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Article *in* Journal of Islamic Studies · December 2011

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PHILOPONIAN MONOPHYSITISM IN SOUTH ARABIA AT THE ADVENT OF ISLAM WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF '*THALĀTHA*' IN QUR'ĀN 4. 171 AND 5. 73

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INTRODUCTION

The pre-Islamic history of Christianity in South Arabia has garnered much attention from researchers in recent decades, but few have carried that research into its implications for the historical context of the Qur'ān, and fewer still have allowed the Qur'ān to inform them on its own historically Christian context. This study aims at a non-reductionist historical view of the rejection of the term 'trinity' in the Qur'ānic revelations following the Christo-Islamic meeting between the Prophet and the Najrani Christians. It will be shown that the particular Arabic word choices in Q. 4. 171 and 5. 73 are congruent with the historicity of Monophysite Philoponian tritheism being the dominant Christology of the Najrani bishop Abū Ḥāritha, and thus contemporary English translations of the Qur'ān which employ the term 'trinity', are inaccurate.[1]

[1] By way of introduction to the non-specialist reader: the Monophysite doctrine is a Christological stance which contends for Christ being in one nature God and man at the same time. At the Council of Chalcedon (451), this formula was rejected as heresy by the Chalcedonians, but remained the Christology of about a third of Christendom until the rise of Islam. The implication of Christ being in one nature God and man meant that Mary had literally given birth to God and God had literally died on the cross. Further, the distinction between Christ's divine-humanity and the full divinity of the Father and Holy Spirit necessitated an epistemological division between the Trinitarian persons, so the accusation of tritheism was awarded to the Monophysites. Thus the formula was rejected by the Chalcedonians. The Chalcedonians were also known as

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN SOUTH ARABIA

According to Ibn Isḥāq (d. *ca.* 770), the first Christian influence to reach South Arabia was a man named Faymiyūn, a brick builder who introduced Christianity to Najran.[2] If the story is true history, the date of

'Diaphysites', contending Christ to be one hundred percent human and one hundred percent divine at the same time, the two natures never mixing, but nonetheless co-existing in full potency. These two Christologies differed from the Nestorian Christology which presented Christ in much more human terms, as having learned of and even attaining his divinity over time. The Nestorians also widely rejected the title *Theotokos* (Mother of God) for Mary, proposing *Christotokos* (Mother of Christ) instead. These three Christologies (Monophysite, Nestorian, and Chalcedonian) were more or less equally represented at the time of the advent of Islam. Eventually Nestorianism and Monophysitism declined severely, and the majority of contemporary Christians (Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox in general) are doctrinally Chalcedonian (diaphysite).

Monophysite Philoponian Tritheism was a short-lived doctrinal position in the late sixth century, dominant in South Arabia, in which Christians worshipped three distinct gods. No longer one nature and three persons, the Philoponians recognized doctrinally three distinct natures. The doctrine came from John Philoponus and was spread by the bishops Conon and Eugenius. The designation 'tritheism' may be thought of as derogatory, but that is not what is intended here. The theology of John Philoponus propagated three individual natures for the three persons of the Trinity, and further denied any common nature between them, and hence 'tritheism' is clinically appropriate terminology. John's discourse, *Against Themistius* specifically denies the common nature of God as anything more than an abstract human idea: 'For we have proved that the nature called "common", has no reality of its own alongside any of the existents either, but is either nothing at all – which is actually the case – or only derives its existence in our minds from particulars.' Though in its early years the tritheist movement shied away from using plain terminology such as 'three Gods' or 'three Godheads', they eventually affirmed these designations and began to use them freely. A work contemporary to the Philoponian tritheist movement clarifies the distinction between orthodox Monophysitism and Philoponian tritheism. Replying to the accusation of tritheism in orthodox Monophysitism, between 581 and 587, Patriarch Peter of Callinicum composed an anti-tritheist dossier to distinguish the two. The volume contains many quotes from the works of John Philoponus. A study and translation of the dossier is available in R. Y. Ebied, A. van Roey, and Lionel R. Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum: Anti-Tritheist Dossier* (Leuven: Dept. Orientalistiek, 1981; Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 10). The above quote of John Philoponus is from the text of the dossier on p. 51.

[2] Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Isḥāq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 14–16; cf. ʿAbd

Faymiyūn's journey, along with any Christian source material are lost to us.[3]

The Chronicle of John of Nikiu credits a woman named Theognosta with the conversion of the Yemenis in the mid-fourth century.[4] In what seems to be a separate event, Theognosta is subsequently also credited with the conversion of the king of India. The Indian king then requests a bishop, and one Afrudit (Frumentius) is sent to him. The history of Nicephorus tells us of the travels of Frumentius of Tyre, whom Athanasius consecrated as bishop in *ca.* 330, and sent to Himyar, however this destination is almost certainly not correct. According to Athanasius himself, the bishop Frumentius was received from and returned to Axum.[5] Though it has now been shown confidently that he

al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 2nd edn., 2 vols., 1955), i. 31–4.

[3] It has been proposed that this story is a spin-off from stories contained in the fourth and fifth century *Tales of the Coptic Fathers*, and is not to be treated as historical. See Gordon Newby, 'An Example of Coptic Literary Influence on Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīrah*', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 31/1 (1972): 22–8.

[4] R. H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu: Translated from Zotenberg's Ethiopic Text* (Merchantville, NJ: Evolution Publishers, 2007; Christian Roman Empire Series, 4), 69–70. According to John, Theognosta's travels in Yemen occurred after the death of Constantine I in 337. It is not impossible for both John of Nikiu and Nicephorus to be correct about the sending of Frumentius. It may be that Frumentius was sent after the death of Constantine I in 337, seven years after his consecration by Anasthasius in 330. One however wonders if we are not introduced here to two separate events which became intertwined in their historical preservation: that is, the conversion of the Yemenis (Himyarites) by Theognosta, and the sending of the bishop Frumentius to the Ethiopians.

[5] Most historians believe this to have taken place in Ethiopia rather than Himyar. For example J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman, 1979; Arab Background Series), 288–9; and Irfan Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, repr. 2006 [1984]), 91–2. An in-depth analysis is not necessary here, but Thomas Wright presents an alternative interpretation that may be of interest. There are three main accounts of this story: Rufinus, Theodoret and Nicephorus. As the name India was given both to Ethiopia and to Arabia Felix in writings at that time, Wright thinks the location to have been Himyar, as Nicephorus directly states. Socrates' translation of Rufinus seems to indicate Axum, but when compared to the near and far 'Indias' distinguished in other writings of Rufinus, it seems Rufinus intends Himyar as the destination. See Thomas Wright, *Early Christianity in Arabia: A Historical Essay* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1855), 28–33. Mayerson asserts that, 'Athanasius (*ca.* 295–373), bishop of Alexandria, makes clear that the

was sent to Axum, two observations can be made that are of interest here. The controversy over the location of this story in early sources highlights the close relationship between South Arabia and Axum in pre-Islamic times;[6] and Frumentius can now be called the founder of Abyssinian Christianity, which would later have a strong influence in South Arabia.

An eleventh century text, the *Kitāb al-Mijdal* (Book of the Tower) by 'Amr b. Matta alleges that between the times of the Roman Caesar Nero (r. 54–68) and the one whom Matta calls Aphrahat the King of Babylon (*ca.* 270–345),[7] Christianity had already spread as far as the Yemen to the Indian Ocean.[8] He credits this achievement to the work of the famous missionary Mār Mārī,[9] a student of the teachings of Mar Addai

remote region penetrated by Frumentius in the late fourth century – the Further India of Rufinus, the Inner India of Socrates, and the Innermost India of Gelasius – was Axum, which according to the Periplus was an eight-day journey from the Ethiopian port of Adulis. In Athanasius' *Apologia ad Constantium*, Frumentius is twice cited as bishop of Axum.' See Philip Mayerson, 'A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 113/2 (1993): 169–74, at 171. An English translation of the Rufinus account can be found in Stanley Mayer Burstein, *Ancient African Civilizations: Kush and Axum* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, revised edn., 2009), 112–14. The version of Theodoret is in Bishop of Cyrrhus Theodoret, *The Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 50 ff.

[6] A fourth-century inscription found in Axum places both Himyar and Saba under the rule of the Christian Axumite king Ezana (r. 330–356). The inscription is translated in Burstein, 89–90; 97–100. Ezana's Christianity is recorded in a similar inscription that contains his claim, 'In the faith of God and the Power of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost who have saved my kingdom. I believe in your son Jesus Christ who has saved me.' See F. Anfray, A. Caquot and P. Nautin, 'Une Nouvelle Inscription Grecque d'Ezana, Roi d'Axoum', *Journal des Savants* (1970): 260–73, at 266. On the Christianity of Ezana see also Steven Kaplan, 'Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 13/2 (1982): 101–9.

[7] Aphrahat refers to Aphrahat the Persian Sage (*ca.* 270–345), who wrote 23 theological demonstrations.

[8] Henricus Gismondi, *Maris Amri et Slibae de Patriarchis Nestorianorum Commentaria* (Romae: F. de Luigi, 2 vols., 1896), ii, see esp. p. 1 of the Arabic text.

[9] Amir Harrak has recently completed a translation of 'The Acts of Mār Mārī' which he dates from between the fourth century and the advent of Islam. A more precise dating based on known sources is speculative. See Amir Harrak, *The Acts of Mār Mārī the Apostle* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005; Writings from the Greco-Roman World, 11), xvi.

(*ca.* 50–150).[10] An unpublished second part of the text states that, 'There was no one who preached about the Messiah in the country of Tihāma and the Ḥijāz, because the apostles stopped at Najrān and went no further. They were preoccupied with the kings of Kinda and the princes of Yemen.'[11]

The Arab Nabatean tribal region officially became the Roman Province of Arabia during the rule of Hadrian (r. 117–138). The tribal ruler Imruʾ al-Qays, whose more southern reign included Najran by 328, also had treaties with Rome.[12] The influence of Christian Rome into South Arabia became even more formal in 356 when an embassy was sent by Constantius to the Himyarites. *Church History* by Philostorgius records that Theophilus was sent to the Himyarite ruler, Ta'ran Yuhan'im, who then converted to Christianity. Three churches were subsequently constructed, one in the capital city of Dhafar, one in Aden,

[10] Though it cannot be said that Addai was himself a Monophysite as he lived centuries prior to the Council of Chalcedon, his *Doctrina* (a work dated to *ca.* 400, also prior to the Council of Chalcedon) has been shown to carry strong Monophysite tendencies. This will have either made South Arabia fertile ground for the flow of official Monophysitism, or found a welcome audience in the Monophysitism of South Arabia, depending on when Mār Mārī is to have visited there. See Jan Willem Drijvers, 'The Protonike, the Doctrina Addai and Bishop Rabbula of Edessa', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 51/3 (1997): 298–315. Mār Mārī is to have been such a disciple of Addai that they have a liturgy written that is credited to both of them. *The Holy Qurbana of Addai and Mari* (a.k.a. *The Anaphora of Addai and Mari*) is one of the foundational liturgies of the Syrian Church of the East. A study of this text can be found in A. Gelston, *The Eucharistic Prayer of Addai and Mari* (Oxford: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1992).

[11] This quote is taken from Samir K. Samir, 'The Prophet Muhammad as Seen by Timothy I and Some Other Arab Christian Authors' in David Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam: The First Thousand Years* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001), 84. The *Acts of Mār Mārī* places the missionary in southeastern Arabia including Ubulla at the southern opening of the Arabian Gulf, and Maishan (Zubayr) on the South Arabian side, near where Basra would be built in 638. A translation can be found in Harrak, 67, n. 134; 71, n. 139. Harrak (ibid, 83–7) has also included a section from the *Liber Turris* of Mārī b. Sulaymān, which also witnesses to Mār Mārī's travels in southeastern Arabia. (Cf. Gismondi, *Maris Amri et* Slibae, i. 3–6 of the Arabic.) Having travelled in Arabia a great deal, and having been at the mouth of the Arabian Gulf, Mār Mārī's possible journey to a major centre such as Najran is certainly not out of the question.

[12] The treaties occurred after the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in 318, and the Council of Nicaea in 325. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs*, 93–4.

and one at the mouth of the Persian Gulf.[13] In the latter half of the fifth century, the first Monophysite Bishop of Najran, Paul I, was in place.[14]

The *Book of the Himyarites* names the first South Arabian Christian as Ḥayyān (a.k.a. Ḥannān).[15] Ḥayyān reportedly became a Christian on his trade route to Persia, bringing Christianity back with him to Najran between 399 and 420.[16] The same source records in detail the martyrdom of a number of the Najrani Christians in the early sixth century. The Najrani bishops Paul I and Paul II were also martyred in Dhafar and Najran (respectively) under the Jewish Himyarite king, the Dhū Nuwās Masrūq, in *ca.* 520.[17]

[13] The construction of the churches did not secure the position of Christianity in the area, as Judaism was on the rise. Unfortunately the texts are not clearer on the specific location of the church on the Persian Gulf. Philip R. Amidon, *Philostorgius: Church History* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007; Writings from the Greco-Roman World, 23), 40–4; cf. Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, 86–106.

[14] Both Paul I and Paul II were consecrated by Philoxenus of Maboug who, together with Severus of Antioch, was head of the Monophysite movement. Irfan Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), 374.

[15] J. Ryckmans and J. W. Hirschberg have disagreed on whether Ḥayyān was Monophysite or Nestorian. Irfan Shahîd, taking up the discussion, concludes that neither option is possible, since the reign of Yazdgard I (399–420) during which Ḥayyān's conversion took place, occurred prior to both the Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451). Hirschberg also proposed that the characters of Ḥannān of the *Chronicle of Saard* and Ḥayyān of the *Book of the Himyarites* were not the same person. Shahîd as well demonstrates that this is incorrect: ibid, 362–3.

[16] This story is not contained in the earliest manuscripts of the *Book of the Himyarites*. It was retold in the *Nestorian Chronicle of Saard*, and is preserved by Moberg in his translation: *The Book of the Himyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1924; Skrifter Utg. Av Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet I Lund, 7), xlix–l. The *Book of the Himyarites* is undated. Christedes suggests that, since the overthrow of the Christians by the Persians in 570 is not recorded, the author died prior to the Persian occupation: Vassilios Christedes, 'The Himyarite–Ethiopian War and the Ethiopian Occupation of South Arabia in the Acts of Gregentius (*ca.* 530 AD)', *Annales d'Ethiopie*, 9/1 (1972): 115–46, at 136. Also see Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 264 ff.

[17] A letter from the Persian Bishop Simon of Beth Arsham to Mar Simon is contained in the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn* (a.k.a. *Pseudo-Dionysius*) and includes another telling of the Najran martyrdom recording the death of Paul I. See Amir Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn, Parts III and IV, A.D. 488–775: Translated from Syriac with Notes and Introduction* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of

Byzantium and Abyssinia heard the cry of the martyrs and in 525 launched an invasion, conquering South Arabia and returning it to Christian rule. The church in Dhafar was consecrated as The Church of the Holy Trinity, along with eight other churches (including three in Najran) under Monophysite Christian rule between *ca.* 523 and 570.[18] In 570 South Arabia was conquered by Zoroastrian Persians, who had a long tradition of religious pluralism. Though Christians had lost political control, Christianity was likely the dominant religion in South Arabia during the turn of the seventh century.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE IN SOUTH ARABIA IN THE SIXTH AND EARLY SEVENTH CENTURIES

Richard Bell once posited that the disputes over Trinitarian theology stemming from Chalcedon are not reflected in the Qur'ān, as Trinitarian

Mediaeval Studies, 1999; Mediaeval Sources in Translation, 36), 78–86. For the martyrdom of Paul II see Irfan Shahîd, *The Martyrs of Najrân: New Documents* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971; Subsidia Hagiographica, 49), 46.

[18] See Irfan Shahîd, 'Byzantium in South Arabia', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 33 (1979): 23–94, at 29. The source for this historical material is *Bios* Chapter 9 of *Vita Sancti Gregentii* (hereafter *Vita*). The historical information is woven into legendary tales of miracles surrounding a character named Bishop Gregentius. Shahîd (ibid, 31) divides the *Vita* into two halves, discarding the Mediterranean as spurious and retaining the Arabian as partly authentic. He then divides the Arabian section into the list of churches, the *Leges*, and the *Dialogus*. Of these, he retains only the record of the churches as authentic. A full study and English translation is now available in Albrecht Berger, *Life and Works of Saint Gregentios, Archbishop of Taphar: Introduction, Critical Edition and Translation* (Berlin and New York, NY: De Gruyter, 2006; Millennium-Studien, 7). Though Berger presents the majority of the *Vita* as legendary, an argument for the extraction of the Arabian section (*Bios* 9) is upheld by Gianfranco Fiaccadori who posits within Berger's book that, 'A part of the *Bios* that certainly goes back to a much older source is Gregentios' itinerary with the detailed list of churches [. . .] This wealth of information about the Christian topography of South Arabia is still of value even if Gregentios should have been no historical person at all' (ibid, 52). The challenge of reconciling completely the details surrounding the mysterious South Arabian Bishop are outside the scope of this study. The list of churches in *Bios* 9, and the existence of a bishop in Himyar under the reign of Abraha are accepted. The unlikelihood of Gregentius being an accurate name for such a bishop is noted. Fiaccadori (ibid, ch. 2) suggests that Gregentius (Gregentios) could have been a contemporary of Abraha, consecrated independently if Abraha's request for a bishop from Rome was denied.

theology had been settled by the time of the Prophet.[19] By Bell's estimation, the Qurʾān therefore responds to misunderstood Chalcedonian Trinitarian theology. This is most certainly not the case. The Chalcedonian Church had settled its doctrine certainly by the seventh century, but Chalcedonian Christianity was not the largest branch of Christianity at the time of the Prophet, and certainly not the dominant Christian influence in Arabia. Instead, it was Monophysitism that he encountered in his Christian contemporaries, and the particular brand of the tritheistic Philoponian Monophysitism that he found in the Najranians.

The distinction between Diaphysitism (Chalcedonian Trinitarian theology) and Monophysitism (a widespread branch of Christianity at the time of the Prophet) is important to make here.

> The Monophysites . . . had been maintaining that while Christ existed in one indivisible *hypostasis*, this *hypostasis*, though united in essence to God, must be distinguished from the *hypostaseis* of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit . . . the distinction between the persons of the Trinity was elaborated to the extent that not only individualities (*hypostaseis*) but individual natures within each person had to be recognized . . . Such ideas deserved the term 'Tritheist'.[20]

Additionally, as Christ was God and had only one nature, Mary was therefore in theory the very literal 'Mother of God' (*theotokos*). The exaggerated Mariology of the Monophysitism that the Qurʾān corrects is

[19] Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment: The Gunning Lectures, Edinburgh University, 1925* (London: Cass, repr. 1968 [1926]; Islam and the Muslim World, 10), 6–7.

[20] The quote and a history of the development of Monophysitism can be found in W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., repr. 2008 [1972]), 289–90. The term *hypostasis* (pl. *hypostaseis*) stems from Greek, and refers here to the Trinitarian persons of God in Christian trinitarian theology. Christianity proposes God in one nature (Greek: *ousia*) and three persons (*hypostaseis)*: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the three Persons of a single indivisible nature which is God. In Arabic, hypostasis is rendered: *uqnūm* (pl. *aqānīm*). For a better understanding of the roots of Monophysitism see Uwe Michael Lang, *John Philoponus and the Controversies over Chalcedon in the Sixth Century: A Study and Translation of the Arbiter* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001; Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense. Études et Documents, 47). Readers may also wish to consult the Monophysite Christologies summarized in Roberta C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies: Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabbug, and Jacob of Sarug* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

made clear by its direct rebuttal against the elevation of Mary as an actor in the Godhead (Q. 5. 116).

In 520, the Monophysite James of Serug (d. 521) wrote to the Himyarite Christians to commend their faith.[21] Irfan Shahîd notes that, 'Monophysitism [had] established itself as the dominant Christian denomination in Najrân, probably late in the [fifth] century and certainly in the sixth'.[22] In spite of this concession, Shahîd and others have at times questioned whether or not Chalcedonianism or Nestorianism played a role in the sixth century leadership of Najran. As the Christian doctrine of Najran is the target of the later Qurʾānic response to Christianity, we will turn to these questions here.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (*EI*), the Monophysite Abyssinian Negus Ella-Aṣbeḥa (a.k.a. Caleb; Hellestheaios; r. *ca.* 500–534) conquered Himyar in around 525.[23] He left there a new king named Esimiphaios who was quickly overthrown and in spite of Caleb's attempts to regain power, Abraha replaced Esimiphaios as king of Himyar. Writing in *EI*, Beeston tentatively suggests that Abraha may have had Nestorian leanings. He makes this observation based solely on Abraha's political distaste for Caleb, and a difference in the wording of his opening Trinitarian blessing in writings from those of Esimiphaios, his predecessor.[24] It is conceivable that Abraha allowed ambiguity in his presentation of his faith in order to gain Byzantine support for his action against the Persians, but an official conversion from Monophysitism to Nestorianism is very unlikely. It is more likely that Byzantium was itself still generally Monophysite and on friendly terms with Abyssinia. Beeston's conviction on the matter seems lower than that of Shahîd, who proposes the possibility that Abraha changed his faith from Monophysitism to Chalcedonianism.[25]

[21] Frend, *Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 306.

[22] Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 363. Cook also describes the Christians in Yemen as Abyssinian Monophysites. He suggests that the Persian Christians were dominantly Nestorian, though the rise of Assyrian Miaphysitism in Persia prior to the Persian–Byzantine wars casts doubt on this. Michael Allan Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; Past Masters), 10. Byzantium itself was Monophysite from Zeno's *Henotikon* in 482 at least through the reign of Anastasius (r. 491–518). Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 373–4.

[23] Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (eds.), *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conferences, 13), p. 25.

[24] See H. A. R. Gibb *et al.*, art. 'Abraha', *EI*^{2}, i. 102–3.

[25] Shahîd, 'Byzantium in South Arabia', 27.

According to Shahîd, the *Vita* draws Abraha's Monophysitism into doubt by identifying Gregentius the Bishop of Dhafar, sent by Byzantine Emperor Justin I, as a Chalcedonian.[26] Shahîd's proposal rests on a complex series of intricately aligned conditions for identifying this mysterious bishop dispatched to Himyar between 525 and 535 as a Chalcedonian.[27]

Shahîd's proposal is summarized here. Shahîd reads the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn* as suggesting that it was Caleb (r. 514–42) who requested the bishop from Justin (r. 518–527). The two had met in Jerusalem, according to the *Kebra Nagast,* at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Shahîd interprets this as a pilgrimage for Caleb rather than a business trip, implying Caleb's Chalcedonianism. The bishop sent by Justin to Himyar is identified in the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn* as John of St. John's, a church administrator.[28] Shahîd equates John with Euprepius, bishop of Ethiopia at the time.[29] Paramonarius and Caleb thus being Chalcedonian would imply that Abraha, having requested a bishop from Justin through Caleb, was also Chalcedonian. It is also telling for Shahîd that Gregentius is excluded from the *Ethiopic Synaxarion* implying that he was not Monophysite, thus agreeing with the *Vita*'s position on the bishop's ecclesiastical stance.[30]

Not only is Shahîd's supposition of Abraha's Chalcedionianism based on some remote possibilities, clear problems remain. Firstly, the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn* ultimately relies on the *Book of the Himyarites* which, as Shahîd admits, is too damaged to clarify the event if it is included at all in the damaged sections.

Secondly, there is very little evidence to show that although the Abyssinians and Byzantines had worked together in the liberation of South Arabia from the Jewish kings, they agreed on matters of Chalcedonian theology. In fact, quite the opposite, as Shahîd himself clarifies that when Byzantium and Abyssinia shared theology just prior to Abraha's rule, it was Monophysitism that they shared,

[26] Evelyne Patlagean argued elsewhere that it could not have been that the bishop sent to consecrate the South Arabian churches was either named Gregentius or a Chalcedonian. See ibid, 29–30. Berger's work concludes rather forcefully that with the exception of *Bios 9*, none of the *Vita* is to be trusted as historical.

[27] Ibid, 31.

[28] Harrak, *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, 77.

[29] Shahîd, 'Byzantium in South Arabia', 90.

[30] Ibid, 91.

not Chalcedonianism.[31] It is in spite of any remaining differences that they worked together for political reasons, and no theological reason need be found for their doing so.[32] In fact, taken together with other sources such as Procopius and Nonnosus, it seems clear that Justin's intent in helping the Abyssinians in the takeover of South Arabia was precisely economic and political.[33] In the aftermath of Abraha's taking over as king, both the Byzantines and the Abyssinians lost political control over the region they had banded together to conquer. Abraha received official delegations of his own from Rome, Persia, and even his former home, Ethiopia.[34]

Thirdly, if the author of the *Ethiopic Synaxarion* was relying on the *Vita* as a source, the *Vita*'s identification of Gregentius as Chalcedonian would explain quite simply the name's exclusion in the *Synaxarion*. Whether or not Gregentius was in fact a Chalcedonian his identification as such in the *Vita* is sufficient to justify the excluded name. Vassillios Christedes has asserted that the author of the *Vita* misidentified Gregentius as Chalcedonian in order to line him up with the author's own orthodoxy.[35]

Nevertheless, it is the ecclesiastical allegiance of the leaders in Najran that is primarily at question here, and regardless of Abraha's theological allegiance Shahîd concedes that

> Najrān probably enjoyed politically a somewhat autonomous status in the sixth century, and this would have been another consideration justifying its being an ecclesiastically autocephalous see, which, however, might have been related to the see of Zafar, the capital of the country, whose bishop must have been the metropolitan of the whole South Arabian region. If Abraha led South Arabia to the Chalcedonian fold, then that country would have had two ecclesiastical

[31] Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 373. A theological treaty known as the *Henotikon* in 482 was intended to hold the Byzantines and the Abyssinians together, but it was the Acacian schism (484–519) between Rome and Byzantium that really divided the two as the Byzantines slid more and more toward Monophysitism, and Abyssinian loyalty. Emperor Justin I was able to reconcile with Rome by signing a rejection of Acasiua, Macedonius, Anastasius, and Zeno (author of the *Henotikon*), and the schism between Rome and Byzantium formally ended on 28 March, 519. See Frend, *Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 236.

[32] Zeev Rubin, 'Islamic Traditions on the Sāsānian Conquest of the Ḥimyarite Realm', *Der Islam*, 84/2 (2008): 185–99, at 194.

[33] Ibid, 188.

[34] Ibid, 189.

[35] Christedes, 'The Himyarite–Ethiopian War', 117.

hierarchies, as did Syria in the sixth century, and this circumstance would have both ensured the continuance of the see of Najrân and enhanced its autonomy.[36]

Some of the confusion over the doctrine of the South Arabian Christians is due to signs of continued alliance to both the Byzantine and Abyssinian churches while speaking Syriac and propagating Monophysitism. *The Book of the Himyarites* includes among the clergy in Najran, 'two Arabs from al-Ḥīrā, two Byzantines, one Persian and an Abyssinian'.[37] It follows as no surprise then that one of the features of the dialogue between the Najran Christians and the Prophet as recorded by Ibn Isḥāq was disagreement between the Christians themselves on the nature of God.[38]

Even if perchance Shahîd's suggestion is right and John Paramonarius/Euprepius was the bishop in question (a.k.a. Gregentius), *or* that he was Chalcedonian, it is still implied in *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn* that he died between 535 and 537, almost a century prior to the Prophet's meeting with the Najran Christians.[39] The latter third of that century was spent under Persian rule, with Assyrian Monophysites accompanying the Persians.[40] Further, not only did the Banū al-Ḥārith in Najran have a

[36] Shahîd, 'Byzantium in South Arabia', 40–1, esp. n. 42.

[37] Christedes, 'The Himyarite–Ethiopian War', 132.

[38] Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 269–70.; cf. Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i. 573 ff.

[39] Shahîd, 'Byzantium in South Arabia', p. 90.

[40] At the synod of Beth Lapat (484) in Persia, Nestorianism was declared the official doctrine of the Eastern Assyrian Church. However, in making concessions to their Zoroastrian rulers, the Nestorian church leaders allowed clergy to marry. Opponents of the changes defected to Monophysitism. Henana of Adiabene (d. 610) became head of the school of Nisibis (from *ca.* 571–610). He dismissed Antiochene tradition and reverted to the teaching of Origen, advancing the Monophysites (Miaphysites) among Assyrian Persians by teaching a one-*qnōmā* Christology. The Bishops tried to censor Henana, but he was well protected by the royal court and he remained head of the school. Monophysitism gained a strong official following among the Assyrians. The later wars between the Persian and Byzantine empires (610–28) further weakened the political standing of the Assyrian Nestorian church. The Miaphysites took their opportunity to rise up again, and took over rural sees, South Arabia likely included. By the mid-first/seventh century the Monophysites in Persia were a strong section of religious life. This push from Nestorianism toward Monophysitism/Miaphysitism among Assyrian Christians beginning in 484 was beginning to peak at about the time that the Persians moved into Himyar to conquer the Abyssinians. See Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London and New York, NY: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 32–9;

long standing tribal allegiance to Monophysitism through the Ghassānids,[41] but their first and second bishops, the martyred Paul I, and his successor Paul II, were consecrated by Philoxenus, a founder of the Monophysite movement.[42]

There was also a third Monophysite bishop in South Arabia in the sixth century, Bishop Silvanus, whom we know of through the writing of John Diacrinomenus, who directed a fellow Christian to the bishop in one of his letters.[43] Silvanus' presence in South Arabia is independent evidence of the regional Monophysitism that the Banū al-Ḥārith represented in Najran. Shahîd himself, who originally raised the question of Chalcedonianism in South Arabia later concedes the Monophysitism of the region, stating that, 'it was in the reign of Anastasius and through the vision of Philoxenus that Najrân acquired its strong Monophysite character, which determined the confessional stance of South Arabia for a century till the rise of Islam'.[44]

In 541, al-Ḥārith b. Jabalah (r. 529–69) requested from Empress Theodora (d. 548) Monophysite bishops for the Ghassanids. The empress arranged for Theodosius (Patriarch of Alexandria, r. 535–66) to consecrate two now famous Monophysite bishops, Theodore of Bostra (consecrated *ca.* 542), and the Syrian Jacob Baradaeus (a.k.a. James Baradai, d. 578), after whom the Syrian Monophysites would eventually be called 'Jacobites'.[45] Jacob was perhaps the strongest of Monophysite missionaries, covering massive ground between 542 and 578. Early on, he consecrated Conon of Tarsus and Eugenius of Seleucia who became leaders in the tritheist movement starting in the 550s.

cf. Gerrit J. Reinink, 'Tradition and the Formation of the "Nestorian" Identity in Sixth-to Seventh-Century Iraq', *CHRC* 89/1–3 (2009): 217–50, at 221; cf. Arthur Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1962), 27–9.

[41] Shahîd outlines this direct relationship between the Banū al-Ḥārith in Najran and the Ghassanids in North Arabia. Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 374, 401–2. The Banū al-Ḥārith in Najran provided some of the principal martyrs during the persecution of the Najrani Christians by the Jewish king Masruq in *ca.* 520 CE. For a translation, commentary and the martyriology given by the *Book of the Himyarites*, see Moberg, *Book of Himyarites*, and Shahîd, *The Martyrs of Najrân*.

[42] Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 374; cf. id., *The Martyrs of Najrân*, 46; see also id., *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2 vols., 2009), i. 710.

[43] Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 401; cf. id., *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, i. 709.

[44] Ibid, i. 710–11.

[45] Frend, *Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 285.

Capitalizing on the theology of John Philoponus (d. *ca.* 565), the two propagated a widespread overt tritheism[46] which influenced a massive contingent of the Arabian Monophysites, including Bishop Sergius of Antioch and John Asconaghes (both d. *ca.* 560).[47] The tritheist movement spread quickly to Greece and Rome, Syria, Egypt and south into Africa. In 574 the tritheists themselves divided into two groups, the Athanasians and the Cononites.[48]

In 563, Ḥārith of the northern Arabian Ghassanids carried a letter from Jacob Baradaeus to Constantinople, the primary concern of which was the denunciation of the rapid and extensive spread of tritheism among the Arab clergy.[49] Of the 137 signatories listed at the end of the letter, it is shocking that there are none from Najran or Dhafar.[50] Given the centrality of these two cities to the Christian identity in South Arabia,[51] the presence of at least six churches and two Monophysite bishoprics between them, and the close historical ties between the Banū al-Ḥārith and the Ghassanids in the north, the absence of signatories from these two cities is stunning. It is unlikely that the South Arabian Christians would be uninvited to sign such a declaration had they agreed with it. Far more likely is that the strong tritheistic doctrine that the letter admonishes, that of Conon and Eugenius, was present precisely in Najran and Dhafar in the mid-sixth century.

In 566, the Roman Emperor Justin II (r. 565–78) held a conference between the Chalcedonians and the two kinds of Monophysites (the orthodox Monophysites and the Philoponian tritheists). Eugenius and Conon were involved in the debate which lasted a year, and some reconciliation was gained as both bishops were restored to their sees.[52]

[46] The theology of this tritheistic doctrine promoted three gods, not one God in three hypostases, but of three natures. See ibid., 290.

[47] Ibid, 290–1; cf. Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 21 ff.

[48] The Athanasians rejected the idea of bodily resurrection, which the Cononites accepted, though the two groups shared tritheist theology. Ibid, 22.

[49] Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs*, 183. The letter is in Latin in Jean Baptiste Chabot, *Documenta ad Origines Monophysitarum Illustrandas* (Louvain: Secretariat du Corpus SCO, repr. 1965 [1933]; Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 103), 145–56; for the letter in Syriac with a French translation, see J. Lamy, 'Profession de Foi Adressée par Les Abbés des Couvents de la Province d'Arabie à Jacques Baradée' in J. Lamy (ed.), *Actes du XIe Congrès International des Orientalistes* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1897), 117–37. The letter is discussed in detail in Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, i. 824–38.

[50] Chabot, *Documenta*, 148–56.

[51] The churches of South Arabia and their ecclesiology are discussed below.

[52] Frend, *Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 318.

This did not extinguish the tritheist movement, however, as Patriarch Peter of Callinicum (r. 581–91) was still managing debates with tritheist bishops between 582 and 585.[53]

Al-Mundhir (r. 569–82) succeeded Ḥārith b. Jabalah as the phylarch of the Ghassanids. Al-Mundhir was a strong Monophysite, and received at the court of Emperor Tiberius II in 580 as the king of the Ghassanids, second in power only to the Emperor himself.[54] Al-Mundhir was slandered and betrayed by Maurice (r. 582–602), and was arrested and exiled to Sicily. In 582 Maurice became Emperor of Byzantium. In 584 he abolished the rule of the Ghassanids, and the mighty Arab Christians divided into fifteen tribes. Some of these joined the Persians, advancing Monophysitism under their rule.[55] Maurice was a Chalcedonian, with no taste for Monophysites, and his betrayal of the Arab Monophysites would be avenged by a united Arab army in the spring of 634 against Syria and Palestine. The Arabs were by then no longer interested in ecumenical debate, as they attacked Monophysite monasteries as well as Chalcedonian.[56]

There is enough evidence for the Monophysitism of South Arabia in the sixth century to relegate Nestorianism to a minority, and any known hints of Chalcedonianism among South Arabian Christians to mere whispers. The Najran Christians were staunchly Monophysite in 631, and are extremely likely to have been propagating the overtly tritheistic doctrine of Eugenius and Conon.[57]

In 633, just prior to the Arab invasion, the Synod of Alexandria under Cyrus finally saw the unification of the various kinds of Monophysites and the eventual end of formal tritheism. However, the meeting between the Najran Christians and the Arab prophet had already taken place, and the Arabs now had their own Christology.

Monophysitism had been brought to Najran most likely by the Ghassanids, of whom Abū Ḥāritha b. ʿAlqāma was a direct relative.[58] It was not likely the common Monophysitism of Severus, but the overtly tritheistic Monophysitism of Philoponus that the Najranis followed. It is this tritheistic theology that the Qurʾān responds to in some of the sūras

[53] One of those was Bishop Elias, whom Peter won back to orthodox Monophysitism. See Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 8.

[54] Frend, *Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 328–9.

[55] Ibid, 330.

[56] Including the monasteries of Mardin and Qatar; ibid, 350–2.

[57] Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, ii. 296.

[58] Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 373 ff.

explored below. An accurate understanding of the Qurʾānic rebuttal in the context of the Najranis' meeting with the Prophet will be explored in relation to Qurʾānic translation below.

THE PROPHET'S DIRECT ENCOUNTERS WITH CHRISTIANS

There are four main Christian characters in Muḥammad's biography: the monk Baḥīrā, Bishop Quss b. Sāʿida al-Iyāḍī of Najran, Waraqa b. Nawfal, and Abū Ḥāritha b. ʿAlqāma. When Muḥammad was twelve years old, Abū Ṭālib brought him on a trade caravan to Bostra, Syria. There they were hosted by Baḥīrā, a Christian monk.[59] Baḥīrā, allegedly aware of a Christian prophecy concerning a coming prophet for the Arabs, identified Muḥammad as the foretold. Baḥīrā warned Abū Ṭālib to guard Muḥammad against the Jews.

Whether the story of Baḥīrā is historical or not, Trimingham is 'certain that there was no direct Christian influence upon Muhammad during the formative years of his mission since there is no trace of it in the early suras of the Qurʾān'.[60] This is not likely to be accurate, as Muḥammad

[59] The historicity of this event is debated outside of Islamic tradition. As Trimingham notes (*Christianity among the Arabs*, 4), the Syriac name *bhīrā* simply means 'reverend' as a title, and could have referred to any monk. One can find the retelling of the story by historians in Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 10th edn. (revised), 2002), 111. Also see Tor Andræ, *Mohammed, the Man and His Faith* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, repr. 2000 [1936]), 37–8. The earliest biography of the Prophet tells the story in Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 79–81; cf. Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i. 180–3; Ibn Saʿd includes a brief mention of the event in *Ibn Saʿd's Kitab al-Tabaqat al-kabir* (transl., S. Moinul Haq and H. K. Ghazanfar; New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2 vols., [?]1990), i. 134–5. The Arabic original is in Muḥammad Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 9 vols., 1997), i. 96–100. The biography assembled by Martin Lings is a more colourful version, mentioning that manuscripts belonging to Baḥīrā had predicted a prophet, though this author has yet to find any credible references to such manuscripts. See Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1983), 29–30. The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā as it played out in inter-faith dialogue after the Prophet's death will not be treated here. If Baḥīrā lived in Bostra, and was of Arab descent, he would most likely have been of the Ghassanids, and therefore a Monophysite, see Frend, 306.

[60] Trimingham, *Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 259.

had connections with Bishop Quss and Waraqa b. Nawfal as well. Waraqa was of the Makkan Quraysh, indicating his (and Khadīja's) Christian influence. More likely is that the Christianity that Muḥammad encountered in these influences simply did not provoke a Qurʾānic rebuttal.

Sometime before Muḥammad's call to prophethood, he visited the market of ʿUkāẓ, and heard a sermon preached by Bishop Quss of Najran.[61] Not much is known that can be historically verified about this encounter. It is said that the Prophet remembered the event fondly when the Iyāḍ sent a delegation to him later on.

It is transmitted that when he was forty years old, shortly after his first revelatory encounter, he met with Waraqa b. Nawfal.[62] Waraqa was a learned Christian, and the cousin of Muḥammad's wife Khadīja. Waraqa reportedly affirmed Muḥammad as a prophet of the Christian God.[63] He is said to have been old at this time, and some sources report him to have been blind.

According to Ibn Isḥāq, the Najran Christians who visited the Prophet in 631 were fourteen men in all. Only three of them spoke directly with him. They were Najran's political leader, or *ʿĀqib* (ʿAbd al-Masīḥ); administrative leader, or *Sayyid* (al-Ayham); and

> Their bishop, scholar, religious leader and master of their schools, was ʿAbū Ḥāritha, who was respected among them and a renowned student with an extensive knowledge of their religion; the Christian princes of Byzantium had honoured him with gifts of goods and servants, built churches for him, and venerated him for his learning and religious zeal.[64]

As Abū Ḥāritha was the religious leader, his clear Philoponian tritheistic theology is likely to have been the most dominant and skilfully

[61] Quss was a Monophysite. Irfan Shahîd, 'Islam and Oriens Christianus: Makka 610–622 AD', in Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark Swanson, and David Thomas (eds.) *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2006; The History of Christian–Muslim Relations), 24 ff.

[62] Waraqa b. Nawfal in Ibn Isḥāq 's *Sīra* was one of the four men who rejected polytheism (*ḥunafāʾ*). 'Waraqa attached himself to Christianity and studied its scriptures until he had thoroughly mastered them.' Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 98–9; cf. Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i. 223 ff. Trimingham notes (*Christianity among the Arabs*, 263) that of the four *ḥunafāʾ*, three became Christians, and the fourth died in his quest for the true religion.

[63] Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 107; cf. Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i. 191., Lings, *Muhammad*, 44.

[64] Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 271; cf. Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i. 573.

explained to the Prophet during the meeting.[65] He was the dominant spiritual leader, and from the dominant tribe in Najran.[66] It was his theology that the Qurʾānic revelations respond to in the later sūras. The brand of Abū Ḥāritha's faith is therefore important to the context of the Qurʾān and its accurate translation today.

According to Ibn Isḥāq, sometime that same year leaders of the Banū al-Ḥārith from Najran converted to Islam. Abū Ḥāritha was not among the names of prominent converts listed by Ibn Isḥāq. This may indicate that he did not convert along with his tribe, or possibly that he had died by that time.[67]

THE USE OF 'TRINITY' IN THE QURʾĀN

We shall begin here with the two problematic verses for translators of the Qurʾān, those which deal most directly with the nature of the Christian God.

> People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word, directed to Mary, a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of a '**Trinity**' (ثَلَاثَةٌ)—stop [this], that is better for you—God is only one God, He is far above having a son, everything in the heavens and earth belongs to Him and He is the best one to trust. (Q. 4. 171; M.A.S. Abdel Haleem translation,[68] emphasis mine)

[65] It is also possible that of the Christian leaders of Najran, Abū Ḥāritha was one of only few who could speak both Syriac, the educated language of the Monophysites and Nestorians, as well as the Arabic that the Prophet would have clearly understood. The liturgical language of Najran was likely Syriac, and their leadership may have included Byzantines, Persians, and Abyssinians as well as Arabs, as recorded in *The Book of the Himyarites*. Syriac would have united the leadership in Najran, but Arabic was necessary for the dialogue with the Prophet. Abū Ḥāritha would have known both. On the liturgical language of Najran see Christedes, 'Himyarite–Ethiopian War', 132.

[66] Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 400.

[67] See Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad* (Ibn Isḥāq) 645–48; cf. Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, ii. 592.

[68] M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

And also,

Those people who say that God is the **third of three** (ثَلَاثَةٍ ثَالِثُ) are defying [the truth]: there is only One God. If they persist in what they are saying, a painful punishment will afflict those of them who persist. (Q. 5. 73; M.A.S. Abdel Haleem translation, emphasis mine)

Some remarks on the emboldened translation rendered 'Trinity' in Q. 4. 171 are necessary here, as it does not seem to be congruent with the known historical context of the Qurʾān. The Arabic text is included here to add clarity to the following discussion.

يَٰٓأَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَا تَغۡلُواْ فِي دِينِكُمۡ وَلَا تَقُولُواْ
عَلَى ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلۡحَقَّۚ إِنَّمَا ٱلۡمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ٱبۡنُ مَرۡيَمَ رَسُولُ
ٱللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُۥٓۚ أَلۡقَىٰهَآ إِلَىٰ مَرۡيَمَ وَرُوحٞ مِّنۡهُۖ فَـَٔامِنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ
وَرُسُلِهِۦۖ وَلَا تَقُولُواْ ثَلَٰثَةٌۚ ٱنتَهُواْ خَيۡرٗا لَّكُمۡۚ إِنَّمَا ٱللَّهُ إِلَٰهٞ
وَٰحِدٞۖ سُبۡحَانَهُۥٓ أَن يَكُونَ لَهُۥ وَلَدٞۘ لَّهُۥ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ
وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِۗ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ وَكِيلٗا

(Q. 4. 171; emphasis mine)

لَّقَدۡ كَفَرَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ثَالِثُ ثَلَٰثَةٖۘ وَمَا مِنۡ
إِلَٰهٍ إِلَّآ إِلَٰهٞ وَٰحِدٞۚ وَإِن لَّمۡ يَنتَهُواْ عَمَّا يَقُولُونَ لَيَمَسَّنَّ
ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ مِنۡهُمۡ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ

(Q. 5. 73; emphasis mine)

Abdel Haleem's English translation of 4. 171 above uses the word 'Trinity' to translate the Arabic word *thalātha* (ثَلَاثَةٌ).[69] This rendering may also be found in the translations of Rashad Khalifa and of The Monotheist Group.[70] To illustrate the challenge that translators have

[69] The exact word *thalātha* may also be found at Q. 9. 119 and Q. 19. 10, for example. It is clear that the internal meaning of the Qurʾān is the number three.

[70] See Rashad Khalifa, *Quran: The Final Testament: Authorized English Version, with the Arabic Text* (Capistrano Beach, CA: Islamic Productions, 4th edn. (revised), 2005); The Monotheist Group, *The Message: A Translation of the Glorious Qurʾan* (n.p. [USA]: Brainbow Press, 2008).

faced with these two terms alone, included below is a survey of English translations of these two terms:

Date of translation	English translator	Sūra 4. 171 rendered ثَلاَثَةٌ	Sūra 5.73 rendered ثَالِثُ ثَلاَثَةٍ
1734	George Sale	There are three Gods	Third of three
1930	Marmadule Pickthall	Three	Third of three
1934	Abdulla Yusuf Ali	Trinity	One of three in a Trinity
1955	A. J. Arberry	Three	Third of three
1957	Abdul Majid Daryabadi	Three	Third of the three
1978	Rashad Khalifa	Trinity	A third in a Trinity
1985	T.B. Irving	Three	Third of three
1999	Aisha Bewley	Three	Third of three
2002	Amatul Rahman Omar	[There are] three [Gods]	Third of the three
2004	Abdel Haleem	Trinity	Third of three
2008	The Monotheist Group	Trinity	Trinity

Perhaps the present research can be of some help in clearing up the context. The word *thalātha* should be literally translated as 'three', hence the phrase should here read, 'do not speak of three'. The verse 5. 73 in Khalifa and The Monotheist Group is also translated incorporating the word 'trinity' in place of the phrase 'third of three' as used by Abdel Haleem, rendering *thālithu thalāthatin* (ثَالِثُ ثَلاَثَةٍ) in the text.[71]

There exists a proper Arabic word for Trinity, *al-thālūth* (الثالوث) which includes the letter '*waw*', clearly identifiable even in early Arabic writings in the absence of diacritical marks and vocalization.[72] This translation choice (trinity) is curious as the Arabic word for Trinity was

[71] The term *thālithu* occurs also at Q. 36. 14, where its meaning is clearly 'third'.

[72] The vocalization which distinguishes various pronunciations of the same group of consonants and therefore different meanings is not found in the earliest known Qurʾān manuscripts. The same is true of the diacritical marks, which distinguish between consonants of the same basic shape. Neither of these exclusions from the text would have prevented early readers from misinterpreting 'three' as 'trinity'.

in use at the time of the Qurʾān's textual assembly and does not appear in the Qurʾān. We know this from several sources. Firstly, perhaps the oldest known Arab Christian apology comes from the ʿAbbasid period, and dates to about 755. The apology is indicated by S. Samir to contain the phrase الموحّد الثالوث (The Unified Trinity) and shows concretely this distinction between 'three' as used in the Qurʾān, and 'trinity' as an Arabic word in written use within decades of the Qurʾān's written recording.[73]

However, the word 'trinity' existed in spoken Arabic from the time of the Monophysite debate over the Theophaschite formula, 'One of the Holy Trinity has suffered in the flesh', from 527–36.[74] The Ghassanids were involved in the debate, and it is unreasonable to suggest that the Arab phylarch did not have terminology in his own tongue for a Christian concept so foundational as 'trinity', especially since we know that some Arab kings had been Christians since the mid-fourth century. Shahîd recounts the development of Arabic as a theological language stating that, 'already in the fourth century there was an Arabic confession of faith, the Nicene Creed. In the sixth century, the Ghassānid rulers discussed theology'.[75] Though other scripts were used to render it in writing, it is irrational to suppose that the Arabic word for 'trinity' had not been developed during the period of more than 250 years of Arab Christianity prior to Islam.

Secondly, the Najran martyriological letter of Simeon of Beth Arsham (w.c. 519) contains the word 'trinity'.[76] It was written from Ḥīra very shortly after the Najran massacre. The text is preserved in Syriac and in a Karshuni translation.[77] In the Syriac version of the letter the word for

[73] Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen, *Christian Arabic Apologetics During the Abbasid Period, 750–1258* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994; Studies in the History of Religions, 63), 57. The text contains the Arabic word الثالوث numerous times. It does not provide a definition of the word outside of the theological debate over its meaning. The text therefore assumes the reader's ability to recognize the word, indicating the term's common use.

[74] See Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, i. 734. Arabic as a spoken language existed from the middle of the fourth century, as evinced by the Arabic Namāra inscription in Nabataean letters recording the death of Imruʾ al-Qays, the Christian Lakhmid king of al-Ḥīra, in 328; see Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, 31 ff.

[75] Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, i. 740–4 (the quote is from p. 744).

[76] The text definitely predates the second Assyrian invasion of Himyar in 525. See Irfan Shahîd, *The Martyrs of Najran*, 62, 113.

[77] Karshuni is the Arabic language written in the Syriac script. This was how spoken Arabic was often recorded before the written Arabic language had

trinity is ܬܠܝܬܝܐܝܘܬܐ (*tlīthāyūthā*), clearly indicating the long vowel '*waw*' (ܘ). The long vowel was written in Syriac for both Syriac readings and the Arabic Karshuni readings, and made the later transition into formal written Arabic as the letter '*waw*' (و). The Syriac *tlīthāyūthā* and the Arabic *al-thālūth* both contain the long vowel ('*waw*') distinguishing the word 'three' from 'trinity'. Since there is a Karshuni version, it is known that this text in its oral tradition existed in the native tongue of the people about whom it was written, and as Shahîd notes, 'there is no doubt that in the sixth century [Najran] was an Arab city whose inhabitants spoke the Arabic language as their native tongue'.[78]

Thirdly, it is known from the *Vita* and highlighted by Shahîd that the largest pre-Islamic church in the spiritual centre of South Arabia (Dhafar) was named 'The Great Church of the Holy Trinity'.[79] Though it is uncertain whether the title of this church was engraved on it in Syriac, Sabaic, or Himyaritic, it is unreasonable to suggest that so famous a name did not exist in each of these languages, and especially on the Arab tongue of Bishop Abū Ḥāritha in Najran.[80]

Fourthly, not less than eight villages in Yemen still today carry the name *al-thālūth*: Al Khanq-Sūq al-Thalūth, Barm-Sūq al-Thalūth, and Sūq al-Thalūth are located in the governorate of al-Jawf; Ghārib al-Thālūth and Sūq al-Thalūth are in the governorate of ʿAmrān; and there are three separate villages all named Sūq al-Thalūth in the governorate of Ṣaʿda.[81] It is notable that all of these villages are in the north-western, former Najran region of Yemen, directly between the cities of Ṣanaʿā, Yemen and Najran, Saudi Arabia. One may posit that the names of these villages were not given to them by Muslim rulers subsequent to the Islamic takeover of Yemen in 631, and thus they are

developed. The fact that there is a Karshuni version of this letter means that at some point before classical Arabic writing, the content of the letter was uttered and understood in spoken Arabic. The Syriac text of *Simeon's New Letter* is in ibid, iii–xxxii; facsimiles of the Syriac are in plates I–IX and of the Karshuni version in X–XVIII.

[78] Ibid, 157–8.

[79] Shahîd, 'Byzantium in South Arabia', 28–9.

[80] Shahîd has confirmed that the language of Najran in the sixth century was Arabic, and shown that it could not have been Sabaic. It is therefore rational that Abū Ḥāritha as a bishop spoke both Arabic and Syriac, and that the name of the largest church in South Arabia was known to him in the Arabic language. See Shahîd, *The Martyrs of Najrân*, 242 ff.

[81] The list of villages in Yemen may be obtained through the Yemen Ministry of Public Health at Yemen Ministry of Public Health, 'Maps & Data: Geo Datasets', Yemen Ministry of Public Health http://www.mophp-ye.org/docs/Data/xls_codes.zip (accessed 9 April 2010).

likely pre-Islamic Arabic names assigned by their pre-Islamic Christian inhabitants.[82]

Based on the evidence above, it is conclusive that the term 'trinity' existed in the spoken Arabic language of South Arabia prior to both the advent of Islam and written Arabic, and would therefore have been known by Abū Ḥāritha. It is clear from the *Sīra* that Christology was a major theme of Abū Ḥāritha's dialogue with the Prophet, and it is thus posited that the Arabic word for trinity, *al-thālūth*, was used during the discussion. It was most certainly a known term during the composition of the Qurʾān. Yet if the term 'trinity' was available in Arabic, why did the Qurʾānic revelations produce a different term (three) to communicate 'trinity', as rendered in the contemporary English translations, if that is what it meant?

The *tafsīr* of Ibn ʿAbbās, al-Wāhidī's *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, and the *Sīra* all place the revelation of verse 4. 171 in the context of the Prophet's meeting with the Najran Christians.[83] The context of verse 5. 73 is indicated by Ibn ʿAbbās as the Qurʾānic response to the Najran Christians as well. As the theological differences between Nestorianism, Chalcedonianism and Monophysitism may not have been known to Ibn ʿAbbās, he misidentifies the Najran Christians as Nestorians.[84]

[82] The possibility exists that these names were given to the villages by Christians living under Islamic rule in the area. However, it is unlikely that, for a new village, Muslim rulers would have tolerated such an offensive name for it, if indeed it was offensive. If the names of the villages were given prior to Islam, they indicate the common use of the Arabic word for trinity, if they were given after Islam they indicate the tolerance of Muslim rulers for the Arabic word for trinity as formal names for new villages under their governance.

[83] *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (transl. Mokrane Guezzou; Louisville, KY/ Amman: Fons Vitae/ Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2008; Great Commentaries on the Holy Qurʾan, 2), 130; cf. Muḥammad b. Yāʿqūb al-Fīrūzābādī, *Tanwīr al-miqbās min tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1987), 86. Also *al-Wāḥidī's Asbāb al-nuzūl* (transl. Mokrane Guezzou; Louisville, KY/ Amman: Fons Vitae/ Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2008; Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'an, 3), 89; cf. Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 'Quranic Science: Context of Revelation', http://www.altafsir.com/AsbabAlnuzol.asp (accessed 15 March 2010). Also Ibn Isḥāq, 272.; cf. Ibn Hishām, i. 553.

[84] *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, 146; cf. al-Fīrūzābādī, *Tanwīr al-miqbās*, 98. Geoffrey Parrinder (*Jesus in the Qurʾān* [Oxford: Oneworld, repr. 2003 (1965)], 133–41) sees the Qurʾān as a rebuttal of the Christian heresies of Adoptionism, Patripassianism (the belief that God the Father suffered on the cross), and Mariolatry (especially Collyridianism, a fourth century Arabian sect in which

However, as shown above, the Najran Christians with whom the Prophet had direct interactions were most certainly Monophysite, not Nestorian. This is especially true of the Bishop of Najran, Abū Ḥāritha, whose Philoponian presentation of Monophysite Christian doctrine would have quickly been understood as tritheistic.[85] This theological difference, though perhaps not clear to Ibn ʿAbbās, or to the Prophet's contemporaries, seems clear enough in the Qurʾān, which responds directly to the Monophysite tritheistic doctrine by deliberately using the word 'three' instead of 'trinity' to highlight the tritheistic doctrine. Out of respect for the Qurʾān, we must accept 'three' as a deliberate choice of terminology.

The deliberate choice of terminology in the Qurʾān is strikingly similar to that of Peter of Callinicum in his refutation of tritheism, exactly 50 years prior to the Qurʾānic revelation in 4. 171 and 5. 73. Peter quotes John Philoponus directly, 'Now tell me, do you not confess each of the hypostases to be God in a different way? Do not scheme against the number when you say "three Godheads", but if Godhead is not in each of them in a different way, have the temerity to say so openly'.[86] Resembling the Qurʾānic reply to Abū Ḥāritha, Peter replies to John Philoponus:

> ... we do not hold to three Gods or three particular Gods, three Godheads or three particular Godheads, three substances or three particular substances, three natures or three particular natures ... nor do we hold in any way whatsoever to Gods, Godheads, substances or natures beside the one substance or Godhead in the holy and consubstantial Trinity or beside its hypostases, as new-fangled theologians have newly seen fit to decree.[87]

Peter's critique of tritheism finds echo in the Qurʾān (5. 73): 'Those people who say that God is the third of three are defying [the truth]: there is only One God'. The Qurʾān is deliberately addressing Christianity in non-trinitarian terms in 4. 171 and 5. 73.

women offered cakes to Mary), though he offers little in the way of historical evidence to support these outside of the Qurʾān's own voice. Parrinder also offers the Most Beautiful Names of God as a parallel to the trinitarian concept of three persons in one nature. George Sale's commentary on Q. 4. 171 too proposes Collyridianism as the sect which the Qurʾān refutes here.

[85] The reader may recall here that the Philoponians used the terminology 'three Gods' and 'three Godheads' as well as specifically denying the common nature between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[86] Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 51.

[87] Ibid, 53–4.

The Philoponian tritheistic sect provides the solution as to why.[88] This finding is likely to have some effect on the interpretation of the Qurʾān not only in its historical context but in contemporary Christo-Islamic dialogue as well.[89]

CONCLUSION

The rendering of 'trinity' in place of 'three' and 'third of three' has serious implications not only in the esoteric world of Qurʾānic historical criticism but also in broader Christo-Islamic dialogue. Certainly the commands, 'do not say trinity', and, 'do not say three', have profoundly

[88] One of the reasons we know that it is Monophysite tritheism specifically that the Qurʾān is addressing in these verses is that there was no such revelation (as Q. 4. 171 and 5. 73) between the times of the Prophet's relationship with Waraqa ibn Nawfal and his meeting with Abū Ḥāritha. The Qurʾān did not refute the theology of Waraqa ibn Nawfal. The Prophet was conversing with Christians from the beginning of his prophetic work, yet as the *Sīra*, the *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, and the *Tafsīr* of Ibn ʿAbbās tell us, it was not until he met with the Christians of Najran that the verses concerning tritheism (4. 171, 5. 73) were revealed. It is known that the Christians in al-Ḥīra were likely Nestorian, with a more diaphysite Christology. In the mid-sixth century, Abraham of Kashkar (d. 586), a great Nestorian and leader in the cenobitic movement, was a missionary in al-Ḥīra before founding the great monastery in Īzlā in 571. Since the Qurʾān does not seem to react to Waraqa's theology as tritheistic, it is likely that he had a more unitarian theology than that of the Monophysites, and al-Ḥirā certainly could have provided that theology at about that time. See Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents: Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1960), 150.

It has been suggested that Waraqa ibn Nawfal may have been an Ebionite. The Ebionites stressed the humanity of Jesus and the oneness of God, a Christology not likely to have elicited a negative response from the Qurʾān. The Christology of Waraqa ibn Nawfal did not provoke corrective response in the Qurʾān, and Abū Ḥāritha's tritheism did. So whatever Waraqa's Christology, we may suppose that it was not tritheistic. Hoyland is sceptical of Waraqa having been Ebionite, noting that the 'theory suffers from a selective reading of the text'. See Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997; Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 13), 28.

[89] Now that it is shown that the Qurʾānic revelations implicitly distinguish between trinitarianism and tritheism, it may be re-considered whether or not in spite of its clear unitarian leanings, the Qurʾān itself is an anti-trinitarian document at all.

different meanings to the contemporary Christian reader of the English translation of the Qurʾān. Thus contextual historical accuracy in the interpretation and translation of these particular terms may critically affect the degree to which the Qurʾān is accepted by English-speaking Christian readers, and the degree to which Islamic readers interpret the clear unitarian theology of the Qurʾān as anti-trinitarian as well.

After the Qurʾānic revelation concerning the Najranis, the meaning of the text evolved rather quickly from 'three' to 'trinity' in the commentaries of both Muslim and Christian exegetes over the first three centuries of Islam, and thus the subsequent translations using 'trinity' instead of 'three' have been tolerated. However, the exegesis of the Qurʾān as an early seventh-century correction of diaphysite (Chalcedonian) trinitarian monotheism is not accurate to the context in which these Qurʾānic revelations were originally recited, at least not from the perspective of early Islamic and pre-Islamic Christian sources. Therefore the translation 'trinity' in place of 'three' or 'third of three' at 4. 171 and 5. 73 is the result of the evolving *tafsīr* of the translators, and not indicative of the meaning of the text in the historical context in which it was revealed. The context of composition was the refutation of the Philoponian Monophysite Christian doctrine, a tritheist sect of Christianity devoutly followed by Abū Ḥāritha, the bishop of Najran.