

## Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period**, edited by Mark Beaumont, Leiden, Brill, 2018, xiv + 216 pp., €95.00/\$110.00 (hardback), ISBN 9789004360747

This collection of essays originated in the seventh Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposium on Arab Christianity held in Birmingham, England, in September 2013. Alongside an introduction by the editor, Mark Beaumont, the book begins with an overview chapter by Sidney Griffith that was not originally a part of the 2013 Symposium. Together, these two sections help to survey the history and previous scholarship of Arab Christians and their use of or connections to the Qur'an. Griffith reminds readers that Christian interests in the Qur'an were 'primarily rhetorical, not exegetical, and not confessional' (19) and argues that their use of the Qur'an was frequently meant to support their claims for Christian doctrine in language that Arabic-speaking Christians could appreciate. Each of the remaining chapters attempts to demonstrate various aspects of how Arab Christians used or interacted with the Qur'an or how Muslim discussions about qur'anic features impinged upon Arab Christianity.

Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala's chapter, the first taken directly from the Symposium, considers how the Qur'an functions as a kind of exegetical device for well-known biblical passages. With this in mind, Monferrer-Sala attempts to reconstruct the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra and concludes that the qur'anic narrative is a mosaic consisting of narrative, homiletic and paraenetic elements (48). In this way, it includes pre-qur'anic material and additional elements that were probably in circulation among Arabic-speaking Christians before the inception of Islam.

In Chapter 3, Sandra Keating looks at the renowned epistolary exchange between al-Hashimī and al-Kindī and suggests that al-Kindī was not a rhetorical figure but a historical Jacobite Christian writing in the early-ninth century (54). She focuses in particular on al-Kindī's use of the Qur'an and shows how arguments so well known to Christian apologetic texts find their origin in al-Kindī's *Risāla* (64). More significantly, she considers how al-Kindī's arguments can help to shed light on the Qur'an's early canonization and historical development.

In the next chapter, Emilio Platti also looks at al-Kindī. Platti spends more time on the sources of the Qur'an and demonstrates that al-Kindī was using Islamic sources in order to make his arguments and interpretations. This use of Islamic sources convinces Platti that the *Risāla* should be 'included in any research on the collection of the Qur'ān' (82).

Mark Beaumont contributes Chapter 5 on 'Ammār al-Baṣrī's use of the Qur'an in his ninth-century treatise. Beaumont asserts that 'Ammār developed a systematic theology that was based on his interaction with Islam. With respect to the Qur'an, Beaumont shows that 'Ammār set out to defend Christian truth by arguing that it was rooted in divine signs, which 'according to the Qur'ān, could not be copied' (104). In this way, 'Ammār's theology was shaped by its Islamic milieu and the predominance of the Qur'an therein.

In Chapter 6, Gordon Nickel explores how the notion of Muḥammad as 'the *ummi* prophet', an expression taken from Q 7.157, was understood in the Islamic interpretive tradition and how Muslim intellectuals used the Bible to support their interpretations even as they developed the accusation of *tahrīf*. Nickel concludes that Muslims' understandings of Muḥammad's prophethood had implications for their interactions with Arab Christians, as

seen in responses from those like al-Kindī, who, in his *Risāla*, was quick to address the accusation that the biblical text was corrupt (130).

In Chapter 7, David Thomas considers a handful of different authors and the use of the Qur'an in their texts. Among them are John of Damascus, Patriarch Timothy I and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī and the texts known as *Fī tathlīth Allāh al-Wāḥid*, the *Disputation between a monk of Bēt Ḥālē and an Arab notable*, and Paul of Antioch's *Risāla ilā ba'd aṣḍiqā'ihī bi-Ṣaydā*. By looking at a wider spectrum of texts, Thomas is able to conclude that some Christian authors' use of the Qur'an exposes a 'general attitude ... that [Muslims] were far inferior to [Christians]' (148). He further concludes that such an attitude would serve a 'psychological purpose' by helping readers of such texts to 'continue believing that they were still a part of God's purpose even in the face of his apparent abandonment of them' (i.e. the rise of Islam and rule of Muslims).


Chapter 8 returns to the topic of *tahrīf* with Mike Kuhn's examination of early Islamic perspectives on St Paul. Kuhn's study is a helpful contribution to how we understand the development of *tahrīf* because he shows how Muslim intellectuals came to regard Paul as the primary corrupter of the revelation given to Jesus in the Gospels. Hence, it was not simply that Christians misunderstood or neglected Jesus's revelation. Rather, Christians, the Apostle Paul in particular, set out to misconstrue Jesus's words so that the true religion, the doctrine of *tawḥīd*, and the scriptures preceding the Gospels were corrupted. In turn, the Christian message could not be trusted (172–173). This argument was, furthermore, pulled into Christian–Muslim discourse, where discussions over God as a Trinity in unity or strictly one were abundant (168).

In the final chapter, David Bertaina shows how Būluṣ ibn Rajā', an Egyptian convert to Coptic Christianity whose life spanned the late-tenth and early-eleventh centuries, read portions of the Qur'an in such ways that they agreed with the Bible. Though portions of it may be agreeable or even beautiful, Ibn Rajā' ultimately found the Qur'an to be a defective text (175). Intriguingly, one of the conclusions at which he arrived with respect to his former faith was that the Qur'an, not the Bible, had been corrupted.

It must be acknowledged that, while many of the chapters in the present volume offer fresh insights, the topic of Arab Christians and their relationship to the Qur'an is certainly not a new one. *Arab Christians and the Qur'an* is, nevertheless, a welcome contribution, especially when it is considered alongside the previous Symposia publications and as a kind of companion to the compilation from the fifth Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposium, *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Thomas 2007). Taken together as a single collection, these volumes provide scholars with indispensable treatments of the history of Christian–Muslim relations and religious thought from medieval Arab Christian communities.

## Reference

Thomas, David, ed. 2007. *The Bible in Arab Christianity*. Leiden: Brill.

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