

Early Christian Interpretation of the Qur'ān

After Muslim rule had been established throughout the largely Christian Middle East in the 640's, the Christian majority discovered that their new masters had come with a religion that claimed to be a purer version of divine revelation than the Christian scriptures. As time passed, the Muslim scriptures were written down in beautifully crafted books in the Arabic language of the Caliphs, and became available for Christians to study. The earliest recorded Christian reading of the Qur'ān comes from the writing of John of Damascus (d.c. 750) who spent his career as a secretary to the Caliph in Damascus. John identified three issues in his understanding of the scriptures of Islam that would set the parameters of Christian interpretation of the Qur'ān for subsequent generations. Firstly, the Qur'ān was less than it claimed to be, since it contained material that could hardly be worthy of divine revelation. Secondly, Muḥammad was not what he claimed to be because the Qur'ān provided insufficient evidence to support his prophetic role. Thirdly, when read properly, some statements in the Qur'ān affirmed Christian beliefs.¹

1. The Qur'ān contains material unworthy of divine revelation

John did not hesitate to allege that Muḥammad put into the Qur'ān “foolish sayings worthy of ridicule”² John picked out the permission given to Muslim men to marry up to four wives in *sūra* 4:3 as an example. Another “altogether shameful thing” found in the Qur'ān is the desire of Muḥammad for the wife of his adopted son Zayd, and the supposed command of God that Muḥammad should marry her found in *sūra* 35:37.³ Christians had become accustomed to reading the New Testament prohibition of polygamy as the abrogation of the Old Testament allowance of it, and Muḥammad's desire for many wives had to be seen as evidence of a failure to obey the will of God. This accusation was repeated in the early ninth century by `Abd al-Masīh ibn Ishāq al-Kindī in a letter addressed to `Abdallāh ibn Isma'īl al-Hāshimī, a court official of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (813-833).⁴ Al-Kindī seems to have had access to the court of al-Ma'mūn and this explains his intimate knowledge of Islamic traditions. Quoting the permission granted to Muḥammad to marry Zaynab the wife of Zayd in 33:37, al-Kindī commented that Muḥammad believed that this was “told him from above”.⁵ But any sensible person could see the truth behind this story that Muḥammad's real intent was to procure women he desired even if it meant plundering them from other men.⁶ Al-Kindī included a list of criticisms of the Qur'ān that he regarded as proof of the human origins of the book. First of all, the statement in *sūra* 72:3 that “God has taken no wife or son” is directed against Christians falsely since they have never believed such a thing. The truth of the matter is that Jews suggested to Muḥammad that Christians believed that God took a wife and had a son with her, and that he was more than willing to accept their insinuations. As a result, the Qur'ān

¹ See D. J. Sahas *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1972) for biographical details. John's writing on Islam is conveniently presented by N. A. Newman in his collection of Christian and Muslim documents entitled, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993) 133-162.

² John of Damascus *On Heresies* in N. A. Newman *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue* 144.

³ *Ibid* 142.

⁴ *The Apology of Al-Kindī* in *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue* 355-545.

⁵ *The Apology of Al-Kindī* 432.

⁶ *Ibid*

carries false information about Christian beliefs that could not have originated in God himself.⁷

Then the Qur'ān has injunctions from the law of Moses and the teaching of Jesus mixed together in a haphazard way in *sūra* 5:45, which says “we set down for them a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a wound for a wound, but whoever does not take retribution that is an expiation for him”. Al-Kindī accused Muḥammad of joining together contradictory precepts and passing them off as divine law that neither Jews nor Christians could accept as genuine.⁸ His explanation for this phenomenon lay in the way that Muḥammad depended on a Christian monk named Sergius for his information. This monk had arrived in Mecca after having been excommunicated by the church and had won over the idolator Muḥammad to his teaching about one God and the coming of the Messiah. This is why Muḥammad defends the Messiah and Christians in general, “protesting that Christians are friendly disposed”.⁹ In addition, Jews who found favour with `Alī, the relative of Muḥammad, managed to introduce passages from their own Law into the Qur'ān once Muḥammad had died and “in this way they corrupted the whole, taking from it and adding to it as they chose, insinuating their own blasphemies into it.”¹⁰ This complex scenario was entirely speculative and contained no evidence from Islamic sources. But given that versions of this account were circulated widely in the Christian communities of the Middle East in both Syriac and Arabic, it was little wonder that Christians would be conditioned to viewing the Qur'ān through its lens.¹¹

Al-Kindī shows knowledge of Islamic traditions about the Qur'ān which were circulating orally and were committed to writing by the end of the ninth century. Some of these indicated that there were different versions of the Qur'ān in different parts of the Caliphate. The Caliph `Uthmān (644-56) was advised that there were divisions over correct readings of the Qur'ān and he ordered copies to be collected and compared so that mistaken versions would be destroyed.¹² However, al-Kindī interprets this process as proof of the corruption of the Qur'ān in its transmission and of the basic unreliability of the final `Uthmānic version. Addressing al-Hashimī, he puts what he regards as an unanswerable question;

“You have read the Qur'ān and know how the material has been put together and the text corrupted, a sure sign that many hands had been busy on it, and that it has suffered additions and losses. Indeed each one wrote and read as he chose, omitting what he did not like. Now by the grace of God, are these what you consider the marks of an inspired book?”¹³

⁷ *ibid* 418-9.

⁸ *ibid* 450-1.

⁹ *ibid* 453-4. John of Damascus had already suggested that Muḥammad had received information about Christianity from an “Arian monk” who presumably passed on belief in a human Messiah who was less than divine. See *On Heresies* in Newman, 139. The story of Muḥammad being taught by a Christian monk became popular in Christian circles for several centuries. For details see Barbara Roggema, “A Christian Reading of the Qur'an: the Legend of Sergius-Bahīrā and its Use of Qur'an and Sīra”, in D. Thomas ed., *Syrian Christians under Islam. The First Thousand Years* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) 57-73.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 454.

¹¹ For the treatment of Jews as corruptors of the Qur'ān see S. H. Griffith, “Jews and Muslims in Christian Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century”, *Jewish History* 3, 1988, 65-94.

¹² The story can be found in *Sahīh Bukharī* vol. 6, traditions 510-521.

¹³ *The Apology of al-Kindī* 458. This tradition of `Uthmān collecting Qur'āns and establishing an authorised copy was also used to undermine the authenticity of the Qur'ān by the anonymous author of *The Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem* around 840. In this Christian document a monk challenged

At least al-Kindī relied on traditions circulating among Muslims for the basis of his charge of corrupt versions of the Qur’ān, but he put a slant on the story that Muslims have not. As far as the traditions are concerned, `Uthmān can be understood to have wanted to make certain that deviant readings of certain Qur’ānic texts were eliminated from the community, and that the text known to be authentic by those who had knowledge of the original version was carefully preserved and read in every corner of the Caliphate. The most probable reason for al-Kindī’s allegations of a corrupt `Uthmānic Qur’ān was a direct counter-claim to the now common Muslim accusation that Jews and Christians had corrupted the text of their scriptures. John of Damascus had already advised Christians not to quote the Old Testament prophets to prove that they had prophesied the coming of Christ because some Muslims regarded these writings as corrupt.¹⁴ The Caliph al-Mahdī, (775-85) in debate with the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I, had charged Christians with removing texts from the New Testament gospels in which Jesus prophesied the coming of Muḥammad, thus rendering their scriptures unreliable.¹⁵ Al-Kindī therefore was indulging in the same game of finding spurious reasons to discredit the scriptures of the “other” religious group.

Another dent in the theory of the inspiration of the Qur’ān, according to al-Kindī, was the presence of non-Arabic words in the text. Though the Qur’ān claimed to be sent down from God in Arabic, it contained Persian and Ethiopian expressions that had Arabic equivalents but were adopted anyway. Either Gabriel passed on these non-Arabic words to Muḥammad or Muḥammad’s Arabic was not as rich as it could be. If neither of these is acceptable, then it proves that other hands were at work corrupting the text as already shown. The often repeated Muslim argument that the language of the Qur’ān was inimitable and moved grown men to tears foundered on a comparison with the poetry of Arabs before the arrival of the Qur’ān. “If you say that there is nothing like the Qur’ān in point of style and ornamentation, we reply that the style of our great poets...is pure and chaste and from the choicest Arabic...The Qur’ān on the other hand, is broken in its style; hybrid in its diction and, while high-sounding, often destitute of meaning.”¹⁶ Al-Kindī had Arabic as his mother tongue, so was in a much stronger position when engaging in textual criticism of Islamic scripture than other Christians like John of Damascus whose mother tongue was Greek and Patriarch Timothy whose native language was Syriac.

Finally, al-Kindī turned to the way Islam had been promoted through warfare and conquest as proof that people had not been convinced by the Qur’ān itself, which spoke clearly of the need to treat non-Muslims with respect. “Let there be no compulsion in religion” (*sūra* 2:256) and “Only disagree with the people of the book in the best way” (*sūra* 29:46) demonstrated that the Qur’ān commanded Muslims to persuade but not to force Jews and Christians, the people of the book, to accept Islam. Yet Muslims killed with swords, plundered and took possession of property, and

`Abdurrahman, an `Abbasid Amir, to admit that `Uthmān was not satisfied with the Qur’ān so wrote it again, leaving out whatever did not please him. “You will surely recognise that a just governor cannot give preference to a book...which has suffered changes, additions and omissions”. See *The Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem*, in Newman, 269-353, 293.

¹⁴ John of Damascus *On Heresies* 141.

¹⁵ “Dialogue between the Caliph al-Mahdī and the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I” in H. Putnam, *L’Église sous Timothée I* (Beirut: 1975) appendix, 26. For a discussion of Muslim accusations of the corruption of the text of the Christian gospels in the eighth and ninth centuries see I. M. Beaumont “Early Muslim Interpretations of the Gospels” *Transformation* (22) 2005, 20-27.

¹⁶ *The Apology of al-Kindī* 461.

forced Islam on people of the book against their will.¹⁷ If Muslims were so convinced of the inimitability of the Qur'ān then why were they they so insecure about preaching its message without intimidation?

Al-Kindī's attack on the authenticity of the Qur'ān was more sustained than any other in the eighth and ninth centuries. No other Christian writing from this period shows the same breadth and depth of knowledge of the text of the Qur'ān. In addition his familiarity with traditions concerning the early history of Islam was unusual for a Christian writing before the Hadīth were collected and recorded in the second half of the ninth century. However, no response to his accusations has come down to us from a Muslim writer. This may be explained by the fact that the perfection of the Qur'ān was an early conviction of Muslims, and as a result, the Qur'ān did not need to be defended by human beings. If God had spoken then human beings were to listen and obey, and if people refused to do that then their reward awaited them.

2. The Qur'ān shows Muḥammad to be less than Muslims claim he is

If the Qur'ān contained material gathered by Muḥammad from a renegade Christian monk then it followed that he did not receive everything in the Qur'ān directly from God as Muslims passionately believed. If Muḥammad gave permission to Muslim men to marry up to four wives and said that he had been given divine permission to marry Zayd's wife when he was already married to several women, then for Christians, these Qur'ānic permissions could not possibly be from God. Therefore any defect in the Qur'ān implied a denial of Muslim belief in the role of Muḥammad in its appearance. Al-Kindī was fully aware of Muslim convictions about their Prophet. "You urge that your master was an illiterate person and you ask how could he have composed such a book if he had not been inspired?"¹⁸ He quoted *sūra* 17:88, "if all humanity and jinn joined together to produce something like this Qur'ān, they could not", and *sūra* 2:23 "If you are in doubt about what we have sent down to our servant then produce a *sūra* like it", with the comment that they constituted the strongest proof to Muslims of the divine authority of the Qur'ān and the prophetic office of Muḥammad. Nevertheless, these texts were "a frail foundation" for a belief in the divine perfection of the Qur'ān and the role of Muḥammad as a mere receiver of divine messages.¹⁹

John of Damascus had asked which of the prophets had foretold that Muḥammad would arise, since Christians were able to point to multiple testimonies in the Old Testament to the coming of Christ. He mentioned that Muslims were unable to supply an answer.²⁰ In other words, Muslims had no divine corroboration of the prophethood of Muḥammad outside the Qur'ān itself, in the way that Christians had confirmation of the status of Christ outside the gospels. However, this argument was double edged since John also recognised that there were Muslims who did not regard the Old Testament scriptures as reliable and cautioned Christians not to depend on them to prove the divinity of Christ.²¹

Muslims were more concerned to press on Christians the divine origins of the Qur'ān and the utter trustworthiness of Muḥammad as a bearer of the book. Caliph al-

¹⁷ *Ibid* 479.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 452.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 452.

²⁰ John of Damascus *On Heresies* 140.

²¹ *Ibid* 141.

Mahdī asked Patriarch Timothy whether he was prepared to confess that the Qur’ān had come down from God. Timothy declined to give a definitive answer but suggested that the Qur’ān had not been accompanied by any sign or miracle from God in the way that the Torah, the prophetic writings, the Gospel, and the testimony of the apostles had been backed up by divine activity.²² Timothy seemed to be relying on the Qur’ānic denial that Muḥammad performed miracles but this is explicitly cited in the writing of a younger theologian from Timothy’s Nestorian church, `Ammār al-Baṣrī who was active in the first three decades of the ninth century. In his *Book of the Proof* he offered help to his fellow Christians in their conversation with Muslims over a wide range of contentious issues. In terms of the authenticity of Muḥammad’s message he suggested that Christians quote *sūra* 17:59 “We refrain from sending the signs” along with *sūra* 6:109 “They swear that if they saw a sign they would believe...but even if signs came they would not believe”. `Ammār interpreted these texts to mean that Muḥammad did not perform signs even when asked to, and so the Qur’ān testifies that Islam did not come accompanied by signs from God. As a result, Christians could say that Muḥammad’s message was not authenticated by miracles the way that Moses and Jesus proved their divine mission through the performance of signs. The Qur’ān clearly states that Jesus performed miracles and therefore unlike Islam “Christianity was established by the clear signs of God”.²³ By referring to the Qur’ān, Christians could easily reach agreement with Muslims that Jesus performed miracles to authenticate his message but that Muḥammad did not. The logical outcome of such a use of the Qur’ān was the lack of evidence for the authenticity of Muḥammad as a divine messenger in the book that he brought.

While the Qur’ān claimed that Muḥammad did not perform miracles, there were several stories in circulation by the ninth century telling the opposite. Al-Kindī referred to these at some length in his letter. For example, Muḥammad said of a howling wolf that approached him and his companions that it was an ambassador from the lions. “They say that the wolf spoke to Aban the son of Aus, and that at once he professed the true faith”.²⁴ Al-Kindī made fun of the portrait of the prophet that emerged from such an account. “Your master understood the howling of a wolf, he knew that it was an ambassador from the lions of the field. But tell me this, supposing he had told them that the wolf was a messenger from the Lord of all, could they have refuted his statement?”²⁵ He pressed his case by asking where such a story was told in the Qur’ān, and if the book is silent then Muḥammad was not the one to pass it on but it was sheer invention by Muslims to make him seem like other prophets who proved their divine credentials by performing miracles. In the case of the apostles of Christ, they brought the message of Christ along with signs. These humble fishermen had only the authority of Christ and no human power or status, and they convinced others by the miraculous signs that they brought. “These men could prove that they were sent by God most high. In this respect they differed from your master, who presses a claim which is destitute of support.”²⁶

Therefore, Christians were able to contrast the miraculous activity of Jesus and his apostles with the absence of any miracle working by the Prophet of Islam, and to show that the Qur’ān testified clearly that it was a miracle free message. The fact that

²² “Dialogue between the Caliph al-Mahdī and the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I” in Putnam, app. 27.

²³ `Ammār al-Baṣrī, *The Book of the Proof* in M. Hayek *`Ammār al-Baṣrī, apologie et controverses* (Beirut: 1977) 31.

²⁴ Al-Kindī 441. This story is reported by Bukharī in his *Sahīh*, vol 5, 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid* 443.

Islam was an essentially non-miraculous religion according to the Qur'ān meant that the compulsion among Muslims to invent stories of Muḥammad's miracles had to be explained by the natural demand for supernatural proof. If any sensible person was told that a message came from God then he automatically expected evidence of divine authentication. This was why Muslims were drawn into the need to create such evidence. But in so doing they gave testimony to the absence of supernatural origins for their prophet's message.

Another contrast between Christ and Muḥammad was raised in the Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem, which was probably written around 840. In this debate, a representative Christian monk proclaimed that Christ was without sin and this qualified him to be worshipped, to which a representative Muslim replied that the Prophet Muḥammad was also without sin. But the monk claimed that the Qur'ān said "O Muḥammad, We have forgiven you of your past sins and what is yet to come", and that this proved he had sinned and would sin in the future.²⁷ Nevertheless, *Sūra* 48:2, "that God may forgive you (singular) your former sins as well as your future ones," does not actually mention Muḥammad and could be understood to refer to a Muslim in general. In the Dialogue, the Muslim simply lets the monk make his doubtful case and does not attempt to defend the Prophet from this interpretation of the Qur'ān, preferring to change the subject altogether. This is early testimony to Muslim claims that Muḥammad was sinless, a popular belief in subsequent Islamic writing. On this point of the sinfulness of Muḥammad the Christian use of the Qur'ān was not as secure as the use of the Qur'ān to establish that Muḥammad performed no miraculous signs.

3. The Qur'ān sometimes supports Christian Beliefs

John of Damascus listed texts of the Qur'ān that supported Christian teaching as well as those that denied it. The Arian monk had given Muḥammad mixed information about Christianity and this is echoed in the message of Muḥammad. Support for Christian teaching can be found in the statements that there is one God, maker of all things, not begotten, [112:3] and that Christ is Word of God and Spirit of God [4:171] and was born of the virgin Mary [19:16-21]. Statements that do not support Christian beliefs are that God does not beget [112:3] that Christ is created [3:47] and no more than a servant [43:59] that the Jews attempted to crucify him, but it was in appearance only that he was crucified because God took him to heaven [4:157] and that when Christ came up to heaven God asked him whether he told people to worship him, but Christ said that he was only a servant of God [5:116-7].²⁸ John was able to rely on the Qur'ānic statements that confirmed Christian beliefs to argue that Muslims must accept the implications of those statements. Thus, he suggested to his Christian readers that they reply to the Muslim accusation that Christians associate Christ with God in the wrong way when they say that Christ is Son of God and God by quoting *sūra* 4:171 where Christ is Word and Spirit of God. "The Word and Spirit are not separated from the one in whom they are by nature"²⁹ So Christians can justifiably argue that the Qur'ān supports the divine nature of Christ.

This appeal to Christ as Word and Spirit of God in the Qur'ān was to become repeated regularly by Christians in the Middle East for centuries. "Almost every Christian apologist in the world of Islam from John of Damascus onwards quotes or

²⁷ *The Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem* 333.

²⁸ John of Damascus, *On Heresies* 140.

²⁹ *Ibid* 141.

alludes to this Qur'ān verse.”³⁰ The most sophisticated use of the text comes in a debate between Abū Qurra (d.c. 830), a leading Chalcedonian theologian from the early ninth century, and an anonymous Muslim scholar in the presence of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn. This piece of writing betrays influence from the debate between Timothy and al-Mahdī as well as the Religious Dialogue of Jerusalem so may not be a transcription of an actual encounter of Abū Qurra, but he did have a reputation for debating with Muslims. Certainly, the following interchange follows ideas present in John of Damascus' work which probably influenced Abū Qurra.

Abū Qurra: Tell me about the Messiah, is he created of something or not?
 Hashemite: He is the Word of God and his Spirit.
 Abū Qurra: The Word of God and his Spirit, are they delimited and described?
 Hashemite: No.
 Abū Qurra: Are they comprehensible?
 Hashemite: No.
 Abū Qurra: So tell me, is the Word of God Creator or created?
 The Hashemite was troubled at once and became quiet. He could not say anything except “Creator”. The Caliph was astounded.³¹

Now it is highly unlikely that a Muslim would have made this admission in an actual debate, but the writing shows a level of confidence on the Christian side that is striking. There is a conviction that the Qur'ānic titles “word and spirit of God” given to Christ can only be interpreted by Muslims as proof of his divine status. Al-Kindī certainly used the text to drive home the same point. “You see how your master imposes on you the faith of God as one with the Word and Spirit; and declares that Christ, the Word of God, took flesh and became man”.³²

One item from the Qur'ān that John of Damascus did not include in his list was the affirmation that Christ performed miracles. `Ammār al-Baṣrī made use of *sūra* 5:110, “O `Īsā son of Mary, remember my grace given to you... You healed the lepers by my permission, and you raised the dead by my permission... I restrained the Children of Israel from doing violence to you when you showed them these signs.” The Qur'ān obviously taught that Christ authenticated his message through miracles and therefore the Qur'ān upheld the truth of Christianity as established by divine signs. The fact that the Qur'ān firmly denied that Muḥammad performed miracles surely put Muḥammad's message in a poor light by comparison.³³ The miracles Christ performed functioned as evidence for the truth of the gospels, so that if the Qur'ān testified to Christ's miracles then it also testified to the divine origins of his message. `Ammār attempted to answer a Muslim accusation that Christians had altered the revelation brought by Christ in its appearance and meaning without changing the actual words themselves, by comparing Qur'ānic and Biblical statements. “The Qur'ān says that the Spirit is from the Lord and the book of God says that the Spirit is the Lord. The Qur'ān says that the Word is created and the gospel says that the Word is eternal and is God”.³⁴ `Ammār concluded that the Bible could not be interpreted to mean the same as the Qur'ān at these key points and therefore the two texts were not

³⁰ S. H. Griffith “The Qur'ān in Arab Christian Texts; The Development of an Apologetical Argument: Abū Qurrah in the Maglis of Al-Ma'mūn” *Parole de L'Orient* (1999, 203-233) 216.

³¹ Abū Qurrah in the Maglis of al-Ma'mūn, (Paris Arabic 70, folio 153) in S. H. Griffith 229.

³² Al-Kindī 425.

³³ `Ammār al-Baṣrī, *The Book of the Proof* 31.

³⁴ *Ibid* 45.

really saying the same thing. How could Muslims continue to claim that the message of Christ was identical to that of the Qur'ān?

The Muslim charge that the people of the book changed the text of their scriptures could be challenged by showing that the Qur'ān valued the Bible. Al-Kindī quoted several Qur'ānic texts, 10:94 “If you are in doubt about what we have sent down to you then ask those who read the book that came before”, 5:46 “We sent `Īsā , son of Mary, to confirm the Torah that had come before him and we sent him the Gospel in which is guidance and light”, and 5:68 “O people of the book, you can only be established on the Torah and the Gospel which were sent down to you by your Lord”. He asked how the text of the Torah or the Gospel could be corrupt when these texts supported the authenticity of the previous scriptures. Surely Muslims were contradicting their own scriptures in making allegations about the corruption of the Bible.³⁵

To be sure, the Muslim belief that Christians had either misinterpreted or rewritten their scriptures was strengthened by Qur'ānic texts that criticised three essential Christian convictions, the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the crucifixion. *Sūra* 5:73 “They are unbelievers who say that God is a third of three, for there is no God but one God” seemed to exclude the possibility of the Trinity. Al-Kindī asked his Muslim correspondent who actually believed that God was a third of three. “You claim some knowledge of the three Christian sects...Do you know any who say that God is the third of three? They teach the one God in whom is the Word and the Spirit, and that without distinction. Your master himself confessed this.”³⁶ Here al-Kindī used the affirmation of Christ as having the Word and Spirit of God from *sūra* 4:171 to back up a Qur'ānic doctrine of the Trinity, while relegating the accusation of tritheism to the margins.

Abū Rā'īṭa, a miaphysite Jacobite theologian active in the early ninth century, also attempted to find the Trinity promoted in the Qur'ān in the plurality of the divine character. 2:34 “We said”, 7:181 “We created”, 4:163 “We revealed”, 6:6 “We destroyed”, all show that these words were spoken by more than one person. Muslims may say that this is simply a plural of greatness, but there is an obvious weakness in that argument, since God does not need to make himself any greater than he is by exaggerating his character as if he were basically weak and requiring rhetoric to convince humans of his majesty.³⁷

The Incarnation appeared to be ruled out by the Qur'ān in several places where God is said not to have begotten a son. This is specifically related to Christian teaching in *sūra* 9:30, “The Christians say the Messiah is God's Son...May God destroy them.” The reason for this seems to lie in the character of God who is declared to be free from the necessity that fatherhood would lay on him, according to *sūra* 19:35, “It is not for God to have a son. May he be glorified! When he decides anything he only has to say ‘be’ and it comes into existence.” Abu Rā'īṭa found Qur'ānic texts that might support what Christians really believed about the Incarnation. Firstly, he focused on the many texts that spoke of God sitting on a throne, and the Muslim reading of these that held God to be simultaneously in heaven and on his throne.³⁸

³⁵ Al-Kindī, 498-9.

³⁶ *Ibid* 425.

³⁷ Abū Rā'īṭa *Letter on the Holy Trinity* in Graf 20-1.

³⁸ Abū Rā'īṭa *Letter on the Incarnation* in Graf 25-64, 45-6. There are 18 references to God sitting on his throne in the Qur'ān.

Abū Rā'īta: Do you not say that God is in heaven and on his throne? Show us whether all of God is in heaven and on the throne, or only part of him.

The Muslim: We do not describe God in part here or in part there. He is in heaven and on the throne and everywhere.

AR: Then heaven is in everything so that nothing remains in heaven that is not God.

M: Our expression "God is in heaven and on the throne" means that he is Lord of heaven and Lord of the throne.

AR: You believe that God appears in heaven and on the throne but he is not in them.

M: God is in them, he doesn't just appear in them.

AR: Then God is limited by his creation.

M: God is in them by appearing in them.

AR: Then you agree with us that God can be in an aspect of his creation without being swallowed up by it.³⁹

If a Muslim believed that the Incarnation cancels out God's rule by unnecessary involvement in creation, then the picture of God limiting himself to a throne is a Qur'ānic parallel to the divine Word becoming human. For if Muslims interpreted these throne texts to exclude divine limitations then Christians could rightfully ask Muslims to treat the Incarnation the same way. God could become human without limiting himself in any way as his session on a throne proved.

Abū Rā'īta, secondly, used *sūra* 19:35 to inform Muslims of the true Christian belief in the divine Sonship of Christ. If Muslims said that God did not have a son because that would imply that God had entered time from eternity and that he only needs to say "be" and it is, then Christians should say that this is exactly what they believe. This Qur'ānic text supports the Christian belief that the Son was begotten of the Father without any lapse of time, since there never was a time when the Father was without the Son.

"If Muslims say that the actions of God are not like the actions of humans because his power over things is the same as his power over what he wills...but the actions of humans are by movement, in time and place, and effort and trouble, and necessity, then say that the begetting of God Almighty is altogether remote from human begetting."⁴⁰

In other words, the Qur'ān promotes a Christian view of God's relationship with the world and the attack on sonship in the Qur'ān is misdirected by Muslims against Christians.

ʿAmmār followed a similar line of argument when he referred to *sūra* 72:3 "Our Lord is highly exalted. He did not take a female companion to have a son." Christians would not stoop to accuse their creator of such a thing. "We call the Word of God a son according to what the gospel says about him...Children exist in time, but the Son is eternal without beginning in time."⁴¹ He developed another argument based on the anthropomorphisms describing God found in the Qur'ān such as "the merciful", "the wrathful", and "the one who is pleased". If God is merciful then it implies pain in his heart, if wrathful it implies a change in God from the state of being

³⁹ *Ibid* 45-6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid* 49.

⁴¹ ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī *The Book of the Proof* 57.

merciful, and if he is pleased then he has changed from the opposite condition of being disappointed. Therefore when Muslims say that the Christian anthropomorphisms “father” and “son” are inadequate to describe God, Christians ought to reply that many Qur’ānic depictions of God are inadequate.⁴² `Ammār attempted to get Muslims to accept that since they had to use time bound concepts when referring to God just as Christians did, Muslims and Christians were in the same linguistic world, and so Muslims were unjustified in rejecting “father” and “son” categories for God because they were too human.

The Qur’ān clearly denied that Christ had been crucified in *sūra* 4:157-8 “The people of the book said, we killed the Messiah, Jesus, Mary’s son, God’s messenger. But they did not kill him. They did not crucify him. Rather it seemed so to them...No, God raised Jesus to himself”. One Christian approach to this rejection of Christ’s death was that of Timothy in dialogue with the Caliph al-Mahdī who quoted 4:157. Timothy replied by quoting *sūra* 19:33 where Jesus said “peace be upon me, the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I am raised to life”, and argued that Jesus was referring to his death and then his resurrection. Al-Mahdī was not persuaded and insisted “Jesus is not yet dead but he is going to die”, an interpretation based on the traditions surrounding the return of Christ to preach Islam followed by his death for the first time.⁴³ Al-Mahdī raised another objection to the death of Christ. “Jesus was honoured by God who did not deliver him into the hands of the Jews so that they could kill him”.⁴⁴ Timothy had no Qur’ānic reference this time but quoted John 10:17-18 “The Father loves me because I lay down my life of my own free will” and argued that this rescued God from any blame for his death.

However, `Ammār dealt with the same Muslim point by referring to the rejection of the divinity of Christ in *sūra* 19:88-91 “They say that the Merciful has taken a son. You have come out with a horrible thing! The heavens are ready to burst and the earth split open and the mountains fall down when they say that the Merciful has a son”. So when Muslims denounce Christians for saying that Christ was crucified and accuse them of imputing weakness to God or deficiency to Christ, let Muslims consider their denial of his divine status. “How can they impute weakness to God in our saying that Christ was crucified when according to them he was a prophet...and that he was not so exalted among them such that the heavens are ready to burst as they claim.”⁴⁵ In other words, God need not be considered weak if he allowed a prophet to die, but he might be thought of as weak if Christ was equal to him in status.

Abū Rā’iṭa took a different line with the denial of the crucifixion. When Muslims say that the crucifixion is a lie against God then Christians can quote *sūra* 17:43 “God is exalted far above what they say”, and apply it to *sūra* 4:157, “The Jews said ‘we killed the Messiah’, but they did not kill him”. The Jews may have lied about the death of Christ, but if their lies did not affect God’s nature, then that agrees with the Christian understanding of the crucifixion, since Christians believe that the death of Christ did not affect the divine nature of Christ but only his human nature. “The Jews killed the Messiah but his divine substance was untouched by death”.⁴⁶ So if the Jews claimed to have killed the divine nature of Christ they were lying, and the Qur’ān testifies to that lie. This distinction between Christ dying in his human nature and yet not dying in his divine nature has been used in subsequent Christian

⁴² *Ibid* 62.

⁴³ Putnam, appendix 46. See *Sahīh Muslim* 1:287-293, for traditions about the return of Christ.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* 48.

⁴⁵ `Ammār, 79.

⁴⁶ Abū Rā’iṭa, *Letter on the Incarnation* 62.

interpretation of the Qur'ānic denial of the death of Christ, and has even been adopted by some Muslims in the twentieth century.⁴⁷

4. Conclusion

These Christian treatments of the Qur'ān were not often challenged by Muslims in the eighth and ninth centuries. Apart from Caliph al-Mahdī, whose rejoinder to Timothy's interpretation of *sūra* 19:33 was considered in their debate about the death of Christ, other Muslims who debated with Christians preferred to attack Christian teaching and practices rather than defend Islam. The most extensive critique of Christianity by a Muslim in the period was by Abū `Īsā al-Warrāq (d.c. 861), and he never engaged with any Christian opinion of Islam, but only with the contradictory nature of Christian beliefs in the Trinity and the Incarnation as seen from the logical centre of God's oneness.⁴⁸ The celebrated Muslim intellectual Abū `Uthmān al-Jāhiz (d. 869) knew that Christians were in the habit of giving their own interpretations of the Qur'ān but he did not think it worthwhile giving any examples to refute them.⁴⁹ Indeed he scornfully dismissed them as the product of underhand tactics designed to disturb weaker Muslims, such that serious Muslims would hardly be disturbed by them. This latter attitude helps explain the dearth of Muslim engagement with Christian readings of the Qur'ān.

Around the end of the ninth century, Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1014), included a critique of Christianity in his exposition of Islamic beliefs, in which he responded to the Christian use of the throne texts of the Qur'ān. "There are those who say that the Word indwells the human nature without being confined to it, just as the Creator sits on his throne without being confined to it. This is irrational, because the Creator is not on his throne in the sense that he indwells it."⁵⁰ The common note in these three Muslim writers is the irrationality of Christian faith as compared with the reasonableness of Islam. Al-Jāhiz confessed amazement that so many people in the world had embraced the Christian faith and that so few Christians had accepted Islam which was so obviously more rational. But then that only confirmed how humans are seldom guided entirely by reason.⁵¹ If this was the prevailing attitude of Muslims towards Christianity it is hardly surprising that Christian interpretations of the Qur'ān were given little attention by Muslims. It is little wonder, given the belief in the inimitability of the Qur'ān, that Muslims did not think it worthwhile to consider Christian interpretations of their scriptures until relatively recent times.

⁴⁷ See I. M. Beaumont *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005) for Christian and Muslim writers who have appealed to the distinction between the divine and human aspects of Christ in interpreting *sūra* 4:157. Twentieth century Muslim scholars, M. M. Ayoub and S. H. Nasr, interpret the denial of the killing of Christ to refer to his status as God's word which can never be defeated.

⁴⁸ See D. Thomas *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam, Abū `Īsā al-Warrāq's Against the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, and his *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity, Abū `Īsā al-Warrāq's Against the Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴⁹ Al-Jāhiz *Reply to the Christians* in Newman, 706.

⁵⁰ Al-Bāqillānī *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, (ed) R. J. McCarthy (Beirut: 1957) 88.

⁵¹ Al-Jāhiz, *Reply to the Christians* 700.