribe or religion. If the expression *ṣābī* were

<sup>9</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, II, 34-35.

<sup>10</sup> Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥayy b. ʿAbd al-Kabīr b. Muḥammad al-Kattānī, *al-Tarātib al-idāriyya*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿArabī, n.d.), I, 202-203, 392.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 208.

the name of a tribe, it would have belonged to that tribe's language, and been accepted among the foreign words in the Qur'ān. Moreover, from the time of the companions, people would have known that this noun was the name of a certain tribe.

According to the narration by al-Ṭabarī from Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, it was told to Ziyād b. Abīh (Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān) (d. 53/693) that the Şābi'īs turned towards the *qibla* to pray five times a day; thus, he concluded to collect *jizya* from this community. Later, he learned that these people worshipped the angels.<sup>12</sup> According to al-Qurṭubī, Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān (Abīh) saw this community called Şābi'īs, and realized that they worshipped the angels, so he decided that they should pay *jizya*.<sup>13</sup> So, the first person to have a judgment on the Şābi'īs, in al-Ṭabarī's narration, and the first statesman to meet the Sabians, in al-Qurṭubī's account, was Ziyād b. Abīh. Considering Ziyād's date of death, this event must have taken place before 53/693. On the other hand, if we take into account that Ziyād was among the administrators during 'Umar's reign, the story could have occurred at an earlier date, because the territory where the community called Sabians lived was between Baṣra and Wāsiṭ, and these lands were conquered during the reign of 'Umar. Ziyād might have come upon these people during 'Umar's reign; however, it should be kept in mind that his name is not among the commanders who conquered the region.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, 'Umar remarked about this community, "These are among *Ahl al-Kitāb* (the People of the Book)",<sup>15</sup> so the possibility of such an event during his reign grows even stronger. But it is more probable that the abovementioned encounter or the judgment by Ziyād on the Sabians happened during Ziyād's governorship in 'Irāq under Mu'āwiya's reign.

On this issue, there are some narrations from Ibn 'Abbās who was one of the younger companions of the Prophet Muḥammad, because he stayed in the Baṣra region for a long time. Thus, we see that the

<sup>12</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, II, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, (ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥifnāwī; Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2005), I, 393.

<sup>14</sup> See Abū Muḥammad Ibn Ḥazm 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Zāhiri al-Andalusī, *Jumal futūḥ al-Islām in Rasā'il Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī*, (ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās; Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li l-Dirāsāt wa l-Nashr, 1981), II, 128.

<sup>15</sup> al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa l-bayān*, I, 128.

convictions about the expression “šābī” in the Qurʾān emerged only after this community was met in the Baṣra region, and they were called Šābiʿīs (Sabians). However, Muslims hesitated on the issue for a long time and could not reach an exact decision. One of the most striking indicators of this situation is that in the fourth century AH (tenth century CE), the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Qāhir Bi’llāh (r. 320-322/932-934) asked al-Iṣṭakhrī (d. 328/940) about the religious situation of the Sabians. According to al-Qurṭubī, al-Iṣṭakhrī issued a *fatwā* that they were unbelievers. al-Nawawī relates that al-Iṣṭakhrī concluded, “These are idolaters, and they should be killed”. However, at the end of an agreement, the Caliph gave up the sentence of death.<sup>16</sup> Even though al-Qāhir Bi’llāh’s question was intended to determine in which legal category the Sabians should have been placed, it is meaningful to show that it was still a dubious question, even at that period. From a different point of view, despite more than three centuries since the first contact with Sabians, neither their beliefs nor their practices are clear in the minds of Muslims. This must be because of the artificiality of their naming as *Šābiʿīs*.

### Šābī/Šābiʿī in Tafsīr (Exegesis of the Qurʾān) Literature

Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), an exegete of the early period, defines the šābiʿīs in verse 62 of *Sūrat al-Baqara* as a community that reads the Psalms (*Zabūr*) and worships the angels, whereas in verse 69 of *Sūrat al-Māʿida*, he describes them as a Christian community who converted to Noah’s religion. He adds that, in fact, Sabians do not belong to Noah’s religion, despite their assertion.<sup>17</sup> According to Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Khuwwārī, a Khārijī exegete in the third/ninth century, Sabians were a community that read the Psalms and worshipped the angels. al-Khuwwārī also relates that according to Mujāhid (d. 104/722), one of the *tābiʿīs*, this was a community between the Jews and the Magians, before concluding, “In fact, they did not

<sup>16</sup> al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān*, I, 393; Abū Zakariyyā Muḥyī al-Dīn Yahyā b. Sharaf al-Mūrī al-Nawawī, *Kitāb al-majmūʿ*, (ed. Muḥammad Najīb al-Mutīʿī; Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, n.d.), XVII, 231. According to Abū l-Faraj Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿIbrī, the person on whom al-Qāhir Bi’llāh applied oppression and ordered his execution is a Ḥarrānīan Sabian of Baghdād, and his name is Sinān b. Thābit b. Qurra. See *Tārīkh mukhtaṣar al-duwal*, (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1992), 162; F. C. de Blois, “Šābiʿ”, *EF*, VIII, 673.

<sup>17</sup> Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, (ed. Aḥmad Farīd; Beirut: n.p., 2003), I, 53, 313.

have a religion". Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), a Ḥanbalī scholar, also narrates the first conviction of Mujāhid.<sup>18</sup>

As the person who has most extensively discussed the issue, al-Ṭabarī thinks that this word should be an adjective, such as *murtadd*. Nevertheless, according to his exegesis style, he evaluates the information he gathered in three sections. In the first part, there is information on the Ṣābī'īs' religious situation. The second part is on their worship practices, and the third part addresses their judicial status.

i. Religious situation: There are two views from Mujāhid on their religious situation. According to the first view, they are related neither to Judaism nor to Christianity; in fact, they do not even have a religion. According to the second view, they are a community between fire-worshippers (Magians) and Jews, but one cannot eat the animals they slaughter and cannot marry their women. Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) adopts this second view. According to Abū Najīḥ, they are between Jews and Magians, but they do not have a religion. Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) asked Ibn 'Aṭā' (d. 114/732), "It is asserted that the Ṣābī'īs are a tribe around Sawād; they are neither Magians, nor Christians, nor even Jews". Ibn 'Aṭā' responds, "I heard that. The polytheists said of the Prophet that he "he became ṣābī'ī; left the religion (*qad ṣaba'a*)". Ibn Zayd says "Ṣābī'ūn is one of the religions. It is in Jazīra (between Euphrates and Tigris), near Mosul. They assert Allah is the One; but they have neither prayers, nor holy scriptures, nor even prophet. The polytheists thought the Prophet resembled them, so they said he was a ṣābī'ī".

ii. Worship: According to information given to Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān, Sabians turned towards the *qibla* and performed their prayers (*ṣalāt*) five times a day. Qatāda (d. 118/736) affirms that they worshipped the angels, turned towards the *qibla* for their prayers, and read the Psalms. Abū 'Āliya said they were People of the Book and read the Psalms. According to Abū Ja'far al-Rāzī, they worshipped angels, read the Psalms, and perform their prayers towards the *qibla*.

iii. Judicial status: Sufyān says he asked Suddī about the Ṣābī'īs and he answered "they were among the People of the Book".<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Khuwwārī, *Tafsīr Kitāb Allāh al-'Azīz*, (ed. Balḥājī b. Sa'īd al-Sharīfī; Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1990), I, 112; Abū Muḥammad Muwaffaq al-Dīn 'Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jumhūriyya al-'Arabiyya, n.d.), XIII, 503.

Abū Manşūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), a contemporary of al-Ṭabarī, says of the Sabians, “They worship the angels, they believe in Psalms, they pray for stars, they take their place between Magians and Christians, and believe in two gods”, but he goes on to confess, “in fact, we do not possess clear and exact knowledge about them”.<sup>20</sup> The prominent Mu‘tazilī exegete al-Zamakhsharī emphasizes the meaning “One who has left the common religion” and asserts that they are a community that left the Jews and Christians, and then worships angels.<sup>21</sup>

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) gives the Arabic meaning of the word before repeating the existing information about the Ṣābi‘ī community. However, he differs from the others on one point. According to al-Rāzī, the Ṣābi‘ī community is the Chaldeans to whom Ibrāhīm (Abraham) was sent as a prophet.<sup>22</sup> al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) informs us about their judicial status. According to him, Suddī (d. 128/745), Khalīl (d. 175/791) and Iṣḥāq b. Rāhawayh (d. 238/853) considered the Ṣābi‘īs among the People of the Book, while Abū Ḥanīfa thought that it was *ḥalāl* (lawful) to marry their women and to eat the meat of animals they slaughtered. Muḥāhid and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī asserted that their religion was a mixture of Judaism and Magianism (*Majūs*) and decreed that one cannot eat the animals they slaughter. Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687) did not find it legal to marry their women. As for al-Qurṭubī’s own idea, he thinks that they believed in the unity of God but also in the influence of stars.<sup>23</sup>

It is possible to summarize the information in some other exegeses as follows: according to ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 250/767) and Suddī, the Ṣābi‘īs are among the People of the Book; according to Sa‘īd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714) and al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), they are a community between Jews and Christians; Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Ibn Nuḡaym and Muḥāhid assert that their place is between Jews and Magians; according to Ibn ‘Abbās and Khalīl, they are a group among Christians, which claim that they belong to Noah’s religion, and their *qibla* is from where the south wind blows; Qatāda (d. 118/736) believes

<sup>19</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān*, II, 35-37. al-Bukhārī also relates the view that is said to belong to Abū ‘Āliya. See al-Bukhārī, “Tayammum”, 6.

<sup>20</sup> al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt Abl al-sunna*, I, 59.

<sup>21</sup> al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, I, 178.

<sup>22</sup> Abū ‘Abd Allāh Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Taḥfīr al-kabīr*, (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1934), III, 105.

<sup>23</sup> al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, I, 393.



that they worship angels, perform prayers and read Psalms; Ibn Zayd says they are followers of the unity of Allah, but they have neither an *ʿamal* (religious deed) nor a scripture, nor even a prophet; according to al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076), the Sabians worship and respect the stars; and for al-Samʿānī (d. 489/1096), they are Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 36/656) and his followers.<sup>24</sup> However, there is no clarity about the position of Salmān al-Fārisī and his relation to the Şābiʿīs.

### Şābiʿīs in *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence) Literature

Ḥasan al-Baṣrī thinks that one cannot marry the Sabian girls or women and that one cannot eat the meat of animal slaughtered by them.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that he does not consider them among *Ahl al-Kitāb* (the People of the Book). In his *Kitāb al-kharāj*, the first ʿAbbāsīd *qāḍī* (*qāḍī al-quḍāt*) Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798) includes the Sabians among the communities who should pay *jizya*, just like Jews, Christians and Magians, but he does not relate whether there was any contact with them or whether this tax was actually collected from them. On the contrary, he mentions the practices toward Jews, Christians and Magians several times due to various reasons.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, while introducing the judicial status for a non-Muslim who claims to have become Muslim, Muḥammad al-Shaybānī (d. 189/805) mentions Jews and Christians, as well as Manichaeans, but not the Şābiʿīs, to represent the believers in two gods.<sup>27</sup> al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), another *faqīh* of the early period, classifies Christians, Jews and Magians among the non-Muslims (*dhimmīs*) and discusses the

<sup>24</sup> al-Wāḥidī, *al-Wasīṭ*, I, 149; al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa l-bayān*, I, 128; Abū l-Muẓaffar Maṣṣūr b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Samʿānī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān (Kitāb al-tafsīr)*, (ed. Abū Tamīm Yāsir b. Ibrāhīm and Abū Bilāl Ghānim b. ʿAbbās; Riyāḍ: Dār al-Waṭan, 1997), I, 88; Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa l-ʿuyūn*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992), I, 132-133; Abū l-Faraj Jamāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAlī Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fi ʿilm al-tafsīr*, (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 1987), I, 92.

<sup>25</sup> Abū Bakr Ibn Abī Shayba ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-ʿAbsī, *al-Muṣannaf*, (ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt; Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1409), IV, 23.

<sup>26</sup> See Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb b. Ibrāhīm b. Ḥabīb al-Anṣārī, *Kitāb al-kharāj*, (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Salafiyya, 1396), 131, 133, 134, 139.

<sup>27</sup> Abū Bakr Shams al-Aʿimma Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Sahl al-Sarakhsī, *Sharḥ Kitāb al-Siyar al-kabir*, (ed. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad al-Shāfiʿī; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1997), I, 106-110.

treatment of Nabataeans during ‘Umar’s reign.<sup>28</sup> However, according to another source, al-Shāfi‘ī refrains from making a judgment about them because of insufficient information on the subject. In response to questions, he says that they should be treated in a similar way as the People of the Book.<sup>29</sup> Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) of the next generation considers the Sabians among the Christians, but because their holy day is Saturday (Shabbat), he adds that they may also be considered among the Jews.<sup>30</sup> According to the Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), Ṣābi‘īs believe that the sky is living and sentient, they accept the seven stars as gods, and they possess the pages of Ibrāhīm, Seth, Zubayr and David. But Ibn Qudāma asserts that these holy texts in the hands of the Ṣābi‘īs did not contain *sharī‘a* and that they were only the texts of sermons. Thus, according to him, the Ṣābi‘īs cannot be considered among the People of the Book.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Ṣābi‘īs in the Islamic Literatures of History, Heresiology, and Geography**

‘Alī b. Sahl Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. 247/861) introduces the Ṣābi‘īs as a community who believes in the existence of human ancestors even before Adam and Eve, as the Indians do.<sup>32</sup> Nāshi‘ al-Akbar (d. 293/906) mentions the Ṣābi‘īs along with the philosophers and relates that they reject the afterlife and claim the stars that fall down from the sky torment the evil souls.<sup>33</sup> al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 346/957) claims that the Ṣābi‘ī belief was formed by a person called Būdāsaf/Būdāsif.<sup>34</sup> According to al-Mas‘ūdī, the Ṣābi‘ī belief is based on the conviction that the sky has influence over the earth and governs it. In particular, the stars in the sky are the source of every occurrence and creation and

<sup>28</sup> Abū Ibrāhīm Ismā‘īl b. Yaḥyá b. Ismā‘īl al-Shāfi‘ī al-Muzanī, *Mukhtaṣar Kitāb al-Umm*, (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifa, n.d.), 411-412, 460.

<sup>29</sup> al-Nawawī, *Kitāb al-majmū‘*, XVII, 231.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, XIII, 503; XXI, 202.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, XIII, 503.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Alī b. Sahl Rabban al-Ṭabarī, *al-Dīn wa l-dawla fī itbbāt nubuwwat al-Nabī Muḥammad*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (ed. ‘Ādil Nuwayhiq; Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1982), 38.

<sup>33</sup> Abū l-‘Abbās ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad Nāshi‘ al-Akbar, *Masā’il al-imāma*, (ed. Josef van Ess; Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1971), 114.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm uses the name Būdāsaf/Būdāsif as the equivalent of Buddha and considers him the leader of Buddhism. Abū l-Faraj Muḥammad b. Iṣḥāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, (ed. Ibrāhīm Ramaḍān; Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifa, 1994), 419.

they conduct the order in the universe. Their movements, the distances between them, and their positions cause certain occurrences on earth, and the emerging events can only be explained by their positions and movements. al-Mas‘ūdī feels the need for a footnote and asserts that there is no relationship between this Sabianism and the Ḥarrānian Sabianism; for him, the real homeland of the Şābi‘ī belief is somewhere between Wāsiṭ and Başra.<sup>35</sup> His contemporary, al-Maḡdisī, gives extensive information about the Ḥarrānians, but he does not mention that they are Sabians. At the beginning, he prefers the expression “*sbarā’i‘ al-Ḥarrāniyyīn*” (*sbari‘as* of Ḥarrānians). He includes Sabians within the worshippers of two gods (*adyān al-tatbniya*).<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it seems that al-Maḡdisī shares the same opinion as his contemporary al-Mas‘ūdī. al-Khwārizmī (d. 387/997) discusses similar information, despite some minor differences. According to him, who were called Şābi‘īs are the Chaldeans, and during the reign of al-Ma‘mūn, the Ḥarrānians were called Şābi‘īs. In fact, the Sabians are a sect of Christianity.<sup>37</sup> The Ash‘arī theologian ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baḡhdādī (d. 429/1037) has a similar view. According to him, there is no relationship between the Ḥarrānians and the true Sabians, who lived around Wāsiṭ. As indicated in *al-Fibrīst*, Ḥarrānians are a community that worships the human head scalped after several operations.<sup>38</sup>

al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048) also states that the Şābi‘ī belief was established by Būdāsaf (Būdhāsaf) and that the Sabians of Ḥarrān, the “Ḥarrānians”, are their remaining descendants. He adds that (as indicated in several sources) this name originates with Hārān b. Taraḡ, brother of Ibrāhīm. al-Bīrūnī goes on to explain that the Ḥarrānians had a ritual of sacrificing men and worshipped several sculptures

<sup>35</sup> Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dbabab wa ma‘ādin al-jawbar*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (ed. Muḡammad Muhyī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd; Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, 1964), I, 222-223.

<sup>36</sup> Abū Naşr al-Muṭaḡhar b. Ṭāhir al-Maḡdisī, *Kitāb al-bad’ wa l-tāriḡb*, (ed. Clement Huart; Paris: Erneste Laroux, 1903), IV, 22-24.

<sup>37</sup> Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Kātib Muḡammad b. Aḡmad b. Yūsuf al-Khwārizmī, *Maḡātib al-‘ulūm*, (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sharḡ, 1342), 25.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fibrīst*, 390-391; Abū Maṣūr ‘Abd al-Qāhir b. Ṭāhir b. Muḡammad al-Baḡhdādī, *Uşūl al-dīn*, (Istanbul: Maṭba‘at al-Dawla, 1928), 321, 325.

(idols) that bore the names of stars.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, he notes that a Manichaean group in Samarqand named themselves Şābi'īs.<sup>40</sup> Sā'īd al-Andalusī (d. 462/1070) states that the peoples of Egypt and Andalusia were idolatrous Sabians before Christianity.<sup>41</sup> All of this information suggests that Islamic authors used the term “Şābi'ī” as a common name for the worshippers of idols or stars. Accordingly, Sā'īd al-Andalusī's explanation “All idolatrous Arabs accept the unity of Allah. Their prayers are a kind of Şābi'ī pietism that respects and praises the stars and the idols” supports this suggestion.<sup>42</sup>

al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) analyzes the Şābi'īs in different groups. The first Şābi'ī group believed in the prophets they called *ʿĀdbīmūn* and *Hermes*, who were actually *Seth* and *Enoch*, respectively. They were Chaldeans to whom Ibrāhīm was assigned as a prophet. Nonetheless, they did not possess or follow any *sbarīʿa*. They developed certain beliefs in contrast with the *Ḥanīf* religion of Ibrāhīm and deviated from the right way. In this sense, al-Shahrastānī considers the Şābi'ī belief as the opposite of the *Ḥanīf* religion.<sup>43</sup> The Şābi'īs were divided into *aşḫāb al-hayākīl* and *aşḫāb al-ashkbāş*. While the first group worshipped the stars through certain symbols, the second group worshipped the statues of certain persons they sculpted. In short, the first group worshipped the stars, while the second idolized the statues.<sup>44</sup> Analyzing the Ḥarrānians as a distinct Sabian group, al-Shahrastānī refers to actual facts and contents himself with describing the beliefs and ideas of the idolatrous tribe in the Ḥarrān region. First, he narrates their conception of God and the universe, which is mostly similar to the convictions of the first Sabians. Then he treats their beliefs about incarnation and infiltration (*ḥulūl*). Finally, he explains their practices in accordance with their faith.<sup>45</sup> In

<sup>39</sup> Abū l-Rayḫān Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, *al-Āthār al-bāqīya ʿan al-qurūn al-kbāliya*, (ed. Parwīz Adhkāʿī; Tehran: Mīrāth-i Maktūb, 1380 H. S.), 243-245.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>41</sup> Abū l-Qāsim Sā'īd b. Aḥmad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Andalusī, *Ṭabaqāt al-umam*, (ed. Ḥayāt Bū ʿAlwān; Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalīʿa, 1985), 106, 156.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>43</sup> Abū l-Faṭḥ Tāj al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *al-Mīlal wa l-niḥal*, (ed. ʿAbd al-Amīr ʿAlī Mahnā and ʿAlī Ḥasan Fāʿūr; Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifā, 1990), II, 306-308.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 358-361.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 365-368.

his work on sects and religions, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī prefers a slightly different usage than in his exegesis and uses the expression “Şābiʿa” rather than “Şābiʿī”. Furthermore, he asserts that the people he calls *al-Şābiʿa al-khālīṣa* (the True Sabians) were an ancient tribe who worshipped stars and celestial bodies, and he explains that they worshipped stars because they believed that Allah placed all the deeds of the universe under the responsibility and control of these stars.<sup>46</sup>

The Ḥarrānīs, who were called Sabians after the era of al-Maʿmūn, used philosophical concepts such as *jawbar* (substance), *khalāʿ* (space) and *hayūlā* (hyle, prime matter). These people believed in the existence of five *eternals* (*qadīm*): two were active, one was passive and the remaining two were neither active nor passive. The God and the soul were active, the hyle was passive, and *dahr* (time) and *khalāʿ* (space) were neither active nor passive.<sup>47</sup> According to Ibn al-Nadīm, the Ḥarrānīs used “the concepts of hyle, element, form, non-existence, time and space” in the Aristotelian sense. Ibn al-Nadīm classifies them as members of the eternal Nabataean order.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) notes that the “hyle” conception of the Sabians was similar to that of its philosophical counterpart, called “*aşṣāb al-bayūlā*”.<sup>49</sup> In consideration of such information, it is possible to speak of a structure of the belief of the Ḥarrānians in which a philosophical culture was blended with idolatry.

The Malatya-born Assyrian historian Abū l-Faraj Ibn al-ʿIbrī (d. 685/1286) indicates that in the past, seven races (Persians, Chaldeans, Greeks, Copts, Turks, Indians and Chinese) lived in the world, and they were all Sabians because they worshipped idols they created as symbols of the stars and celestial bodies. In accordance with this opinion, he states that the Roman Emperor Constantine rejected the Şābiʿī religion and adopted Christianity.<sup>50</sup> Abū l-Faraj also mentions

<sup>46</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Riyāḍ al-mūnaqa fī ārāʾi abl al-ʿilm*, (ed. Asʿad Jumʿa; Kairouan: Markaz al-Nashr al-Jāmiʿī, 2004), 86, 160.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fibrīst*, 389-389; Shlomo Pines, *Madhhab al-dharrā ʿinda l-muslimīn* (*Beiträge zur Islamischen Atomenlehre*), trans. into Arabic Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥādī Abū Rīda, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Mişriyya, 1946), 60-66.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fibrīst*, 414.

<sup>49</sup> ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayna l-firaq* (ed. Muḥammad Muhyī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd; Beirut: al-Maktaba al-ʿAşriyya, 1990), 355.

<sup>50</sup> Ibn al-ʿIbrī, *Tārikh mukhtaşar al-duwal*, 3, 64.

the Ḥarrānians as Sabians and says that before the reign of al-Maʿmūn, they lived in religious liberty during the caliphate of his uncle Ibrāhīm. According to Abū l-Faraj, the same environment of freedom continued during the period of Muʿtaḍid (r. 279-289/892-902), and there were some scholars who wrote about their beliefs in Syriac, Arabic and Greek.<sup>51</sup>

Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Ḥimyarī, the ninth/fourteenth century Andalusian geographer, says that Ḥarrānian Sabians paid homage and respect to an oracle called Ṣāb b. Ṭāṭ b. Khanūkh, who was a person knowledgeable about wisdom, philosophy and stars. This oracle was the first person to settle in Babylon and sculpted the first statue there. According to this information, this figure most extensively influenced and formed the Sabian belief and thought. Consequently, it is debatable whether the assertions about the beliefs of the Ḥarrānians reflect the truth or whether they are the consequences of endeavors to find an origin for their faith. Because the Ḥarrānians claim that Mānī, the founder of Manichaeism, and Bar Dīšān, the leader of the Dayṣāniyya sect, were Ḥarrānians,<sup>52</sup> such suspicions are foremost about this community.

Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī talks about a different Ṣābiʿī community. In his account, “according to Yazīdism, an Ibāḍī sect, that is attributed to Yazīd b. Unaysa, in the future, Allah will send a prophet from among the ʿAjams (Persians) with a book brought down in one time from heaven. This so-called prophet will leave the way (*sharīʿa*) of Muḥammad to establish another way. They claimed that the religion of this person was Ṣābiʿa”. Here, al-Ashʿarī adds a note that they are neither the Sabians of his days nor the ones in the Qurʾān.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Ibn al-ʿIbrī, *Tārīkh al-zamān*, trans. into Arabic by Ishāq Armala, (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1986), 23, 48; the Turkish translation: *Ebu'l-Ferec Taribi* (by Ömer Rıza Doğrul; Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1945), I, 216, 244-245.

<sup>52</sup> Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Ḥimyarī, *al-Rawḍ al-miʿtār fī khabar al-aqtār*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās; Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1984), 191-192.

<sup>53</sup> Abū l-Ḥasan Ibn Abī Bishr ʿAlī b. Ismāʿīl b. Ishāq al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa ikbtilāf al-muṣallīn*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (ed. Hellmut Ritter; Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980), 103-104.

## Assessment and Conclusion

At the end of our research, we conclude that the expression *şābiʿūn/şābiʿīn* in the Qurʾān is the plural form of *şābī*, the noun derived from the verb “*şa-ba-ʿa* → *yaş-ba-ʿu* → *şubū*”. This concept, as al-Ṭabarī affirms, is an adjective, such as *murtadd*, that is used in the Arabian Peninsula for persons who have left their religion and converted to another, rather than signifying a certain community or a religion. In other words, while in Islam people who left the religion were called *murtadd*, during the pre-Islamic period people who left the prevalent and common belief were defined with the adjective *şābī*. This situation can be understood from the usage of the expression for the Prophet Muḥammad, ʿUmar and others. In particular, its usage in the sayings of Prophet Muḥammad shows that this expression was not applied as a noun but as a descriptive adjective. Moreover, because no companion except Ibn ʿAbbās gives information about a community called *Şābiʿī*, it is likely that no such community was known then.

In the tafsīr literature, the expression is consistently treated as an Arabic word and is analyzed primarily through its linguistic aspect. Thus, the idea of the above judgment grows even stronger. al-Ṭabarī, a reliable exegete in terms of both narration (*riwāya*) and sound opinions (*dirāya*), declares that during his time there was a dispute about whether this concept was an adjective or the name of a community. Therefore, it is clear that during the fourth/tenth century, the adjective version was still fresh and strong in people’s minds. According to the information above, Ziyād b. Abih must have been the first statesman to have a relationship with the so-called *Şābiʿī* community, although it is unclear when he had this contact. It may have happened during his office as the clerk of Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī under ʿUmar’s reign or even when he was in charge of the Dīwān and Treasury Affairs of the Baṣra governor ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿĀmir al-Kurayz during ʿUthmān’s caliphate. However, it may have taken place much later, when Ziyād was ʿIrāq’s governor during the reign of Muʿāwiya.<sup>54</sup> The judgment of Ziyād on the *Şābiʿī*s merely consists of

<sup>54</sup> Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyá b. Jābir al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-buldān (Ülkelerin Fetihleri)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. into Turkish by Mustafa Fayda, (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2002), 499, 514; Abū ʿUmar Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *Kitāb ʿiqd al-farid*, (ed. Aḥmad Amin et al.; Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1962), IV, 167, 169; Melek Yılmaz, *Mugîre b. Şuʿbe, Hayatı, Kişiliği ve Devlet*

determining their political and judicial position within the state. In any case, the early Muslims did not intend to analyze the religious, cultural and social aspects of this community. Their only aim was to define the position (that is, the political and judicial status) of this community within Islamic territory in the eyes of the government. In fact, the *fiqh* works and the early exegeses comprise information that is devoted to such an objective. Nevertheless, the gathered information is not clear or extensive enough to determine their position and location or to establish a judicial opinion about them, which is why they have become a matter of serious dispute among early Muslim jurists. This controversy is based on the fact that no exact similarity or identification could be established between the *şābī* in the Qurʾān and this community. If such an identification could have been established, the jurists of the day would not have had such deep controversies. The jurists, who took the expression in the Qurʾān into account and so considered them among the People of the Book, remained in the minority, while the majority stressed their similarity to the Magians. For example, al-Imām al-Shāfiʿī was impartial on the so-called Şābiʿī tribe because he could not clearly determine their resemblance to the *şābī* in the Qurʾān. Accordingly, the later Shāfiʿī scholars thought that Sabians did not resemble either the Jews or the Christians and classified them among the Magians. However, if they were to take into account the verse 62 of *Sūrat al-Baqara*: "... whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good, they shall be rewarded ..." and the classification in verse 69 of *Sūrat al-Māʿida*, "Jews and the Christians and the Sabians", the Sabians should have been considered People of the Book because they are mentioned together with Jews and Christians, who are accepted as People of the Book. In verse 17 of *Sūrat al-Ḥajj*, Magians (fire-worshippers) and *musbriks* (polytheists) are also added to these. The added communities in this *sūra* are not considered among the People of the Book. Considering these facts, some early Muslim jurists have included the Sabians among the People of the Book, suggesting that they read the Psalms and were followers of the prophet Yaḥyá (John). On the other hand, the jurists who reached clearer information on the Sabians adopted exactly the opposite attitude. This dispute between Muslim jurists demonstrates that no similarity was in question between the *şābīs* in the Qurʾān and the community later called *Şābiʿīs*. If there

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*Adamlığı [Mughbira b. Shuʿba, His Life, Personality and Statesmanship]*, (MA thesis; Bursa: Uludağ University, 2005), 98.



had been any identification between the two, there would have been an accord on them as there was on Jews and Christians, and they would have been included among the People of the Book. In many Qurʾanic exegeses, only Jews and Christians are included in the concept of “The People of the Book”.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī indicates that the content of the People of the Book in *Sūrat al-Bayyina* is restricted to Christians and Jews. al-Rāzī relates the controversy about the inclusion of the Magians among the People of the Book and states that some accepted this argument while others did not. However, he does not even mention the name of the *Şābiʾīs*.<sup>56</sup> This is mostly because in his time, the meaning and the content of the concept “the People of the Book” was clarified, and that people commonly thought the *Şābiʾīs* out of the People of the Book. That *The Encyclopedia of Islam* defines the People of the Book as “an expression used generally for Jews and Christians in Qurʾān”, shows that this conviction remains the same today.<sup>57</sup>

We have a fundamental and crucial question at this point: if the expression *şābī* is an Arabic word, an adjective meaning *to leave the religion*, why were certain communities such as Mandaeans and Ḥarrānians, who were not Arabs by language and nationality, called by this name? Did these communities bear the same name before Islam, or was the name attributed to them afterwards? The research so far has not found convincing proof that they bore the same name before Islam. *The Encyclopedia Britannica*’s suggestion that the *Şābiʾī* belief was often taken for the religions of Mandaeans and pagan Ḥarrānians<sup>58</sup> weakens the possibility that the expression originated from *ş-b-*, which meant “to be baptized” in the Mandaic language.<sup>59</sup> The Roman Pliny (the first century CE), the first person to

<sup>55</sup> See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, V, 480; al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwilāt Abl al-sunna*, I, 78; al-Wāḥidī, *al-Wasīf*, I, 446; Abū Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Sunna al-Ḥusayn b. al-Masʿūd al-Baghawī, *Tafsīr al-Baghawī (Maʿālim al-tanzīl)*, (ed. Khālīd ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-ʿAkk and Marwān Suwār; Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1992), IV, 513.

<sup>56</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, XXXII, 39-40.

<sup>57</sup> See Remzi Kaya, “Ehl-i Kitap” [Ahl al-Kitāb], *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslām Ansiklopedisi (DİA) [Turkish Religious Foundation Encyclopaedia of Islam]*, X, 516-519.

<sup>58</sup> “Sabians”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, XIX, 855.

<sup>59</sup> Şinasi Gündüz, *Son Gnostikler: Sâbîler, İnanç Esasları ve İbadetleri [The Sabians: The Last Gnostics, Their Beliefs and Prayers]*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Ankara: Vadi Yayınları, 1999), 28.

mention the Mandaean, talks about them using expressions such as *Mandani/Mardani*.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the community calls themselves *Mandāyi (Mandaeans)*<sup>61</sup> or *Naşuraiyi (Naşoraeans)*<sup>62</sup>, suggesting that they must have obtained the name “Şābiʿī” only after Islam. According to *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, because Muslims behaved tolerantly towards Sabians (as they did with Jews and Christians), some communities may have adopted the *Şābiʿī* name to benefit from this tolerance.<sup>63</sup> Thus, we can say that the Mandaean may have followed this approach. In any case, as mentioned above, there is information in Islamic sources that the Ḥarrānians took the *Şābiʿī* name after the reign of ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Maʿmūn.

Nonetheless, an analysis of the Islamic sources reveals that some of these references talk about Mandaean, whereas some others mention Ḥarrānians. In particular, because the Mandaean bear some Judaic and Christian elements simultaneously, even contemporary researchers have to apply different approaches and opinions to determine their origin and location.<sup>64</sup> The views on Mandaean, such as, “They are a branch of Jews; a Christian sect; between Judaism and Christianity; between Jews and Magians” in traditional Islamic sources are still shared by today’s researchers. This historical confusion and obscurity brings about the problem of placing the mentioned community. After the Ḥarrānians called themselves *Şābiʿīs*, the later sources had to take their beliefs into account too; thus, the problem grew even more enigmatic.

al-Khwārizmī, al-Shahrastānī, Fakhr al-Dīn ar-Rāzī and the Assyrian historian Abū l-Faraj have classified the *Şābiʿīs* among the Chaldeans, possibly because the community attached importance to stars within their faith. On the other hand, while some scholars identify the *Şābiʿīs* with the *Ḥanīfs*, interestingly, al-Shahrastānī describes them as

<sup>60</sup> Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus), *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. with notes by John Bostock and H. T. Riley, (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855), II, 71.

<sup>61</sup> Edmondo F. Lupieri, “Mandaean: i. History”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online Edition, 20 January 2010, available at <http://www.iranica.com/articles/mandaeans-1>.

<sup>62</sup> Kurt Rudolph, “Mandaean: ii. The Mandaean Religion”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online Edition, 20 January 2010, available at <http://www.iranica.com/articles/mandaeans-2-religion>.

<sup>63</sup> “Sabians”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, XIX, p. 855.

<sup>64</sup> “Mandaean”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, XIV, 766-767.

Chaldeans (Babylonians) who, in contrast with *Ḥanīf* religion of Ibrāhīm, worship stars and believe in numerous gods. An even more amazing point is that Salmān al-Fārisī is asserted to have been a Šābīʿī before converting to Islam. All of these statements are in need of proof, and it seems very difficult to prove them. For example, according to the latest assertion, the priests whom Salmān al-Fārisī met after leaving Īrān may not have been Christians but (though very unlikely) Mandaean.

We can raise several possibilities for the reason why these communities were called Šābīʿīs. However, it should be noted that these are merely assessments based on the acquired findings. It is very hard to talk about a certainty. Thus, modern researchers have opposing views on the issue. There is not even a common view on the Mandaean, not to mention the Sabians. Nonetheless, we will now present three reflections on how the name Šābīʿī was given to these communities, which called themselves by different names, and how they came to accept this name.

The *first possibility* is that the name was given by the Muslims. This is probably the strongest one. As the Muslim conquerors proceeded into ʿIrāq, they came upon a community who did not deserve interest due to their political and military existence and importance, who believed in stars, had a ritual like ablution, prayed at certain hours of the day, read a Psalms-like book and worshipped turning toward the south (*qibla*). As al-Ṭabarī points out, the Muslim soldiers thought that the expression *šābī* in the Qurʾān could have been the name of a community. They predicted that this community, which did not resemble Jews, Christians or Magians, could be the *šābī*, and they gave them the name. However, there is no clarity about when this contact happened. Because historians generally note situations of war and major political events, and because the Mandaean have no importance in these matters, the date of the contact remained obscure. We only know that the first contact at the governmental level was by Ziyād b. Abīh. However, there is no proof whether the name was a product of this encounter or dated back to an earlier era. Probably, the first commanders to meet the Mandaean took into account the similarity of their beliefs and prayers with Jewish and Christian rites, included them in the *jizya* group, and used the term *šābī*, for which the corresponding term in the Qurʾān was relatively unclear. The situation is similar to the fact that Columbus, who discovered the American continents, believed these lands to be India and the locals

to be Indians. Hence, this is why the indigenous people of America are called Indians today. In the history of Islam, there have been similar developments. For example, the group founded under the guidance of Wāsil b. ‘Aṭā’, which called themselves *Ahl al-‘adl wa l-tawḥīd*, were named *Mu‘tazila* by their enemies. In time, this name grew familiar, and they began to use it themselves. Şinasi Gündüz, who is known for his studies on the issue, indicates that the so-called Şābi‘ī community called themselves Mandaeans or Naşoraeans, and the Şābi‘ī name was given to them by their Arab neighbors.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, in the course of time, this name has been understood by some Muslim scholars as a general name for the followers of the religions without a sacred book. Accordingly, Sā‘id al-Andalusī said that Egyptians and Andalusians were idolatrous Sabians before Christianity, and the Assyrian historian Abū l-Faraj states, “Constantine accepted Christianity, thus he rejected the Şābi‘ī religion”.

The *second possibility* reveals that the communities of the region (except the Jews, Christians and Magians) assumed the name on their own. The greatest motive for such an action is no doubt the privilege for the members of this religion in Islamic law. Considered the People of the Book, Christians and Jews had a privileged position within Islamic law. This fact may have motivated certain communities, Mandaeans above all, to adopt the name Şābi‘ī. Because the Ḥarrānians adopted the name in a later period, and because al-Bīrūnī relates that a Manichaean group in Samarqand called themselves Şābi‘īs, this possibility looks stronger. Accordingly, as for the interpretations of some Western researchers, when the Mandaeans first met Muslims they introduced their religious book *Ginza Rba* as a holy text and John the Baptist as their prophet. Thus, they were included in Islam’s category of the People of the Book and lived in peace without having to change their religion.<sup>66</sup> Muslims saw the adoption of this name by the Mandaeans as a judicial solution. The comments by the first Muslim jurists considering the Mandaeans among the People of the Book seem to support this interpretation. In the exegeses of the Qur’ān, their holy book is said to be the Psalms/*Zabūr* because people tried to see them as a community that believed in a divine text. In the

<sup>65</sup> T. Fahd, “Şābi‘a”, *EF*, VIII, 675.

<sup>66</sup> J. Jacobsen Buckley and Ezio Albrile, “Mandaean Religion”, trans. from Italian by Paul Ellis, *Encyclopedia of Religion Second Edition*, (editor in chief: Lindsay Jones; USA: Thomson Gale, 2005), VIII, 5635.

Qurʾān, in addition to the Torah and the Bible, the *Zabūr* is mentioned as holy scripture. The first two are the sacred books of Jews and Christians, but the *Zabūr* remains in a sense ownerless; thus, the problem is solved by deeming Mandaeans the followers of the *Zabūr*. Such behavior has brought many advantages for Muslims, too, in judicial terms. However, upon an analysis of the information by al-Nawawī, it was understood over time that their book was not the *Zabūr* and that they worshipped not Allah but angels. Consequently, the community was excluded from the frame of the People of the Book.<sup>67</sup>

The *third* and probably the weakest possibility asserts that it was the name of a community with little population in the ʿIrāqī region and that the Mandaeans and Ḥarrānians adopted the name to gain advantages within Islamic law. İsmail Cerrahoğlu, one of the first Turkish researchers on the Şābīʿīs, seems to support this assertion. According to Cerrahoğlu, this community has its own religion, and in the course of time, they have gone out of existence.<sup>68</sup> However, Cerrahoğlu does not introduce any information or opinion about this date.

Consequently, we have to state that no identification exists between the expression *şābīʿūn/şābīʿīn*, which we find three times in the Qurʾān,<sup>69</sup> and the community called Şābīʿīs. The main proof of this fact is that the communities that are called “Şābīʿīs” with an adject-

<sup>67</sup> al-Nawawī, *Kitāb al-majmūʿ*, XVII, 231.

<sup>68</sup> İsmail Cerrahoğlu, “Kurʾān-ı Kerīm ve Sābīiler [The Qurʾān and the Şābīʿīs]”, *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* [Review of the Faculty of Divinity of Ankara University], X (1962), 116.

<sup>69</sup> “Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians (the Arabians who have left their previous belief), whoever believes in Allāh and the Last Day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve” (al-Baqara 2/62).

“Surely those who believe and those who are Jews and the Sabians (the Arabians who have left their previous belief) and the Christians whoever believes in Allāh and the last day and does good, they shall have no fear nor shall they grieve” (al-Māʿida 5/69).

“Surely those who believe and those who are Jews and the Sabians (the Arabians who have left their previous belief) and the Christians and the Magians and those who associate (others with Allāh), surely Allāh will decide between them on the day of resurrection; surely Allāh is a witness over all things” (al-Hajj 22/17).

tive deriving *ī* suffix have had different names for themselves and their tribes. In any case, the early sources and recent researches show the Mandaeans and Ḥarrānians as the Šābi'īs. There is consensus on the point that the Ḥarrānians adopted this name later. From this point of view, it is possible to say that this name was attributed to the Mandaeans later, by themselves or by others, because the content of the concept is not clear in the Qur'ān. The information in the sayings of Prophet Muḥammad shows that the expression is limited by the converted –in other words, by the persons who have left the prevalent religion in the Arabian region. Because the whole Arabian Peninsula opted for Islam in time, the concept was irrelevant; thus, an opportunity was born for new, equivalent meanings and usages. It seems that the Mandaeans and Ḥarrānians have taken advantage of this opportunity to increase their comfort and ameliorate their judicial position.

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