

Heirs of the Apostles

*Studies on Arabic Christianity in Honor of
Sidney H. Griffith*

Edited by

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The Utility of Christian Arabic Texts for Qurʾānic Studies

Clare Wilde

1 Traditional Approaches to the Qurʾān

According to Islamic tradition, the Qurʾān—inimitable (Q 17:88) and in clear Arabic (e.g., Q 16:103)—was revealed to the prophet Muhammad between 610 and 632, in the Hijaz in Arabia. As the prophet himself was *ummi*¹ (perhaps meaning he was illiterate, a gentile, or lacking knowledge of biblical languages), his followers memorized, recited, and recorded the revelations. A generation after the prophet's death, the caliph ordered the collection of all records of the known verses and a single official codex—known as the 'Uthmānic version—emerged, in a contested process.² Islamic debates over the Qurʾān did not stop there. By the beginning of the ninth century, Muslims were debating the eternal versus created nature of God's speech. As with the codices of the Qurʾān, the caliph again weighed in, ordering all public officials to profess the created nature of the Qurʾān, but this caliphal inquisition was short lived.³ In fact, normative Islam would later profess its “uncreatedness.”⁴

1 Sebastian Günther, “Muḥammad, the Illiterate Prophet: An Islamic Creed in the Qurʾān and Qurʾānic Exegesis,” *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 4 (2002): 1–26.

2 For a concise overview, see Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); for a Christian Arabic account, see 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, *Risālat 'Abd Allāh ibn Ismāʿīl al-Hāshimī ilā 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī wa-Risālat al-Kindī ilā l-Hāshimī* (London: Bible Lands Missions' Aid Society, 1912). See the English edition in N.A. Newman, ed., *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 365–545, here 452–470; for a detailed discussion, especially in the Shīʿa tradition, see Hossein Modarressi, “Early Debates on the Integrity of the Qurʾān: A Brief Survey,” *Studia Islamica* 77 (1993): 5–39.

3 On the *miḥna*, see John Nawas, “A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for al-Maʾmun's Introduction of the Miḥna,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26 (1994): 615–629; see also Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: the Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Maʾmun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Massimo Campanini, “The Muʿtazila in Islamic history and Thought,” *Religion Compass* 6 (2012): 41–50.

4 As in the eleventh century caliphal edict preserved in Ibn al-Jawzī, Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Alī: *Al-muntaẓam fī taʾrīkh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, ed. Fritz Krenkow, vol. 8 (Hyderabad 1938), 8:109–111. Translated in N. Calder, J. Mojaddedi, and A. Rippin, eds., *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature* (London: Routledge, 2003), 159–162.

Emphasis on the inimitable and uncreated nature of the Qur'ān elevated it above the status of a normal text. In fact, the status of the Qur'ān as Word of God in Islamic tradition has been likened to that of Christ, rather than the Bible, for Christianity. It could be recited and memorized for popular devotion, but its interpretation for legal or other purposes has traditionally been the provenance of scholars, as attested to by the classical works of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *tafsīr* (exegesis). While Sunni narratives have dominated scholarly discussions of the collection and codification of the Qur'ān in Islamic history, as well as in western scholarship,⁵ they are becoming the subject of increased scholarly curiosity. Given the history of governmental interference in the transmission and understanding of the Arabic Qur'ān, the suppressed versions have been the subject of scholarly and confessional interest. Since the 1970s, scholars have questioned the traditional narratives about the timeframe and location of the initial Arabic Qur'ān,⁶ re-examining qur'ānic familiarity with Late Antiquity,⁷ as well as hoping to find some traces of the contents of the suppressed codices.⁸

Although the Qur'ān is generally recognized as the first Arabic book,⁹ even if it was the result of an all-too-human redaction process, Islamic and Christian traditions preserve doubts about the details of the traditional Islamic account of the qur'ānic revelation. Why would God have revealed a clear Arabic revelation to the barely literate Arabs of the Hijaz?¹⁰ A second line of criticism is the qur'ānic relationship to Jewish and Christian lore. Given its familiarity with Syriac and Aramaic traditions, the Qur'ān has been criticized as

5 See Modarressi, "Early Debates," for an excellent overview of historic Shi'a disputes with the received text.

6 Most noteworthy are Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

7 Patricia Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qur'ān (Part One)," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74 (2015): 225–253; Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Qur'ān and the Apostles of Jesus," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76 (2013): 209–227; Emran El-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (London: Routledge, 2014); Holger Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013).

8 Gerd Puin, "Observations on Early Qur'an Manuscripts in Sana," *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science* 27 (1996): 107–112.

9 Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

10 'Abd al-Masīh al-Kindī, *Risāla*; Newman, ed., *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, here 460–465.

merely an Arabized version of Christian or Jewish legends.¹¹ Finally, the earliest qur'ānic archaeological inscriptions are dated to the late seventh century; the most reliably dated early manuscripts are contemporaneous with the earliest manuscripts of the prophetic biography and the collections of ḥadīth (eyewitness accounts of Muhammad's words and deeds). But these are all datable to a century or so after 'Uthmān's purported codification.¹² It is also about this time that the earliest datable Christian Arabic texts emerge.¹³

2 Christian Arabic

Despite its intimate connection with the Qur'ān, Arabic has been the language of many peoples, not just Arabs, and not just Muslims. Christians, for example, were often employed as scribes in the caliphal court, and were instrumental in the translation of Greek texts (often via Syriac) into Arabic.¹⁴ But, due to their Christian theological subject matter and non-adherence to the rules of classical Arabic grammar, Arabic texts authored by Christians are frequently overlooked by Arabists and Islamicists (a recent study estimates that 90% of Christian Arabic texts have yet to be studied).¹⁵ In fact, speaking of the broader category in which Jewish and Christian Arabic texts are often classified, Joshua Blau states: "It is obvious that only in very exceptional cases will one start the study of Arabic with Middle Arabic."¹⁶ Middle Arabic has been understood in a

11 Emran El-Badawi, "The Impact of Aramaic (especially Syriac) on the Qur'ān," *Religion Compass* 8 (2014): 220–228; also in this category are reprints of classic essays, such as Abraham Geiger, "What Did Muhammad Borrow from Judaism?" in *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book*, ed. Ibn Warraq (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998), 165–225, as well as classic polemics such as Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The 'Heresy of the Ishmaelites'* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

12 Gabriel Said Reynolds, "Le problème de la chronologie du Coran," *Arabica* 58 (2011): 477–502. See also Alba Fedeli's recent comment on the so-called "Birmingham Qur'ān" at <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/collective-enthusiasm> (Accessed 8 September 2018).

13 David Thomas, et al., *CMR 1*; Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997).

14 For example, David Thomas, ed., *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in 'Abbasid Iraq* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsī Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th c.)* (London: Routledge, 1998).

15 Alexander Treiger, "The Fathers in Arabic," in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, ed. K. Parry (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2015), 442–455.

16 Joshua Blau, *A Handbook of Early Middle Arabic* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2002), 9.

variety of ways: almost as a “missing link” between classical Arabic and modern dialects,¹⁷ as composed out of ignorance of, or disregard for, the standard rules of Arabic grammar, or as reflecting the distance between these formal rules and the colloquial language.¹⁸

Non-Muslims did not have confessionally-based reasons to admire the linguistic style of the Qurʾān. But as Arabic became the administrative language of the caliphate, those who had a basic level of literacy had practical reasons to adhere to the rules of Arabic grammar. Thus, despite doctrinal disagreements,¹⁹ socio-economic or political dissatisfactions²⁰ and designations such as “Middle” or “Christian” Arabic, it is not always easy—or appropriate—to distinguish between the Christian and Islamic elements of the Arabic patrimony.²¹ Christians and Muslims studied with the same masters, and disputed points of philosophy and theology together. In fact, a number of Arabic texts transcend confessional divisions.²²

Christian Arabic literature²³ is by no means limited to Middle Arabic, or to Christian theological treatises. But Arabophone Christians did develop a rich theological literature in conversation with Muslims and other Christian denominations. Christian Arabic apologetic literature²⁴ is especially noteworthy for its willingness to use not just the Bible, but also the Qurʾān, in support of Christian truths. Unlike other Christians who responded to Islam, Christians who wrote in Arabic could engage the Arabic Qurʾān directly, sometimes even terming it among the books of God (*kutub allāh*).²⁵

17 Blau, *Handbook*, 9.

18 Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 2014), 152–171.

19 Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen, eds., *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1258)* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

20 For differing perspectives on the situation of non-Muslims under Muslim rule, see Bat Yeʾor, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihād to Dhimmitude* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996); Timur Kuran, “The Economic Ascent of the Middle East’s Religious Minorities: The Role of Islamic Legal Pluralism,” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 33 (2004): 475–515; Anver Emon, *Religious Pluralism and Islamic Law: Dhimmis and Others in the Empire of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

21 Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

22 For example, Yahyā ibn ʿAdī, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq: The Reformation of Morals: A Parallel Arabic-English Edition*, ed. and trans., Sidney Griffith (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002).

23 For a comprehensive overview, see Georg Graf, *GCAL*.

24 For discussion of these and other early Christian Arabic apologies, see Samir and Nielsen, eds., *Christian Arabic Apologetics*.

25 Sinai Arabic 434, ff. 171r, 181v, 174r, 175r.

3 Approaches to the Qur'ān in Christian Arabic Texts

Due to the intimate connection between the Qur'ān and the Arabic language,²⁶ all genres of Arabic texts written by Christians often “feel” qur'ānic, even if they are not explicitly engaging the qur'ānic text. Those that employ the qur'ānic text demonstrate a range of approaches to the Arabic revelation, from critical (such as the letter of 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī)²⁷ to conciliatory (like aspects of the texts under discussion here). Christian Arabic apologies frequently take the literary form of a dialogue text in which a Christian is portrayed in communication with a Muslim or a group of Muslims.²⁸ The following examples are drawn from three such texts, all from the Melkite community (Chalcedonian Christians who came under Arab Muslim rule).

The first text is attributed to the early ninth-century bishop of Harran, Theodore Abū Qurra.²⁹ He was summoned by the caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 819–833)³⁰ to debate a number of Muslim notables on the veracity of the Christian religion. The discussion ranges from points of Christian doctrine that are not compatible with Islamic belief (e.g., the divinity of Christ) to pointed attacks on the weaknesses of Islamic faith (e.g., if God is just, what is the eschatological reward for Muslim women if their husbands are promised houris in paradise?). In this debate, the Muslim notables are vanquished—and not just because of Abū Qurra's familiarity with points of Christian doctrine and his ability to

26 Kees Versteegh, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought Volume 111: The Arabic Linguistic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2013); Jonathan Owens, “The Arabic Grammatical Tradition,” chapter 3 of *The Semitic Languages*, ed. R. Hetzron (New York: Routledge, 1997, digital 2005): 46–58; M.A. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); C.H.M. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur'ānic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

27 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, *Risāla*; Newman, ed., *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 365–545.

28 For further discussion of this genre, see Sidney Griffith, “The Monk in the Emir's Majlis: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period,” in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, ed. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999), 13–65.

29 Ignatius Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra avec les ulémas musulmans devant le calife al-Ma'mūn*. (Aleppo: n.p., 1999). Twenty-six manuscripts of the text are known, dating from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in two recensions: Melkite and Jacobite. For the manuscript history of the text, see Griffith, “Monk in the Emir's Majlis,” 38–39. See an English translation and study of this text in Wafik Nasry, *The Caliph and the Bishop: A 9th century Muslim-Christian debate; al-Ma'mūn and Abū Qurrah* (Beirut: CEDRAC, 2008).

30 On the historicity of the encounter between Abū Qurra and al-Ma'mūn, see Sidney Griffith, “Reflections on the biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah,” *Parole de l'Orient* 18 (1993): 143–170, here 156–158.

explain their validity. His victory is also attributable to a deep knowledge of the Qurʾān itself, an ability to employ it in defense of Christian doctrines, and to critique it.³¹

The second text³² is the response of the twelfth-century Paul of Antioch,³³ bishop of Sidon, to Muslim friends in his episcopal see. Having voyaged to Byzantine and Frankish lands, including Rome and the Amalfi coast, Paul wished to explain why these foreign Christians saw no need to become Muslim.³⁴ He uses the Qurʾān to best any objections a Muslim might pose to the positions voiced by these “foreign” Christians.

The final text is preserved in a unique manuscript (Sinai Arabic 434, ff. 171r–181v, copied in 1138–1139), a microfilm copy of which is housed in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. This manuscript contains the response of an anonymous Melkite monk of Jerusalem to three questions posed by a Muslim sheikh. The sheikh has read a “Refutation of the Christians,” and wants the monk’s expert opinion on three questions concerning (1) the relationship of the eternal being of God to the three persons of the trinity; (2) the hypostatic union of God and man in the person of Christ; and (3) the proof of this hypostatic union in the actions of Christ. In his response, this monk, who lived in pre-Crusader Jerusalem,³⁵ employs both biblical and qurʾānic “proof” in support of Christian doctrines.

31 Dick, ed., *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, 80.

32 Paul Khoury, ed. and trans., *Paul d’Antioche: Évêque melkite de Sidon (XII^e s.)* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique Beyrouth, 1965); cited hereafter with the paragraph number Khoury assigned to Paul’s text, as follows: “Khoury, *Paul d’Antioche*, par. .”; English trans.: Sidney H. Griffith, “Paul of Antioch,” in *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World (700–1700): An Anthology of Sources*, ed. Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 216–235. See also David Thomas and Rifaat Ebied’s publication of a parallel text: *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades: The Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī’s Response* (Leiden: Brill, 2004) and the comprehensive discussion in Diego R. Sarrió Cucarella, *Muslim-Christian Polemics across the Mediterranean: The Splendid Replies of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfi* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

33 For further discussion of Paul’s life, see Khoury, *Paul d’Antioche*.

34 This work may well have been the text to which Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) wrote his famous *Refutation of the Christians*. See Thomas Michel’s edition and translation of Ibn Taymiyya’s work: *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya’s al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥiḥ* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1984).

35 Robert Haddad, *La Trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes 750–1050* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), 38. He dates the text to 780 (see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 504–505). A ninth-century date is suggested by Mark Swanson, “Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qurʾān in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies,” *The Muslim World* 88 (1988): 297–319, here 301, n. 25.

Each text has its own tone and they have various manuscript traditions: Sinai Arabic 434 is a unique manuscript for which there is, as yet, no published translation or critical edition, while Paul's and Theodore's tracts are found in various manuscripts, and both have been edited and translated. Yet all three of these texts skillfully intertwine elements familiar from Islamic tradition with Christian theological arguments (e.g., debates over the created or uncreated nature of the Word of God). Each is dialogic in nature: Christians converse with Muslims, defending their faith against the charges and/or inquiries of their Muslim interlocutor(s). They were selected for their relatively respectful engagement with the Qur'ān.

4 Prooftexting

The majority of qur'ānic passages³⁶ in these three texts are, to borrow a phrase from Mark Swanson, "proof-texts." Qur'ānic passages may be quoted in part or in full, but are always read with a Christian or Christianizing gloss. In addition to arguments from reason and Greek philosophy, they selectively employ qur'ānic passages to prove their points. This approach to the Qur'ān disregards traditional Muslim interpretations of the given passages (Muslims are, in fact, portrayed as criticizing Christians for such selective use of the Qur'ān in Paul's text).³⁷ Much as Christians mined the Hebrew Bible for "proofs" that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, Arabophone Christians found qur'ānic proof texts for the veracity of Christianity. Much as Muslims criticized Jews and Christians for mishandling their original scriptures, a common technique in Arabophone Christian apologies was to claim that Muslim interpretation was erroneous, not the Qur'ān itself. For, if Muslims read the Qur'ān correctly, they would see that it confirms Christian truths, such as the divine sonship of Christ or the veracity of the gospel.

Christian prooftexting is facilitated by the extensive qur'ānic allusions to Christianity.³⁸ Although Christians in various times and places have tended to dismiss the Qur'ān as merely reflecting, or informed by, heretical forms of

36 See Clare Wilde, *Approaches to the Qur'ān in Early Christian Arabic Texts* (Palo Alto: Academica Press, 2014) for a comprehensive list of the qur'ānic passages employed by these authors.

37 Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche*, pars. 45–47.

38 There is a succinct overview in Sidney Griffith, "Christians and Christianity," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 6 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:307–316.

Christianity,³⁹ it can also be read as an intentionally polemical text. For example, in its allusions to Jesus and his mother, the Qurʾān appears to be playing on, or responding to, Late Antique Christological debates⁴⁰—disputes over which Christians remain divided until today.

Christian Arabic prooftexting of the Qurʾān ranges from wholesale adoption of some qurʾānic passages to selective reading or ingenious rewording of others. This can extend to qurʾānic accounts that are not found in the canonical New Testament, but which can be read as supporting Christian theology: qurʾānic accounts of Jesus speaking from the cradle or fashioning a bird from clay⁴¹ (Q 3:45–49; 5:110) are cited along with biblical and pagan proofs for Christ's divinity. But the Christian Arab understanding of these miracles is not always faithful to the qurʾānic wording that these miracles were only possible through the *idhn Allāh* (permission of God). Playing on the qurʾānic wording, the anonymous monk of Jerusalem⁴² blithely rereads the qurʾānic text as the miracle occurring *bi-idhn lāhūtihi* ("by the power of his divinity").

Prooftexting is also employed at the level of interpretation, without any rereading or emending of the qurʾānic text. For example, the initial verses of Q 2 prompted much exegetical discussion: why is it "that (*dhālika*) book, in which there is no doubt" if it is, in fact speaking of itself? Should it not have referenced "this" (*hādhā*) book? The Christian gloss provides a simple, if disingenuous, solution. For, the chapter begins with three letters: *a-l-m*.⁴³ As these are the first three letters of "*al-masīh*" (the Messiah), the Qurʾān—if the Muslims only heard it correctly—is praising the veracity of the Gospel! "*Alif—lām—mīm* (read: the Messiah). That book, in which there is no doubt (read: the Gospel) a guide for the pious ..." This is a far cry from the common Islamic interpretation of this passage as a reference to the Qurʾān itself.⁴⁴

39 John of Damascus, *Heresy of the Ishmaelites*.

40 Neal Robinson, "Jesus and Mary in the Qurʾān: Some neglected affinities," *Religion* 20 (1990): 161–175.

41 For a pre-Islamic version of the story, see the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 15:1–7.

42 Sinai Arabic 434, ff. 177v.

43 For further discussion of the disconnected letters that begin some chapters of the Qurʾān, see Keith Massey, "A New Investigation into the 'Mystery Letters' of the Qurʾān," *Arabica* 43 (1996): 497–501 and Devin Stewart, "The Mysterious Letters and Other Formal Features of the Qurʾān in Light of Greek and Babylonian Oracular Texts," in *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context* 2, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2011), 323–348.

44 Sinai Arabic 434, ff. 178v–179r; Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche*, par. 16; see also Theodore's invocation of this passage in his "Confirmation of the Gospel" in John Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 51; for Jewish approaches to

Christian Arabic prooftexting also employs selective reading of certain passages, or of Muslim interpretive traditions critical of Christianity. In their allusions to qur'ānic passages that contain explicit criticisms of Christian doctrine, our authors frequently ignore segments critical of Christian praxis or belief, and focus on those elements that, in fact, accord with Christian doctrine. Q 4:171 is a case in point: in the course of their discussions, all three of our authors emphatically assert their monotheism (and Christology), repeatedly utilizing the combination of God's "Spirit" (*rūḥ*) and "Word" (*kalima*) of the verse ("Jesus, son of Mary, was a messenger of God and his word, which he conveyed to Mary and a spirit from him")—effectively overlooking the passage's criticisms of Christian beliefs ("do not exaggerate in your religion" and "do not say three" and "exalted is [God] above having a son").

In keeping with their generally respectful tone and their own apologetic agenda, these re-readings are careful not to criticize the Qur'ān; that criticism which is apparent is leveled at the later Muslim community, for misinterpreting the qur'ānic meaning (especially regarding Jesus as the Messiah). Given their apologetic agenda and frequent adjustments of qur'ānic wording to suit their own theological views, Christian Arabic re-readings of qur'ānic passages are unlikely to yield reliable information on the precise form in which their authors knew the Qur'ān. These texts do, however, give valuable information about the familiarity of Christian Arabs with the Qur'ān, the freedom with which they quoted it, and the fact that Christians and Muslims did not necessarily read the Qur'ān in isolation from each other. For, even though Christian Arabic re-readings of these qur'ānic passages do not conform to Muslim interpretations, classical works of Islamic exegesis indicate some familiarity with Christian interpretive frameworks.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Christian Arabic apologies often require an awareness of Islamic theology to be fully understood, as with the aforementioned play on *idhn Allāh*.

5 *Contra Iudaeos*

A second aspect of these Christian Arabic dialogue texts is their continuation of ancient Christian "Contra Iudaeos" argumentation, arguments that also

these letters as signifying a false prophet, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 505–508.

45 For example, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr (Mafātīḥ al-ghayb)*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyi l-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, 32 vols. in 16 (Cairo: n.p., 1933), ad Q 2:2–3.

occur in some Muslim glosses of qur'ānic passages, such as the identification of “those with whom [God is] angry” (Q 1:6) as the Jews.⁴⁶ Late Antique Christianity already used “anti-Jewish” strategies in their writings.⁴⁷ Before the Arabic Qur'ān appeared, Christians would argue that God was angry at the Jews for killing his prophets (1 Thessalonians 2:14–16; Psalm 106/105:37–39).⁴⁸ The Qur'ān, as well as later Islamic interpretations, can therefore also be understood as engaging, or reflecting, Late Antique Christian-Jewish polemics, rather than as introducing some new form of anti-Jewish rhetoric.

Similarly, Jews and later Muslims could accuse Christians of “straying” from true monotheism,⁴⁹ such as when they profess their belief in the “son” of God, even if such discussions were framed in abstract theoretical philosophy. Indeed, to Late Antique observers, Christianity could have seemed a syncretism of a Semitic monotheism into a Greco-Roman polytheistic pantheon, rather than a strict Semitic monotheism.⁵⁰ In their defense of Christian faith, Christian Arab apologists not only made selective use of the qur'ānic distinction (Q 49:14) between true faith (*īmān*) and mere outward submission (*islām*), but also repeated tropes familiar from pre-Islamic Christian treatises on the truth of Christianity taken from anti-Jewish polemics. Rather than defending their fellow biblical adherents, these Christian Arabic debate texts denounced Jewish errors, including their rejection of Jesus and their killing of the prophets (glosses of Q 4:155) and worshipping the golden calf (Q 4:153).

Furthermore, Christian Arabic texts often appear more critical of Jews and Judaism than either qur'ānic passages or later Islamic interpretations—a tendency that one of Theodore's Muslim interlocutors challenges:

I see you, the community of Christians, maintaining that the Messiah is your God and that the Jews crucified him. If the Jews did crucify him with

46 See the discussion of various glosses of this passage in Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

47 Guy Stroumsa, “From Anti-Judaism to Antisemitism in Early Christianity,” in *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, ed. Ora Limor and Guy Stroumsa (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 1–26, here 5.

48 Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche*, pars. 19 and 24.

49 See for example Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Sā'id 'Alī, et al., 30 vols. (Cairo: n.p., 1954–1957), ad Q 1:7 for Christians as those who are “astray.”

50 On this theme, see Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984); Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); or Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

his consent, then there is no crime imputable to them for it, but if it was without his consent, then he is a weak Lord.⁵¹

These Christian Arabic texts⁵² refute common glosses of sūrat al-Fātiḥa, in which those who are “astray” (Q 1:7) are the Christians, but make no such efforts to correct traditional Islamic glossings of “those at whom [God] is angry” (Q 1:6) as applicable to the Jews.⁵³

Christian Arab “anti-Semitism” is an understudied aspect of Christian anti-Semitism, Christian Arabic texts, and the history of Islamic “anti-Semitism.”⁵⁴ Modern Arab (Muslim or Christian) anti-Jewish sentiment is entangled with geopolitical concerns, such as Zionism and the policies of the “Jewish” state of Israel. The anti-Jewish sentiments found in early Christian Arabic texts may also have had some basis in contemporaneous social realities. As Christians who came under Arab Muslim rule had to adjust their triumphal theology to accommodate the new reality of being not only second class citizens under Muslim rule, but also the socio-economic and political equivalents of Jews, some Christians who wrote in Arabic may have developed an even more virulent theological aversion to Judaism, to compensate for their lack of political power vis-à-vis “vanquished” Judaism. This may have been all the more true for the Melkites who, as Chalcedonian Christians, especially under Justinian, held a privileged position vis-à-vis Jews and heretics, including non-Chalcedonian Christians.⁵⁵ Given the conversance of Christians and Muslims in the early Islamic period, a deeper understanding of Christian Arabic contra-Iudaeos argumentation might shed light on the history of anti-Jewish rhetoric in the Islamic tradition.

51 Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 116.

52 Ibid., 75.

53 For example, the *tafsīrs* of Muqātil (d. 150/767) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923).

54 For some relevant insights, see Sidney Griffith, “Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century,” *Jewish History* 3 (1988): 65–94; Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986).

55 See for example Justinian's *Novella* 131, ch. 14 (dated to 545); English translation available on http://droitromain.upmf-grenoble.fr/Anglica/N131_Scott.htm (Last accessed 7 June 2016).

6 Intra-Muslim Debates

The third way in which Christian Arabic texts employ the Qurʾān is in their representation of Muslim beliefs, practices, and disputes that have no obvious bearing on Christian theological concerns. Such representations may occur as analogies to Christian theological dilemmas that Muslims criticize. For example, the Islamic attempt to reconcile God's multiple attributes (as exemplified in the qurʾānic names of God) with his oneness is employed by Christian Arabic authors in support of their argument that the Trinity does not compromise the oneness of God.⁵⁶ Elsewhere, Christian Arabs criticize Islamic beliefs or practices (e.g., belief in *houris* or accounts of the affair of Zayd's wife are common themes)⁵⁷ as a "response" to Muslim criticisms of Christianity (e.g., Christian suppression of bodily desires in asceticism and sexual abstinence⁵⁸). The appearance of such themes in Christian Arabic texts attest to the conversance of their authors with Islamic tradition.

Given their authors' familiarity with Islamic traditions, a close reading of Christian Arabic texts may also provide insight to the historical context of the Qurʾān and its reception that may have been lost to normative Islam. For example, in the course of his debate, Abū Qurra addresses the charge that the Bible has been corrupted with an assertion that Q 108 (al-Kawthar) and Q 111 (which contains a curse on Abū Lahab and his wife, traditionally understood as relatives of Muhammad) are "something bearing no resemblance to inspiration and revelation. It is not true that your messenger said any of this."⁵⁹ Although Abū Qurra's text provides no further information as to the "real" provenance of these passages, or the reason for their appearance in the Qurʾān, this allusion to Q 108 and Q 111 in a Christian Arabic apologetic text is noteworthy on three accounts. First, the seeming ability of a Christian to criticize the qurʾānic text with apparent impunity strikes a modern reader for the freedom of expression—in Arabic—allowed under early ʿAbbāsīd rule. Second, these passages have no bearing on the customary criticisms that Muslims would level at Christians. As such, this passing remark indicates that Christians who wrote in Arabic did not limit themselves to responding to Muslim criticisms of Christianity, but extended the scope of their polemics to points that Muslim themselves were debating. This leads to the third point: Abū Qurra's inclusion

⁵⁶ For example, Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche*, par. 32.

⁵⁷ For example, Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 86.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

of Q 108 and Q 111 in his apology, and the allusion to some connection between these two passages that is not readily apparent from Islamic tradition, indicates a familiarity with a debate in Islamic tradition that, presumably, his audience would have known. As such, this casual reference in a Christian Arabic text may help illuminate details of the reception history of the Qur'ān that the normative Islamic tradition may have lost.

While Q 108 and Q 111 are unlikely participants in Christian-Muslim theological debates, Muslim exegetes have devoted much ink to these brief sūras. Both have been used by Muslim exegetes to “prove” the miraculous or inimitable nature of the Qur'ān, while “heterodox” strains in the Islamic tradition also reflect doubts about their inimitable merits.⁶⁰ The conflicting traditions relating to these chapters indicate a history of tumultuous and varied interpretation. But—like much of early Islamic intellectual history—Islamic tradition is not forthcoming as to the reasons for the varied interpretations. The allusive nature of Abū Qurra's remarks indicates that he is echoing a discussion already present in his milieu; careful reading of this casual allusion in a Christian Arabic text might illuminate our understanding of the range of interpretations that have been present in Islamic tradition.

Although “al-Kawthar” (Q 108:1) has been the focus of much Islamic exegesis, Abū Qurra focuses on the identity of another word in the chapter, *al-abtar* (“the one without offspring”), tying it to Q 111, a chapter traditionally understood as a curse on one of Muḥammad's uncles.⁶¹ Although Islamic tradition has generally understood the “one without offspring” of Q 108:3 to be a certain Qurayshite opposed to Muhammad, the interpreter Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) records a minority understanding of *al-abtar* as referring to Abū Lahab, the individual explicitly cursed in Q 111.⁶² In Islamic tradition, Abū Lahab is identified as one of Muhammad's uncles; as the qur'ānic curse demonstrates, prophetic kinship is not necessarily a guarantor of virtue—a potential problem for the 'Abbāsids, who based their legitimacy in part on prophetic kinship. As Theodore's debate is set in the time of the early 'Abbāsid caliph al-Ma'mūn, his allusion to doubts about the status of Q 111 and Q 108 may illuminate the background to the tradition preserved by al-Rāzī, as well as why both might have become disputed passages. As Christian Arabic texts were not subject to the dictates of normative Islam, careful reading of these texts in the light of Islamic tradition might

60 This is analyzed in Clare Wilde, “The Qur'ān: *Kalām Allāh* or words of man? A case of *tafsīr* transcending Muslim-Christian communal borders,” *Parole de l'Orient* 32 (2007): 1–17.

61 For a discussion of scholarship on this sūra, see Uri Rubin, “Abū Lahab and Sura CXI,” in *The Qur'ān: Style and Contents*, ed. A. Rippin (Aldershot: Ashgate 2001), 269–286.

62 Rāzī, *Tafsīr* ad Q 108:3.

shed light on how political intrigue, as well as linguistic merits, contributed to theological debates over the inimitability and created/uncreated nature of the Qurʾān.

7 Christian Arabic Texts and the Qurʾānic Muṣḥaf?

Recent finds of ancient Qurʾān manuscripts, either as palmipsests (in Sanaʾa) or misfiled in a library collection (in Birmingham)⁶³ have given scholars renewed hope of finding physical textual evidence of the form(s) in which the Qurʾān first circulated. Given their relatively early provenance and supposed freedom from caliphal regulation (or lack of concern for the dictates of normative Islam), Christian Arabic texts have also been posited as sources that preserved alternative verses circulating in early Qurʾāns. While Christian Arabic texts merit further study for the light they could shed on the form(s) in which early readers or auditors knew the Qurʾān, the larger polemical enterprise in which Christians were employing the Qurʾān must also be remembered. For example, in *Answers for the Shaykh*, the anonymous monk writes the “mysterious letters” at the beginning of Q 2 as “*al-mīm*”⁶⁴ instead of the customary usage of three separate Arabic letters: ’—l—m. Is this orthography more likely a literary device to underscore the point he is making, or a reflection of the qurʾānic text known to him? (Paul of Antioch’s text uses the customary orthography in his discussion of this passage.)⁶⁵ Although Theodore Abū Qurra’s text cites Q 108 and 111 with a few slight deviations from the received qurʾānic codex and known variant readings,⁶⁶ in the absence of other evidence, the variations are as likely to be scribal errors or evidence of citation from (faulty) memory (e.g., Q 111:4 is written with “foot” instead of “neck”) as they are to be attestations to otherwise unattested versions of the Qurʾān. Given their casual attention to precise citation of the Arabic Qurʾān elsewhere, a claim for a Christian Arabic citation of a qurʾānic variant would need to have additional, external corroboration to be credible.

63 For concise popular overviews of both of these finds, see Toby Lester, “What is the Koran,” *The Atlantic* (January 1999), available on <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/01/what-is-the-koran/304024> and Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Variant Readings: The Birmingham Qurʾān in the Context of Debate on Islamic Origins,” *The Times Literary Supplement* (7 August 2015): 14–15, available on http://www.academia.edu/25775465/Variant_readings_The_Birmingham_Qur_an_in_the_Context_of_Debate_on_Islamic_Origins_Times_Literary_Supplement_7_Aug_2015_14-15.

64 Sinai Arabic 434, f. 178v.

65 Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche*, par. 16.

66 See the discussion in Wilde, “The Qurʾān: *Kalām Allāh* or words of man?”

8 Concluding Remarks: Christian Arabic Texts and Qur'ānic Studies

Textual manipulation and interpretation are longstanding devices used to trump an opponent's argument. Recognizing that the Bible of the Christians would not persuade Muslims, Christians turned to the Qur'ān for support of Christian doctrinal articulations.⁶⁷ They would use the Qur'ān much as they did the Bible or Greek philosophy, as a proof (*burhān*) in support of their own apologetic or polemical agendas. In this context, certain Christian Arabic texts are remarkable for both their conversance with Islamic tradition, as well as the seeming freedom with which they approached the qur'ānic text.⁶⁸

That they may have abused this freedom, or become too adept in their apologetic *tafsīr*, may be indicated by the prohibition on Christians teaching the Qur'ān to their children found in some versions of the Covenant of Umar.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, particularly when Christians, in Arabic, allude to interpretations of the Qur'ān with which we are unfamiliar, we should listen closely. For Christians who were intent on defending the truth and virtue of Christianity, including their Scripture, would likely have been very attuned to, and may also have contributed to, any discussions of infelicities in the inimitable and uncreated Word of God. And, as they were not subject to the same strictures of normative Islam as their Muslim neighbors, these texts may provide us with information about the ways in which the Qur'ān has been interpreted—ways that normative Islam may have forgotten.

Building on the work of Sidney Griffith, this chapter has argued that qur'ānic passages found in early Christian Arabic texts—whether as prooftexts, contra-Iudaeos argumentation or reflection of intra-Muslim debates—when read in the light of Islamic tradition and their own apologetic or polemic agendas, illuminate our understanding of early approaches to the Qur'ān. Christian Arabic texts might therefore enhance qur'ānic scholars' understanding of the formative debates concerning the content, form, and nature of the Qur'ān.

67 Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), here 75–92.

68 Dick, ed., *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, 72.

69 See the bibliography on the covenant in Clare Wilde, "We shall not teach the Qur'ān to our children," in *The Place to Go To: Contexts of Learning in Baghdad from the Eighth to Tenth Centuries*, ed. Jens Scheiner and Damien Janos (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2014), 233–259.

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