

Muhammad and the Saints:
The History of the Prophet in the *Golden Legend*

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James of Voragine is mostly known for his immensely successful collection of saint's lives, the *Golden Legend*,¹ composed around the year 1265. Lesser known is the fact that he wrote a historical chronicle inside his *magnum opus*, inserted in the second-to-last chapter. Though this chapter claims to be about Pope Pelagius I, a secondary figure in the canon of popes, the life of Pelagius is only a small part of the entire chronicle, which is often referred to as the *Historia lombardica*. In some versions of the manuscript of the *Golden Legend*, the chronicle has in fact given its name to the entire work. Fascinatingly, the *Historia lombardica* also contains a life of the prophet Muhammad, a seemingly unlikely choice for a chapter in a collection of the lives of Christian saints. The role of the *Historia lombardica* within the *Golden Legend* as a whole has not been studied in depth until recently, and the passages concerning Muhammad in particular have received only fleeting attention from scholars.²

1. Jacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni (Florence: SISMEL, 1998), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *LA*, followed by chapter and line numbers. Translations of the *Golden Legend* are from volume 2 of Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1993), and are cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

2. Apart from a summary of the text provided by Alessandro d'Ancona more than a century ago, a very cursory article by George-Henri Bousquet, and a short mention in John Tolan's book on Petrus Alfonsi indicating James of Voragine's use of Petrus's *Dialogi contra Iudaeos* as a source, this passage seems to have passed almost unnoticed. See Alessandro d'Ancona, *La leggenda di Maometto in Occidente*, ed. Andrea Borruso (Rome: Salerno, 1994), first published in *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 13 (1889): 199–281, reprinted with additions in Alessandro d'Ancona, *Studj di critica e storia letteraria* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1912), 2:167–306. On the *Legenda aurea*, see esp. pp. 76–77; George-Henri Bousquet, “Mahomet et l'Islâm, selon un passage peu connu de la *Légende Dorée*,”

In this article, I will analyze the story of Muhammad in the *Golden Legend* with particular attention to the place it has been given and the way that James of Voragine exploited his different sources. I will then argue that the phenomenal success of the *Golden Legend*, and its consequent spread all over medieval Western Europe, meant that the *Golden Legend* was the most accessible and widely utilized source for information regarding Muhammad and the Islamic religion for the Christians of the West.

I. STRUCTURE AND POSITION INSIDE THE *GOLDEN LEGEND*

A short biography of Muhammad in a collection of Christian hagiographic stories could at first surprise some as out of place. The presence of a (pseudo)biography of an enemy of Christian faith in his collection of saints' lives would not have surprised readers of James of Voragine's work, however; by this point they would already have read about Judas in the chapter dedicated to the apostle Matthias (*LA* 245) and about Julian the Apostate in the chapter on Saint Julian (*LA* 30.79–128). In James of Voragine's Christian world, there was a space for Evil, but a very limited area. It is as if, by mentioning sinners such as Simon Magus or Julian the Apostate, or even Judas, James of Voragine was trying to tame them, to show that despite all the damage they did, they were inside the circular time of the Church, they were expected, and they were, even more important, transient. James of Voragine was interested not only in providing his readers with a full and detailed hagiographic life of as many saints as possible, but also in offering his readers a religious-historical context and a description, as objective as he could give, of some enemies of the Church, in order to enhance the importance of all those who decided to stay on what he considered to be the right path. This is ultimately the role of the *Historia lombardica* in the *Golden Legend* as a whole.

Annuaire de l'Institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales et slaves 20 (1968–72): 137–44; John Tolan, *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), pp. 100–101. The most recent edition of the *Dialogi* is Pedro Alfonso de Huesca (Petrus Alfonsi), *Diálogo contra los Judíos*, ed. Klaus-Peter Mieth, trans. Esperanza Ducay, direction by M.a Jesús Lacarra (Huesca: Instituto de Estudios Altoaragoneses, 1996), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Dialogi* (all translations are mine).

II. ANALYSIS OF THE SOURCES AND GENERAL CONTEXT OF WESTERN LITERATURE ON MUHAMMAD AND ISLAM

The relationship between medieval Western Europe and medieval Islam was marked, at least until the beginning of the twelfth century, by a remarkable lack of insight. In a chapter appropriately titled “The Age of Ignorance,” Richard Southern describes the authors before 1100 as “luxuriat[ing] in the ignorance of triumphant imagination.”³ This is probably the best compact description of the situation before the twelfth century. Western Christian knowledge of medieval Islam was based on works more imaginative than factual. Muhammad was seldom mentioned, and when he was he had been transformed into a god adored by the Saracens, as for instance in the *Chanson de Roland*, where he appears in a very unholy trinity: “The Emir calls upon Apollin and upon Termagant and Mahomet as well.”⁴ Things changed after the year 1100, with two important figures to be mentioned before all others: Petrus Alfonsi, whose early twelfth-century *Dialogi* was a central source for the medieval understanding of Islam, and Peter the Venerable, the last of the great abbots of Cluny. Even if Peter the Venerable was not as tolerant and progressive as some historians have suggested, and even if he was not the first Christian thinker to try to “refute” what he saw as the heretical position of Muhammad, it is nonetheless with Peter the Venerable that medieval Western attitudes toward Islam started to change.⁵ It is, moreover, thanks to the translation he commissioned of the Qur’an that Christians were directly exposed to the ideas of Islam for the first time.

But apart from such learned discussions, the bulk of information concerning Islam for the medieval audience was based on a number of stories circulating in pseudobiographies of Muhammad, either in Latin or in vernacular languages. At the end of the nineteenth century, Alessandro d’Ancona traced many of these apocryphal stories on the Prophet back to their earliest sources. D’Ancona merely summarizes the passage in the *Golden Legend*, however, without indicating any sources or analyzing the content in detail. Contemporary scholarship

3. Richard W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 28.

4. *The Song of Roland*, trans. W. S. Merwin (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 104.

5. James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton University Press, 1963); John Tolan, “Peter the Venerable on the ‘Diabolical Heresy of the Saracens,’” in *The Devil, Heresy, and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, ed. Alberto Ferreiro (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 345–67.

has not taken James of Voragine's work in much consideration, if at all. In a recent study of medieval notions of Islam that notes Peter the Venerable's important role, John V. Tolan does not even mention James of Voragine.⁶ This article will argue that James of Voragine's life of the prophet, biased and slandering as it is, could have been an important and long-neglected source for the late medieval Western Christian understanding of Islam.

James of Voragine places his section on Muhammad inside chapter 177 of the *Golden Legend*. This chapter should be on Saint Pelagius, but after only a few lines it is devoted to a long historical digression that starts at the time of Pope Pelagius I in the sixth century and ends with the death of the Emperor Frederic II in the middle of the thirteenth.⁷ James of Voragine used many different sources for this historical section, but for its structure he mainly relied on two: the *Historia Langobardorum* by Paul the Deacon, for the period up until around the year 600 (*LA* 177.4–75), and then the last chapter of the *Speculum naturale* by his fellow Dominican Vincent of Beauvais, for the period from the conversion of the Lombards to the end (*LA* 177.151–406). Between these two sections lies the excursus on Muhammad (*LA* 177.76–150), which constitutes around one-sixth of the entire chapter.

James of Voragine introduces the long passage on Muhammad with some precise chronological references and a rather vague indication of his sources:

Huius Bonifacii tempore mortuo Phoca et regnante Eraclio circa annos domini DCX Magumethus pseudo propheta et magus Agarenos siue Ismaelitas, id est Saracenos, hoc modo decepit, sicut legitur in quadam hystoria ipsius et in quadam chronica. (*LA* 177.76)

[It was in the time of Boniface IV, about the year of the lord 610, when Phocas was dead and Heraclius reigned in his place, that Magumeth, a false prophet and sorcerer, began to lead in to error the Agarenes or Ishmaelites, whom we call Saracens. This, as we read in a history of Magumeth and in a certain chronicle, came about in the following way.] (*Golden Legend*, p. 370)

Pope Boniface IV had been just mentioned for having asked and obtained from the Emperor Phocas (602–10) a formal declaration that

6. John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

7. On the sources and importance of chap. 177 of the *Golden Legend*, see Stefano Mula, "L'Histoire des Lombards: Son rôle et son importance dans la *Legenda aurea*," in *De la Sainteté à l'hagiographie: Genèse et usage de "la Légende Dorée"*, ed. Barbara Fleith and Franco Morenzoni (Geneva: Droz, 2001), pp. 75–95.

the Church of Rome, Saint Peter's see, was the head of all churches. It is thus in the context of Rome's supremacy that James of Voragine inserts his digression on what he saw as a most dangerous "heresy": Islam.

While the mention of a "certain history about him" and a "certain chronicle" are not very helpful and probably misleading, we can identify two of James of Voragine's sources. The first is Hugh of Fleury's *Chronicon*, though it is possible that James of Voragine found these passages in Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale*, which also contains them.⁸ The second source, as noted by d'Ancona and more recently by Tolan, is the fifth chapter of Alfonsi's *Dialogi contra Iudaeos*.⁹ James of Voragine exploits parts of Alfonsi's work, but in the first part he simply relies on descriptive material, provided by the Jew in the dialogue, who tends simply to describe the habits and the religion of the Muslims, and it is only in the last part that he makes use of the part of Alfonsi's text that is critical of Islam. James of Voragine seems to have made a clear and evident effort to be "objective" on one side, even though his ultimate goal was to discredit what he saw as a most pernicious heresy.

But the beginning of James of Voragine's text does not come from either of these two sources, and instead he opens with an *exemplum* intended to discredit the ability of Muhammad to do miracles. Muhammad, so the story goes, was instructed by a very famous cleric, "clericus quidam valde famosum," on how to deceive his people. He only had to put some grains in his ear and train a dove to come and eat it there: this way, Muhammad would be able to pretend that the dove was nothing less than the Holy Spirit. Muhammad followed the advice, the people believed him, and immediately afterward he began to invade the Persian kingdom and the Eastern Empire (*LA* 177.77–84).¹⁰ The unknown man is part of the larger tradition of Muhammad's life and is variously called Bahira, Waraqa, or, as also later in the *Golden Legend*, Sergius. I have not yet been able to trace this *exemplum* to

8. I have not been able to access the ancient edition of Hugh's *Chronicon*, but the relevant passage that I will use as a reference in this article is quoted in Rodney M. Thomson, "William of Malmesbury and Some Other Western Writers on Islam," in *Medieval Hagiography and Romance*, ed. Paul Maurice Clogan, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture, n.s. 6 (Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 179–87, esp. pp. 181–82; Vincentius Bellouacensis (Vincent of Beauvais), *Speculum quadruplex* (Douai, 1624). The *Speculum historiale* is the fourth volume, and the *Naturale* is the first. The passage from Hugh is in *Speculum historiale* 23.39.

9. Tolan notes James of Voragine's use of Alfonsi in *Petrus Alfonsi*, pp. 109–10.

10. The last line about the invasions is probably taken from Sigebertus Gemblacensis, *Chronica*, sub anno 630, ed. L. C. Bethmann (Berlin, 1819).

any specific source, but the story of the dove became popular, and Frederic Tubach lists six different *exempla* collections, all composed after the *Golden Legend*, containing it.¹¹ James of Voragine does not comment on the story, but, in a later revision of the *Golden Legend*,¹² adds a line expressing doubts of its reliability: *Hoc quidem uulgariter dicitur, sed uerius est quod inferius habetur* (LA 177.85). [This at least is the popular story, but the following account is closer to the truth (*Golden Legend*, p. 370).]

This passage reminds the reader of other moments in the *Golden Legend* when James of Voragine invites the reader to use caution regarding what he has written, even if he still clearly deems the story worth noting. He mentions an apocryphal story as the source for the passages on Judas (LA 45.14: *Legitur enim in quadam hystoria licet apocrypha . . .*), on Nero in the chapter on Saint Peter (LA 84.212: *ut in quadam hystoria licet apocrypha legitur . . .*; LA 84.243: *Hec autem in chronicis non leguntur, sed apocrypha sunt*), and at various other moments when he mentions Pontius Pilate.¹³ In this case, James of Voragine informs us that his source is probably an oral one and, for this reason, less reliable than the chronicle he has used for the rest. But immediately afterward, James of Voragine, in a passage that he has taken from Vincent of Beauvais (*Speculum historiale*, 23.40), seems to reaffirm the validity of what he has just said. He writes that Muhammad created his own laws, pretending that the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove dictated them to him. He no longer mentions that it was a trick, but the gist remains the same.

The following section (LA 177.86–101) is based mainly on Hugh of Fleury, either directly or through the *Speculum historiale* (23.39), but also contains small notes, such as an explanation of the prohibition on eating pork (LA 177.89–91), that have been gathered from other sources, among which probably the *Liber contra sectam sive haeresim*

11. Frederic C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki: Akademia Scientiarum Finnica, 1969), n. 1762. A shorter reference to the same story is also in Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale* 23.40. According to d'Ancona, the ultimate source should be the *Libellus in partibus transmarinis de Machometi fallaciis* (*La leggenda* [n. 2 above], p. 59).

12. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, the recent editor of the *Golden Legend*, distinguishes mainly between a first and a second version of the *Golden Legend* (see his introduction to the *Legenda aurea* [n. 1 above], pp. xiii–xxxv), but the manuscript tradition of James of Voragine's text is such that Maggioni writes about the many Golden Legends (Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, "Le molte *Legende auree*, Modificazioni testuali e itinerari narrativi," in Fleith and Morenzoni, eds., pp. 15–40).

13. For a more detailed discussion of the role of the references to apocryphal literature in the *Golden Legend*, see Remi Gounelle, "Sens et usage d'*apocryphus* dans la *Légende dorée*," *Apocrypha* 5 (1994): 189–210.

Saracenorum by Peter the Venerable.¹⁴ It is from Hugh's text that James derives such major points in the prophet's biography as his career as a merchant, the cause of many of his encounters with Jews and Christians, his mixing up truth and falsehood in his Qur'an, his marrying a widow called Cadigan, and finally the epileptic crises of Muhammad that were presented as visions of the Archangel Gabriel.

At this point the search for sources seems to become more complicated, since James of Voragine's indication of where he found his information is as vague as ever. In the span of just a couple of sentences we can find (1) "elsewhere, however, we read" [*Alibi tamen legitur*], (2) "still another source tells us" [*licet alibi legatur*], (3) "so they say" [*ut asserunt*, all three quotations from LA 177.102], and finally (4) "they say" [*ut tradunt*, LA 177.104]. In fact, it seems that the sources can be reduced to Alfonsi's *Dialogi* and Hugh of Fleury's text. The "elsewhere" of the first case refers to the source of the story of a monk called Sergius, who supposedly helped Muhammad to learn the basic elements of Christianity, and this is almost certainly from the *Dialogi* (p. 95). To the second source (*licet alibi legatur*) we owe the information that Sergius was indicated as an archdeacon from Antioch. But here again we can find an almost literal borrowing from the *Dialogi*: "Fuit etiam eo tempore in regione Antiochiaie archidiaconus quidam, nomine Sergius, amico Mohamet et Iacobita" (p. 95). For the third possible source (*ut asserunt*), the *Dialogi* is again the most probable candidate, with a passage immediately preceding the one we just mentioned. Here (p. 95) the Jacobites and their heresy are mentioned, even if Sergius is not explicitly linked with this group of heretics.

A comparison of the two passages from the *Dialogi* and the *Golden Legend* will give an idea of James of Voragine's reworking and misunderstanding of his source:

Dialogi

Arabum tunc temporis maior pars milites erant atque agricolae et ipsi fere omnes ydolatrae, preter quosdam, qui Moysi legem secundum Samaritanos tenebant heretice, et alios Christianos, qui Nestorianos erant et Iacobitae. Iacobitae autem sunt heretici,

Legenda aurea

Alibi tamen legitur quod fuerit quidam monachus qui Magumethum instruxit nomine Sergius qui in errorem Nestorii incidens dum a monachis fuisset expulsus in Arabiam uenit et Magumetho adhesit, licet alibi legatur quod fuerit archidiaconus

14. Edition of the text in Kritzeck, pp. 220–91. In particular, the idea that Muhammad consciously mixed truth and untruth in his Qur'an (LA 177.92–93) follows Peter the Venerable's discussion at the end of his second chapter (pp. 288–89), without being a literal transposition.

a quodam Iacobo dicti
circumcisionem predicantes,
Christumque non deum, sed
hominem tantum iustum, de
Spiritu Sancto conceptum et de
virgine natum. Fuit etiam eo
tempore in regione Antiochiaie
archidiaconus quidam, nomine
Sergius, amicus Mahomet et
Iacobita, unde ad concilium
vocatus est et dampnatus. (p. 95)

[In that time the larger part of the Arabs were soldiers and farmers, and they were almost all idolaters, apart from some, who followed heretically the Samaritans' interpretation of the Law of Moses, and other Christians, who were Nestorians and Jacobites. Jacobites are in fact heretics, called from a certain Jacob, who practice circumcision, say that Christ is not God, but only a righteous man, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. At that time, in the region of Antiochia, there was a certain Archdeacon, called Sergius, a friend of Mahomet and a Jacobite, for which reason he was summoned to the council and condemned.]

in partibus Antiochie degens et fuerit, ut asserunt, Iacobita, qui circumcisionem predicant Christumque non deum, sed hominem tantum iustum, de spiritu sancto conceptum et de virgine natum affirmant, que omnia Saraceni creduntur. Predictus igitur Sergius Magumethum de nouo et uetero testamento, ut tradunt, plura edocuit.

[Elsewhere, however, we read that it was a monk named Sergius who instructed Magumeth. Sergius had fallen into the Nestorian heresy and been expelled by the monks, whereupon he went to Arabia and joined company with Magumeth. Still another source tells us that he was an archdeacon in the area of Antioch and was (so they say) a Jacobite: this sect practices circumcision and preaches that Christ was not God but only a righteous man, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. All this the Saracens affirm and believe. In any case it was Sergius who, they say taught Magumeth much about the Old and the New Testaments.] (*Golden Legend*, p. 371)

The three sources claimed by James of Voragine are reduced to one, somewhat misread. It will not be a surprise that the fourth reference is again based on a later passage of the *Dialogi* (still p. 95), mixed with a sentence from Hugh of Fleury.¹⁵ There is no need for us to attribute directly to James of Voragine himself this exorbitant number of sources and the erroneous statement identifying Sergius as a Jacobite. This is not the place to discuss the question in detail, but I think we can take this as a clear indication that, at least for this historical section, James of Voragine worked with a team whose job was to extract notes from larger texts, which James later incorporated into his

15. Hugh of Fleury's passage reads: "[Muhammad] coepit nouas leges fingere, et eis tradere, adhibens ipsis legibus testimonia de utroque Testamento" (Thompson, p. 182).

own narrative.¹⁶ Working with a number of notes on Sergius, it would have been easy for James of Voragine to assume that each note came from a different source, even if all of them came from the *Dialogi*.

From this point on, the main source continues to be Alfonsi's *Dialogi*. Alfonsi is mostly known today for his *Disciplina clericalis*, a very successful collection of thirty-four short stories, often reemployed in later *exempla* collections, presented in the form of a dialogue between a master and his disciple. But Alfonsi's earlier work, the *Dialogi*, was most important for medieval knowledge of Islam. This work, composed around 1108–10, contains twelve dialogues between two men: Peter, a Christian, and Moses, the Jew. Peter and Moses represent, in Tolan's words, Alfonsi's two selves: the Jew he was born, and the Christian he became. The dialogues are mostly meant as Alfonsi's defense of his conversion against Jewish attacks. Alfonsi, born in Andalusia, not only attacks Judaism but tries to explain why, having had the choice, he did not convert to Islam. His answer is contained in the fifth dialogue, meant as a total refutation of Muhammad's life and opinions.

It is not necessary to detail James of Voragine's borrowings from the *Dialogi*. The most interesting aspects are James's elimination of the fiction of the dialogue and his reliance for his first, descriptive section mostly on what Moses the Jew said about Muhammad and Islam but also on the less aggressive aspects of Peter's exposition. The final result is a text that in its first part looks more like a simple description than an attack on Islam or a defense of Christianity.

One aspect to note is that James of Voragine returns to the history of the dove and to the trustworthiness of that account: "Et sic Magumethus totius gentis illius prophetam se simulando obtinuit principatum omnesque sibi sponte uel timore gladii crediderunt. Et istud est uerius quam illud quod supra de columba est dictum et sic est tenendum" (*LA* 177.112–13). [Thus Magumeth, by pretending to be a prophet, gained control over the entire Arab nation, and they all believed him either willingly or for fear of the sword. This account is more true than what was said about the dove, and is therefore to be accepted (*Golden Legend*, p. 181.)]

Inserted in the excerpts from the *Dialogi* are also other notes from one or more still unidentified sources, such as the fact that Sergius, being a monk, decided to impose on the "Saracens" the use of the typical monkish wear and the prayer toward the South, as opposed to Jews praying toward the West and Christians toward the East (*LA* 177.114). Later, the description of the three rivers of Paradise could find its origin in a short mention in Hugh of Fleury's *Chronicon*, but all the details seem to come from some other source. The last section

16. Mula, pp. 92–93.

returns to the *Dialogi*, and it contains the most straightforward criticism of those who believe in Muhammad. This curious passage deserves to be quoted in full:

Mentiuntur quoque de eo quod luna ad eum accessit, quam ille in sinu recipiens in partes duas diuisit et iterum coniunxit. Venenum insuper sibi in carne agnina oblatum fuisse dicunt. Agnus autem ei locutus est dicens: "Caue ne me sumas quia in me habeo uenenum." Et tamen post plures annos ueneno sibi dato interiit. (*LA* 177.146–50)

[(The Saracens) also falsely assert regarding him that the moon once came to him, and he took it in his lap and divided it into two parts, then put it together again. Moreover, they say that the poisoned flesh of a lamb was once set before him. The lamb spoke to him, saying: "Beware and do not eat me, because I have poison in me." Yet after many years poison was given to him and he perished.] (*Golden Legend*, p. 373)

The passage is heavily indebted to one of Moses' questions to Peter in the *Dialogi*:

Quare nulla probabilitate demonstratum prophetam dixeris, quem ratis miraculis denotatum esse frequenter audieris? Nonne prophetam eum brutum animal, bos uidelicet Doregele, nuncupavit? Nonne per utramque manicam ingressa luna, de sinu redintegrata progrediens, prophetam eum mirificum designavit? . . . Mirum etiam fuit, quod, cum ficum arborem, ut ad se veniret, vocavit, venit quidem arbor ad eum, et ipse de fructu eius comedit, et brachium ovis, quod inuenenatum sibi erat in scutella appositum, cum eo loquutum est et dixit: "Ne me comedas, quia sum inuenenatum." (*Dialogi*, p. 96)

[Why did you say that he was not proved a prophet in any way, when you often heard him being famous for his miracles? Isn't it true that even a brute animal such as the cow Doregele called him a prophet? Isn't it true that the moon showed him a wonderful prophet by entering from both sleeves and coming out of his bosom whole? . . . It was also marvelous when he ordered a certain fig tree to come to him, and the tree came, and he ate of its fruit, and when a leg of a lamb, poisoned and put in a dish for him, started speaking to him saying: "Don't eat me, because I am poisoned."]

James of Voragine does not follow Peter's answers but simply provides a negative answer to Moses' rhetorical questions to conclude in a very effective way with a line whose source is not Alfonsi: "Yet after many years poison was given to him, and he perished." Instead of explaining why and how Muhammad's supposed miracles were false, James of Voragine concludes with the death of the prophet by poison, thus showing his mortality and lack of foreknowledge.

III. THE LIFE OF THE PROPHET AS A REVERSED SAINT'S LIFE

For the reader of the *Golden Legend*, there are many recurring elements in the lives of all the saints, and one crucial point is the presence of miracles. Alain Boureau has studied the different typologies of miracles in James of Voragine's work,¹⁷ showing their central role in James of Voragine's narrative system. For James of Voragine, the miracle showed that the individual saint was blessed with God's grace and thus was a necessary sign of his or her sanctity. When we move to Muhammad, it is well known that one important element in the criticism of Muhammad of authors such as Peter the Venerable is the fact that the Prophet never accomplished any miracles. This fact alone was considered enough to discredit Muhammad as a prophet and as a saint. It should be no surprise, then, that Muhammad's life in the *Golden Legend* begins with the story of a false miracle and ends with an example of his failure to foresee the future. The negative *exemplum* of the dove indicates to the medieval Christian, used to miracle-performing saints, that Muhammad was utterly incapable of miracles and that by consequence he lacked divine grace.

The same *exemplum* of the dove also mocks Muhammad's pretense of receiving revelations from Gabriel. We find here a reversal of the role of the revelation in a typical saint's life.¹⁸ James of Voragine does not have to stress in any way the similarities and differences between the lives of the saints and Muhammad's life. In his carefully constructed text, based on the reemployment of different sources, but remodeled to fit his purpose, Muhammad appears as the embodiment of the opposite of the virtues presented earlier in the *Golden Legend*. If the saints had a place in the cyclical time of the Christian calendar year, Muhammad is integrated in human history, destined to failure and transience. By incorporating Muhammad's life in his historical chronicle, James of Voragine was rhetorically trying to show that Muhammad's time was already gone, and his heresy doomed to fail.

IV. CONCLUSION

James of Voragine was not Peter the Venerable or Alfonsi. His work, the *Golden Legend*, was not meant to fight a heresy or to convince Muslims of the mistakes in their beliefs. Rather, it was meant as a database for preachers and as a historical text, not of human history

17. Alain Boureau, "La Légende dorée": *Le système narratif de Jacques de Voragine* († 1298) (Paris: Cerf, 1984), esp. pp. 153–65.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 165–69.

but of Christian history. It is certainly not necessary to show here how the *Golden Legend* functioned as an incredible mine of information for preachers, collectors of *exempla*, and artists. James of Voragine himself reused parts of it in sermons and in his *Chronicle of Genua*. It is in this chronicle, for instance, that we can find a shortened version of his life of the Prophet.¹⁹ The role of the section on Muhammad, then, was not to convince but to communicate what James of Voragine thought was the objective truth about Islam and its founder. Inserting this life inside his historical chapter, and at the same time reversing the order of the narrative he used for most of his saints' lives, James of Voragine was able to impress rhetorically on his readers the concept that Muhammad was, first, a mere accident in human history, and second, a fake and false prophet. But if James of Voragine's goal was to spread this "truth," the question still remains if he achieved it or not. Reading contemporary literature on medieval Christian writers on Islam and their neglect of the *Golden Legend*, it would seem that James of Voragine failed and that his work was read for everything but Muhammad. I would like to suggest otherwise, and though I cannot bring any unassailable evidence, I think indirect data from the *Golden Legend* manuscript tradition and from two anonymous Italian verse translations of Brunetto Latini's *Trésor* can shed new light on the fortune of James of Voragine's passage on Islam.

We can gather some information on the success of the chapter on Pelagius from the diffusion of the *Golden Legend* as a whole. James of Voragine's work was widely copied and modified, sometimes with additions, sometimes in fragmentary form. The relevance of the historical section of chapter 177 is clearly indicated by its presence in a large number of manuscripts of the Latin text, but also in some of its translations.²⁰ While this transmission only indicates the fortune of the chapter as a whole, a change of the title of the chapter in the manuscript tradition provides a further clue. As Barbara Fleith has noted in her research on the tradition of the *Golden Legend*, the chapter on Pope Pelagius was known under many different titles: *De Gestis*, *Cronica*, *Langobardorum historia*, but also, more interestingly for us, *Machometus*.²¹ This title, present in the index or on the margin of

19. *Iacopo da Varagine e la sua Cronaca di Genova*, ed. Giovanni Monteleone (Rome: Tipografia del Senato, 1941), 2:236–37.

20. For instance, the chapter is duly translated in the early Catalan version of the *Golden Legend*, *Vides de Sants Rosselloneses, Text català del segle XIII*, ed. Charlotte S. Moenkis Kniazzezh and E. J. Neugaard, 3 vols. (Barcelona: Fundacio Salvador Vives Casajuana, 1977), 3:459–82. The section on Muhammad is at pp. 462–66.

21. Barbara Fleith, *Studien zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der lateinischen "Legenda aurea"* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1991), p. 337.

some fifteen manuscripts,²² provides striking evidence of the importance that the Muhammad section had for at least some of the readers of the *Golden Legend*.

A second element that could shed some light on the fortune of the Muhammad section is more open to interpretation. D'Ancona noted more than a century ago a surprising reference to Muhammad in two late thirteenth-century Italian metrical translations of Brunetto Latini's *Trésor*.²³ In both texts, there is one telling innovation on the traditional story: the prophet's real name is no longer Muhammad, but Pelagius:

Poi li mise in errore Machumitto;
 Ò udito dire che fue monaco e cardinale,
 Che lui lasciò Eradio che dovesse predicare.
 Era di vita et di spirito tanto,
 Che Cristiani e Pagani l'adoravano per santo,
 Et Pelagio era il suo nome;
 Della casa della Colonna di Roma fue sua natione.

[Then Muhammad led them into error / I heard that he was a monk
 and then a cardinal, / And that Eradio allowed him to preach. / He was
 so holy in life and in spirit, / that both Christians and Pagans
 worshipped him as a saint, / And his name was Pelagius; / He came
 from the Roman family of the Colonna.]

Ò trovato e udito novellare
 Ch'Eradio lasciò oltre mare
 Uno de' Cardinali, romano,
 Che predicasse [al popolo?] cristiano,
 Ch'avea nome Pelasgio,

[I found and heard tell / That Eradio left beyond the sea / One of the
 Cardinals, from Rome, / To preach to the Christians, / And who was
 called Pelasgio.]

Certainly, as d'Ancona remarked, we have no evidence that the authors of these two passages used the *Golden Legend*, and they themselves only mention some otherwise unknown oral tradition for the story they report. It could be a coincidence, but I find a more convincing explanation for the confusion to be the presence of the section on Muhammad in chapter 177 of the *Golden Legend* on Pope Pelagius.

Hidden among the saints, James of Voragine's Muhammad went long unnoticed after the Middle Ages, because of the declining fortunes of the *Golden Legend* in the time of the Reformation. Not original in its content, James of Voragine's short life of the prophet was

22. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

23. Texts in d'Ancona (n. 2 above), pp. 33–35; see also pp. 75–76 and 90–91.

probably the most accessible source of information on Islam for a long time and for a great number of people, either directly or indirectly through sermons. Muhammad replaced Pelagius's name in the table of contents of some manuscripts of the *Golden Legend*, and Pelagius was considered as Muhammad's real name in two translations of the *Trésor*. These two small indications attest to the vitality of the Pelagius chapter of the *Golden Legend*, and in particular to the popularity of James of Voragine's version of the life of Muhammad.