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The Many Faces of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ

Abstract: Although Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (Q 112) is one of the shortest *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān, it has led to an extensive commentary on its structure and content in Muslim exegetical literature and in Western scholarship. This article takes the recent attempt to contextualize the *sūrah* in Western scholarship as a starting point and proposes new evidence for the nature of the religious milieu that shaped its form and content. It posits several "intertexts" of creedal expressions, which shed light on the discursive nature of the *sūrah*.

Two features in particular have led to the extensive commentary on Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (Q 112) in Muslim exegesis and Western scholarship:[1] firstly, it articulates, alongside the *shahādah*, the Muslim creed *per se*; secondly, certain philological and stylistic features of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ have posed a challenge to understanding it fully. Although the main objective of the *sūrah* in articulating the monotheistic confession of the early Muslim *ummah* seems to be straightforward, the brevity and high density of philological peculiarities have generated a vast discourse about the exact nature

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1 Arne Ambros even argues, in his extensive philological analysis of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, that the relation between the brevity of the *sūrah* (fifteen words) and its extensive commentary make it the most commented upon Arabic text: "Wollte man versuchen, das bestimmten Texten bekundete philologisch-exegetische Interesse zu quantifizieren, indem man eine numerische Relation zwischen der Länge des Textes und dem Umfang der diesem gewidmeten 'Worte über Worte' herstellt, dann würde unter den Texten arabischer Sprache der Sure 112 mit ihren knappen 15 Wörtern wohl der erste Rang zufallen" (Ambros, "Die Analyse von Sure 112," 219).

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and addressees of the *sūrah*.[2] The *sūrah* consists of four[3] short verses and contains several puzzling syntactical and semantical features:

> (1) Say: He is God, one, (*qul huwa llāhu aḥad*)
> (2) God, the absolute, (*allāhu l-ṣamad*)
> (3) He did not beget, nor is he begotten, (*lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*)
> (4) And there is none like him. (*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad*)[4]

The syntactical structure of the first verse is ambiguous:[5] Is the personal pronoun *huwa* the subject (*mubtadaʾ*) of the sentence and *allāh* the predicate (*khabar*)? ("He is God"). Is *aḥad* a second predicate to *huwa* and attached without repeating the pronoun *huwa*? ("He is God, he is one"). Or is *aḥad* only an apposition (*badal*) to *allāh*? ("He is God, one"). But how can *aḥad* be in apposition to the definite *allāh* while being indefinite? And is it possible that *huwa* is a "pronoun of the fact" (*ḍamīr al-shaʾn*), which introduces the proposition that "*allāh* is one" so that *allāh* is the subject and *aḥad* the predicate?

Two *qirāʾāt*-traditions further complicate these syntactical observations on the first verse. One of them dismisses the first two words (*qul huwa*), and the other gives the definite adjective *al-wāḥid* instead of the indefinite *aḥad*.[6] The latter *qirāʾah* would solve the "ungrammaticality" of the indefinite noun *aḥad*.[7] And the *sūrah* further contains two *hapax legomena: al-ṣamad* in verse two and *kufuʾ* in verse four.

Muslim exegesis and Western scholarship have extensively discussed these syntactical and lexical features. The exclamatory character of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ has also led to the question: To whom and against which doctrinal background is the creed of the *sūrah* articulated? And very often, the answer to this question has decided how to deal with the philological peculiarities of the *sūrah*. The Muslim tradition reports three different addressees: Meccan pagans (*mushrikūn*), Jews, and

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2 Rosenthal, "Some Minor Problems in the Qurʾân"; Calverley, "The Grammar of Sūratu ʾl-Ikhlāṣ"; Köbert, "Das Gottesepitheton *aṣ-ṣamad* in Sure 112,2"; Paret, "Der Ausdruck *ṣamad* in Sure 112,2"; Schedl, "Nochmals *ṣamad* in Sure 112,2"; Rubin, "Al-Ṣamad and the High God"; Neuenkirchen, "Sourate 112: Al-Ikhlāṣ"; Hammond, "The Problem of the Quranic *al-ṣamad*".

3 According to the counting of Damascus and Mecca, the *sūrah* consists of five verses (Spitaler, *Die Verszählung des Koran*, 73). Both count *lam yalid* as a separate verse. But this would break the continuous *-ad* rhyme scheme.

4 Translation according to Neuwirth, *The Qurʾan and Late Antiquity*, 478; all other translations in this paper are adapted from Alan Jones.

5 See the profound philological analysis in Ambros, "Die Analyse von Sure 112."

6 Khaṭīb, *Muʿjam al-qirāʾāt*, 10:635.

7 The indefinite *aḥad* is usually reserved for negative and interrogative sentences, which makes its occurrence here "ungrammatical".

Christians.[8] Consequently, the beliefs of the pre-Islamic Arabs, as well as Jewish and Christian creeds, were proposed as the possible background for the stylistic and linguistic features of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ and its meaning. This article begins with a short and descriptive summary of previous attempts to contextualize this *sūrah*.[9] It then proposes further evidence to contextualize the *sūrah* within the dynamics of religious polemics in the Arabian Peninsula in Late Antiquity. In this part, a new "intertext" for Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ will be introduced, which possibly shows strong functional, structural, and semantic parallels.

Contextualizing Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ: The Christian, Jewish, and pagan background(s)

Several traditions give various Jewish inquiries as a context for the revelation of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ:[10] either they asked for the lineage of Muḥammad's Lord (*unsub lanā rabbaka*), or they asked, "Who created God (*fa-man khalaqahu*)?" But in Muslim exegesis, no explicit Jewish credo or ideas are discussed as a possible background for Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. In Western scholarship, several features of the *sūrah* have been contextualized with conceptions from Jewish traditions. Claus Schedl, for instance, argued for the Jewish background of the whole *sūrah*.[11] The first verse, he explained, is identical to the Shema Yisrael from Deuteronomy: "Hear Israel; the Lord, our God, is one" or "Hear Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one (*šmaʿ yisrāʾēl YHWH ʾĕlōhênû YHWH ʾeḥād*)" (Deut 6:4).[12] And analyzing the second verse of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, Schedl follows an earlier proposal of Köbert[13] in understanding the *hapax ṣamad* as the Hebrew epithet *ṣūr* ("rock") for God.[14] The main objective

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8 For the different contexts of revelation see Rubin, "Al-Ṣamad and the High God," 207–10.

9 This summary is selective and gives an overview of the most important arguments in favor of the different backgrounds of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ.

10 Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān,* 24:728–29; Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32:175. Since this is not a study of the Muslim exegetical tradition, I have confined myself to major classical exegetes like al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī.

11 Schedl, "Probleme der Koranexegese," 1–14.

12 Ibid., 2; see also Hirschfeld, *New Researches,* 35.

13 Köbert, "Das Gottesepitheton *aṣ-ṣamad*," 204–5.

14 Schedl, "Probleme der Koranexegese," 2–3; generally, the suggestions for understanding the qurʾānic *ṣamad* in Western scholarship has oscillated between the two basic meanings of *ṣamad,* which are differentiated by al-Rāzī (*Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32: 181). The verb *ṣamada* means "to adhere to" or "to aim at someone," and is synonymous with *qaṣada*. Based on this verbal meaning, *ṣamad* could be understood in the passive sense of *maṣmūd,* and so a *sayyid maṣmūd* is someone to whom

of Schedl's study is to show that Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ is not formulated against a Christian trinitarianism but the polytheism of Arab pagans. His interpretations conclude that the structure and form of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ extensively share a vocabulary and content with the Jewish tradition.[15]

Many Muslim traditions report that the *mushrikūn* of Mecca also asked the prophet Muḥammad to describe his Lord to them (*ṣif lanā rabbaka*) and give his lineage (*unsub lanā rabbaka*), whereupon Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ was revealed.[16] Uri Rubin systematically analyzed the Muslim exegesis on the *sūrah* and was convinced that the primary addressees were the Quraysh of Mecca and their beliefs in daughters of God and the kinship between them.[17] His analyses focus on the term *ṣamad* and its specific pre-Islamic and Arabic connotation. According to him, the whole *sūrah* owes its distinctive creed to an articulation of monotheistic belief against the *mushrikūn*.[18]

Further exegetical traditions introduce another group of people as addressees of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) quotes a tradition that names the Christians (*al-naṣārā*) as those who asked about the attributes of Muḥammad's God. In dialogue with their questions, the four verses of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ were revealed consecutively.[19]

A comprehensive and systematic analysis of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ as a counter-discourse to a Christian creed was also formulated in the *Corpus Coranicum* project. The database for "The world of the Qur'an" proposes the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) as a possible background for Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ.[20] The beginning of the creed is formulated as follows:

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one adheres in need (*wa-huwa l-sayyid al-maṣmūd ilayhi fī l-ḥawā'ij*). The second understanding of *ṣamad* is explained by al-Rāzī as something without hollowness (*lā jawfa lahu*), and he gives synonyms like *muṣmat* and *muṣammad*, so that *ṣamad* could refer to a solid, compact, and monolithic entity.

15 Arne Ambros criticized the philological observations of Schedl in his study of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (Ambros, "Die Analyse von Sure 112," 222).

16 Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 24:727–28; Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32:175.

17 Rubin, "Al-Ṣamad and the High God," 197–217.

18 Rubin further postulates that although the primary addressees of the *sūrah* were the Meccan *mushrikūn* and their belief in several gods with kinship, it is still admittable that Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ was also directed against Jews and Christians since the Qurʾān describes that even Jews and Christians could be *mushrikūn* (Q 9:30) (ibid., 207–10). The most rigid criticism of Rubin's analysis of *ṣamad* was formulated by Arne Ambros in his study of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (Ambros, "Die Analyse von Sure 112," 222–23, 237–39).

19 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32:175.

20 Michael Marx, Nicolai Sinai, Veronika Roth, "Nizäno-konstantinopolitanisches Glaubensbekenntnis – TUK_47" (https://corpuscoranicum.de/de/verse-navigator/sura/112/verse/1/intertexts/47).

> We believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, the only-begotten; that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth [...].[21]

The authors of this entry on the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed argue that it resembles Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ in its *structure* and *content.* While the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed speaks about Jesus as "begotten from the Father (*ton ek tou patros genēthenta*)," "begotten, not made (*genēthenta ou poiēthenta*)," and "of one substance with the Father (*homoousios tō patri*)," the last two verses of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ deny that God begets or is begotten (*lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*) or that there is any entity that resembles him (*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad*). But also, the first part of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan may share structural parallels to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. At least functionally, the word "almighty" (*pantokrator*) probably corresponds to ṣamad, although the meanings of both words differ.[22]

The polyvalent background

Most of the scholars discussed in the previous section were still indebted to an approach to the Qurʾān as a written "text," which is possibly influenced by previous written "texts" ("Vorlagen"). In recent decades, the perception of the Qurʾān as a primarily oral and recited proclamation, which is in theological discourse with

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21 Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 215–16.
22 Recently Andrew Hammond has questioned that God's description as *pantokrator* in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed could be the reference point for the qurʾānic ṣamad (Hammond, "The Problem of the Quranic *al-ṣamad*," 607–31). He convincingly argues that the whole Christological discussion of God's *ousia* is the subject of the second verse in Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. That God is *al-ṣamad* means that he is "ontologically unique" and indivisible (ibid., 629). He argues that the Qurʾān newly introduced the theological concept of *al-ṣamad* (ibid., 628): "[...] the epigraphic evidence suggests that Arabic-speaking audiences of the Hijaz and Levant could have recognized the word, even if the specific grammatical and lexical form was new to their ears. [...] The Quran uses many words only recently naturalized into Arabic or even deployed *ex nihilo*, words that would have been understood intellectually by an inner circle while producing a purely magical effect for those on the outside. A nontechnical term like ṣmīdā does not appear to be one of them, even if Syriac often provides the answer to problems of obscure quranic terminology." While I agree with the overall analysis of Hammond, I would propose that the qurʾānic *al-ṣamad* is possibly referring to Christian theological vocabulary as Jacob's phrase ṣmad ḥāṣeh.

different concepts, has become more accepted.[23] Following this approach, scholars of the Qurʾān do not search for written "Vorlagen" of specific statements. Still, they want to understand the religious discourse in the Ḥijāz and the circulating ideas and motives that build the context for the qurʾānic proclamation.[24] Angelika Neuwirth in particular has mastered this approach in her historical-critical commentary of the Qurʾān. In her commentary on Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, she argues that it is not one credo or one *text*, which shapes the context of the *sūrah*, but we have to assume a "Denkraum" of Late Antiquity,[25] where different religious groups engaged with each other about their confessional beliefs.[26] Within this polyvalent discourse, the theology and structure of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ can be illuminated. She demonstrates that the *sūrah* is in a dialectic discourse with the Shema Yisrael *and* the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Holger Zellentin has followed Neuwirth's dialectic interpretation of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ in conversation with the Shema and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. He also proposes a broader context for the dynamics of religious polemics in Late Antiquity to understand the qurʾānic credo.[27] Within this late ancient context of confessional discourse and polemics, it becomes plausible that the religious self-understanding of the early Muslim community in the Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ was coded in a language that Neuwirth describes as "polyphonic." Zellentin thus summarizes the intention of the *sūrah* in the following way, "To the Jewish, Christian, and gentile denizens of Arabia, the Medinan Qurʾān thus presents a rejuvenated form of monotheism that dismisses the Nicene Creed, or a creedal confession very close to it, in a reformulation of the biblical Shema."[28]

Material evidence

In 697 the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 66–86/685–705) introduced a dinar bearing Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ on the observe legend of the coin.[29] The fourth verse is missing probably for reasons of space. More remarkable is the missing *qul huwa*

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23 Ibid., 1–64; for an overview of the different methods, see Rippin, "Academic Scholarship and the Qur'an," 27–38.

24 Griffith, "Late Antiquity and the Religious Milieu of the Qur'an,"; Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 59–75, 138–43.

25 Schmidt, Schmid, and Neuwirth, ed., *Denkraum Spätantike.*

26 Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity*, 477–82.

27 Zellentin, "The Rise of Monotheism in Arabia," 162.

28 Ibid., 165. Zellentin gives further evidence for the type of confessional demarcation as presented in Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ by referring to the Clementine Homilies, which also contain a denial of Jesus' divinity by adapting the Shema (ibid., 165–67).

29 https://id.smb.museum/object/2357503/umayyaden-abd-al-malik.

at the beginning of verse one. Although denied by Ambros,[30] this may reflect a reported variant reading.[31] Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ is cited in its entirety at the beginning of the mosaic inscription on the ambulatory of the Dome of the Rock (691).[32] This evidence indicates, that "the Umayyad state … deployed the sura as a fundamental statement of official ideology and one directed first and foremost at its Christian subjects, who were most likely a demographic majority within the empire's central lands at this time, with an increasing percentage of Arabic speakers among them."[33]

An early, albeit undated, Islamic inscription from the region of Najrān shows some possible variant readings of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ.[34] There are several remarkable features with regard to the spelling and wording of this inscription.[35] Interestingly, the first two words *qul huwa* of verse 1 are also missing here, and instead of *kufuwan* we have a spelling, which could be read as *kufuʾan*, *kufan* or *kifāʾan*.[36] All these readings are reported in the Islamic tradition.[37]

In the earliest manuscripts, Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ is not well preserved because it was recorded on the vulnerable final folios of ancient *muṣḥaf*s and, thus, liable to getting lost or damaged. At least Sarayı Medina 1a (ca. 700–900)[38] bears Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ in its canonical form.[39] At the moment we have no early qurʾānic manuscripts (i. e., from the seventh to eighth centuries), which confirm variant readings of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. However, for the following contextualization of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, none of the possible variant readings attested in the material evidence have a significant impact.

Contextualizing the Qurʾān

Even if one accepts the traditional Muslim view of the origin of the Qurʾān in the Ḥijāz, then the exact *modus operandi* of the qurʾānic reception of biblical and post-biblical traditions still remains unanswered. How did these ideas and motifs enter the environment of the Prophet Muḥammad? Since there is a lack

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30 Ambros, "Die Analyse von Sure 112," 225.

31 Khaṭīb, *Muʿjam al-qirāʾāt*, 10:635. There are some later issued silver coins that contain the whole *sūrah* (cf. Hammond, "The Problem of the Quranic *al-ṣamad*," 609).

32 Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock*, 91.

33 Hammond, "The Problem of the Quranic *al-ṣamad*," 609.

34 https://twitter.com/DxqNXDiDbYvi3mL/status/1484257118073073672.

35 Marijn van Putten has given an overview of these features: https://twitter.com/PhDniX/status/1484498586515746816.

36 Ibid.

37 Khaṭīb, *Muʿjam al-qirāʾāt*, 10:639–41.

38 https://corpuscoranicum.de/de/manuscripts/56/page/394r?sura=112&verse=1.

39 I owe this reference and evaluation to Marijn van Putten.

of evidence for an organized community of Christians in the Ḥijāz,[40] hypotheses about an oral reception of certain theological ideas via missionary activity (perhaps proceeding from Najrān, al-Hīrah, or Bostra)[41] or via cultural exchange through trade with North and South Arabia may provide a solution, even if there is not yet sufficient evidence for this apart from the Qurʾān itself.[42] This article is not intended to contribute to the solution of this question. Rather, it takes into account the research that assumes a relationship between qurʾānic theology and ideas and motifs from the tradition of Syriac Christianity.[43] Therefore, texts from the corpus of the Syriac poet Jacob of Serugh (ca. 451–521) are included in the following sections. Jacob's homilies are of particular importance here. These represent the third largest collection by a late ancient author and have a wide range of addressees and reception.[44] This is also evidenced by the fact that they have been translated into several languages.[45] Likewise, recent studies show how influential homilies have been in the wide dissemination of complex theological problems.[46] If theological discourses found a wide reception beyond the narrow circle of scholars, then homilies were a central vehicle for this in Late Antiquity.

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40 Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber*, 137–42.

41 For the spread of Christianity in and around the Arabian Peninsula, see Fisher et al., "Arabs and Christianity"; Fisher, *Between Empires*, 34–71; Block, "Philoponian Monophysitism in South Arabia."

42 This has led some researchers to assume a later genesis of some parts of the Qurʾān outside the Ḥijāz. E.g., Dye, "Le corpus coranique: context et composition," 772–76; idem, "The Qurʾanic Mary," 179–82; Tesei, "The Qurʾān(s) in Context(s)," 188–89; Shoemaker, *Creating the Qurʾan*, 245–54. Nicolai Sinai has coined this problem as "The Christian Elephant in the Meccan Room" and appreciates the gravity of this problem in a forthcoming article. But he convincingly explains why any redating and relocating of major parts of the Qurʾānic corpus produces some "explanatory loose ends" that have not been properly addressed by the proponents of this model. For the moment, I will stick with the traditional account of the Hijāzī origin of the Qurʾān while admitting that we can only try to explain the Qurʾān's intensive engagement with certain ideas of Christian origin with the help of auxiliary hypotheses (missionary activities, oral reception, etc.).

43 Decharneux, *Creation and Contemplation*; Ghaffar, "Kontrafaktische Intertextualität im Koran"; Rizk, "Prophetology, Typology, and Christology"; El-Badawi, *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*; Anthony, "Further Notes on the Word *ṣibgha* in Qurʾān 2:138"; Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran"; Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qurʾān "; Van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qurʾān.

44 Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East*, 1–24.

45 Ibid., 6.

46 Ibid., 23–55.

The dynamics of Late Antique religious polemics in the Arabian Peninsula

The previous studies of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ reviewed above have shown that its articulation of the monotheistic creed of the early Muslim *ummah* reacts to ongoing polemic discourses of religious identity in Late Antiquity and thereby evokes the Shema Yisrael and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. But it is still clear that Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ does not cite either text. Taking the example of the qurʾānic *mushrikūn*, who do not seem to be purely pagan polytheists as the Muslim tradition wants us to assume,[47] Zellentin has proposed to look more closely at the religious developments in South Arabia and the imperial conflicts between the Ḥimyarite and Aksumite empires to give a more concrete scenario for qurʾānic discourse.[48] Recently, the evidence that qurʾānic diction and phrases can be tied more strongly to the religious discourse in South Arabia has become even stronger and it is astonishing how profound the theological discourse of the Qurʾān was indebted to the religious developments within the Arabian Peninsula.[49]

If one applies this approach to the understanding of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, the question arises if there are sources for the reception history of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in Ḥimyar and whether these could help to shed light on several philological, formal, and theological questions for understanding Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ.

Jacob of Serugh's letter to the Ḥimyarites and his Christological credo

At the beginning of the sixth century, the religious conflicts in South Arabia culminated in the massacre of the Christians in Najrān by the Ḥimayrite king Joseph (Dhū l-Nuwās). After having come into power, Joseph persecuted the Christians and their Ethiopian supporters in his realm.[50]

After the siege of Najrān, a large part of its Christian community was probably massacred. These events were noticed beyond Ḥimyarite borders. In 525, the Aksumites invaded Ḥimyar and defeated Joseph. Jacob of Serugh wrote a letter to the

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47 Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*; Crone, *The Qurʾānic Pagans*; Linnhoff, "'Associating' with God in Islamic Thought"; Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qurʾan*, 425–43.
48 Zellentin, "The Rise of Monotheism in Arabia," 174.
49 Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam*; Dost, "An Arabian Qurʾān"; Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam*.
50 Nebes, "The Martyrs of Najrān," 45.

Christians of Najrān to console them for their persecution.[51] Since Jacob died around 520/521, he probably referred to earlier persecutions of the Christian population and wrote this letter during the last years of his life.[52] He starts his letter with a salutation:

> To the chosen athletes, the friends of true victory, the astonishing and the powerful, the servants of God, the truly faithful, our Christian brothers, and the tested confessors, in the city of Nagrān of the Ḥimyarites, the lowly Jacob, who is from the region of Edessa, the faithful city of the Romans, in Jesus, the light of the gentiles and the hope of the worlds, and the judge of the dead and the living: Peace.[53]

Jacob comforts the Christian community of Najrān by reminding them of the sufferings of Christ. He polemicizes heavily against the Jews, who have again come forth as "enemies of the cross (*bʿeldbābaw da-zqipā*)" and are responsible for their persecutions.[54] In the middle part of the letter, Jacob explains that the Christians in Najrān have true beliefs, which is also the reason for their suffering. Jacob insists that their faith is true and describes it as follows:

> You have learned the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (*ʾabā wa-brā w-ruḥā d-qudšā ilepton*). And besides these three names, who are one and as one are three (*w-ʿam hālēn tlātā šemhin d-itayhon ḥad w-ḥad tlātā*),
> you accept no other name and number (*šmā w-menyānā ḥrinā lā mqabbli-tton*).[55]

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51 Schröter, "Trostschreiben "; Olinder, ed., *Iacobi Sarugensis epistulae*, 87–102. For the reception history of Jacob's letter, see Forness, "Jacob of Serugh's Letters"; Jacob's letter to the Ḥimyarites is attested in manuscripts from the sixth to seventh centuries (ibid., 77–79).

52 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, 119–20. There are other letters that testify to a Monophysite interest in Christian Arabs. For example, Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523), who also ordained two bishops in Najrān, wrote a letter to the Nasrid ruler in al-Ḥīrah that gives an overview of Christian heresies from a Monophysite perspective (Martin, *Syro-chaldaicae institutiones*, 71–78; Mingana, "The Early Spread of Christianity," 352–67). Symeon of Beth Arsham (d. before 548) also wrote a letter from al-Ḥīrah about the persecution of Christians in Najrān (Guidi, "La lettera di Simeone"). This gives an account of what happened during the persecution. The same is the case in another anonymous letter also attributed to Symeon by Irfan Shahid (*The Martyrs of Najran*, iii–xxxii, with English translation pp. 43–111.). What is special about Jacob of Serugh's letter is the fact that he addresses the Christian Ḥimyarites directly, placing their fate in a Christological and soteriological context (Forness, *Preaching Christology*, 115–31). This creates a special intimacy in the letter. For this article, it is important that he *explicitly* describes the true *Christological confession of the Christians in Najran*. Since there is also a Muslim tradition that locates the revelation of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ in the context of the arrival of a delegation from Najrān (Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32:175), it makes sense to compare the confession of the Najrānites insinuated by Jacob in his letter with Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. I thank one of the peer reviewers for pointing out the letters of Philoxenus and Symeon.

53 This translation is according to Forness (ibid., 125); Olinder, ed., *Iacobi Sarugensis epistulae*, 87 (4–10).

54 Schröter, "Trostschreiben," 371; Olinder, ed., *Iacobi Sarugensis epistulae*, 89 (23–24).

55 Schröter, "Trostschreiben," 377; Olinder, ed., *Iacobi Sarugensis epistulae*, 95 (1–4).

Jacob here explores the dialectic nature of the trinitarian creed: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three and one simultaneously; therefore, it is no doubt that true Christians are monotheists. Philip Michael Forness explains that Jacob had a "miaphysite interest in Ḥimyar" and formulates the genuine faith of Martyrs of Najrān in contrast to a "dyophysite Christology."[56] Thus, Jacob formulates the following Christological credo as the *pure* belief of the Christians in Najrān:

> One is the Son, begotten of the Father before all the worlds (*ḥad brā da-ylid men ʾabā meddem kull-hon ʿālmē*).
> One is who is the likeness of the Father in everything (*ḥad da-dmā l-abu b-kull*).
> One is the only-begotten, who takes no other order and number like him (*ḥad ʾiḥidāyā d-lā mqabbel ʿammeh sedra w-menyānā ḥrinā*).
> This one is the Son and the Lord and of the same nature as the Father (*hu hānā brā wa-māryā wa-bar kyānā d-abu*).
> This one is from the Father and with the Father (*hānā d-itaw men ʾabā w-ʿam ʾabā*).[57]

Several elements of this credo are adapted from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed[58]: "Son, begotten of the Father" (*brā da-ylid men ʾabā*), the "only-begotten" (*ʾiḥidāyā*), and "of the same nature as the Father" (*bar kyānā d-abu*). The transmission history of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed into Syriac is complex and remains to be studied comprehensively,[59] but the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was translated into Syriac at a synod convened in 410 by the great king Yazdgerd I (r. 399–420) in Ctesiphon.[60] There is a West-Syrian[61] and East-Syrian version[62] of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, although it seems that the West-Syrian version is earlier. The relevant part for Jacob's adaption is the second article, which has the following wording according to the edition of Arthur Vööbus (the relevant passages for Jacob's adaption are in italics):

> And [we believe] in His Son, the *only one/only-begotten* (*wa-beh ba-breh ʾiḥidāyā*),
> who is *begotten of him* (*haw d-etiled menneh*),
> that is, however, from the substance of His Father (*hāna-w dēn men ʾitutā d-abu*),
> God from God (*alāhā d-men alāhā*),
> light from light (*nuhrā d-men nuhrā*),

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56 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, 128.

57 Schröter, "Trostschreiben," 378; Olinder, ed., *Iacobi Sarugensis epistulae*, 95 (14–19).

58 Forness, *Preaching Christology*, 128–29.

59 De Halleux, "Le symbole des évêques perses au synode de Séleucie-Ctésiphon (410)," 161–190; idem, "La philoxénienne du symbole," 295–315.

60 Bruns, "Bemerkungen zur Rezeption des Nicaenums."

61 Vööbus, "New Sources," 295.

62 Cf. Chabot, *Synodicon orientale*, 22 (21–31) – 23 (1–4).

true God from true God (*alāhā šarrīrā d-men alāhā šarrīrā*),
Begotten and not made (*etiled w-lā etʿbed*),
who is *of one nature with his Father* (*haw d-itaw bar kyānā d-abu*).[63]

Jacob adapts some key phrases from the second article of the creed to counter a dyophysite Christology. He insists that the Son has the same nature as the Father and takes only the number one (and not two) ("One is the only-begotten, who takes no other order and number like him"). The Father and the Son are similar in every aspect ("One is he who was like his Father in everything"). Interestingly, Jacob applies the stylistic feature of an *anaphora* to strengthen his argument. He repeats the number one (*ḥad*) three times in his Christological credo: **ḥad** *brā* [...]/**ḥad** *da-dmā* [...]/**ḥad** *ʾiḥidāyā* [...]. This emphasis on the oneness of the Son is directed against a dyophysite position, that Jesus has two natures (divine and human) in him. From the perspective of Jacob, this type of Christology would also have significant consequences for the concept of the Trinity as a whole. If one assumes that Jesus has two natures (*kyānē*), then it would not lead to three but four persons (*qnomē*) in God. Thus, it is no coincidence that Jacob's threefold repetition of *ḥad* refers also to his previous statement that the three names of the Trinity are "one and as one are three (*d-itayhon ḥad w-ḥad tlātā*). And his Christological proposition that the Son "takes no other order and number like him (*d-lā mqabbel ʿammeh sedrā w-menyānā ḥrinā*)" matches his earlier confession that for the Trinity "no other name and number" (*šmā w-menyānā ḥrinā lā mqabbli-tton*) can be accepted. Only if Jesus is one like his Father does the integrity of the trinitarian conception of God remain intact.

The parallels to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ

There are striking parallels between Jacob's Christological credo in his *Letter to the Ḥimyarites* and Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ concerning their *stylistic* and *semantic* features and their particular *function*.

Several scholars have proposed the possibility that the syntactical and semantic irregularities of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ are due to the continuous *-ad* rhyme scheme (*aḥad, al-ṣamad, lam yūlad, aḥad*). Rudi Paret proposed that the first verse ends on *aḥad* instead of *al-wāḥid* because of the rhyme.[64] Ambros assumed that using the term *al-ṣamad* and the unusual syntax of verses three and four ensure the continuous

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63 Vööbus, "New Sources," 294.
64 Paret, *Der Koran,* 530.

-*ad* rhyme scheme.[65] Is it possible, therefore, that the Qur'ān is applying a *fourfold epistrophe* on *aḥad* (through the constant -*ad* rhyme scheme) to counter a Christological credo as formulated by Jacob? A *fourfold -ad* rhyme scheme could signify that it makes no difference how often God's one nature is repeated (three times, four times etc.): God is one in his nature. The whole discussion of the Son's nature and the integrity of the trinitarian conception of God is therefore misleading. The semantic parallels between both credos could reinforce a possible interplay of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ with the Christological credo, since every statement of the credo seems to be addressed and denied in Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (see table 1).

Table 1

Jacob's Christological credo	*Q 112*
One is the **Son** (*ḥad brā*)	(1) Say: He is **God**, **one**, (*qul huwa llāhu aḥad*)
begotten of the Father before all the worlds (*da-ylid men ʾabā meddem kull-hon ʿālmē*)	(3) **He did not beget, nor is he begotten, (***lam yalid wa-lam yūlad***)**
One is who is the **likeness of the Father** in everything (*ḥad da-dmā l-abu b-kull*)	(4) And **there is none like him** (*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad*)
One is the **only-begotten**, **who takes no other order and number like him** (*ḥad ʾiḥidāyā d-lā mqabbel ʿammeh sedrā w-menyānā ḥrinā*)	(2) **God, the absolute,** (*allāhu l-ṣamad*)

The first verse of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ insists on the *oneness of God* (*allāhu aḥad*), while Jacob begins his statement with the *oneness of the Son* (*ḥad brā*). Jacob then articulates that the Son is begotten from the Father (*brā da-ylid men ʾabā*), while the third verse of the *sūrah* clarifies: "He did not beget, nor is he begotten (*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad*)." With the second *ḥad,* Jacob emphasizes that the Son is like his Father in everything (*ḥad da-dmā l-abu b-kull*). This proposition is inverted in the last verse of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ: "And there is none like him" (*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad*). The third sentence beginning with *ḥad* explains the only-begotten as numerically and substantially identical to the Father (*ḥad ʾiḥidāyā d-lā mqabbel ʿammeh sedrā w-menyānā ḥrinā*). The epithet *al-ṣamad* for God in verse 2 (*allāhu l-ṣamad*) possibly denies this. Rudi Paret proposed that *al-ṣamad* should be understood as "compact" and negates the possibility that God could be thought of in three persons.[66] This explanation perfectly matches the qur'ānic rejection of a trinitarian conception of God: "Unbelievers are those who say, 'God is the third of the three

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65 Ambros, "Die Analyse von Sure 112," 239–44.
66 Paret, "Der Ausdruck ṣamad," 294–95.

(*inna llāha thālithu thalāthatin*).' There is no god but One God (*wa-mā min ilāhin illā ilāhun wāḥidun*)" (Q 5:73). From the perspective of qurʾānic theology, the most problematic aspect of Jacob's Christological credo would be that God is reduced to Christ. This is repeatedly stated in the Qurʾān: "Unbelievers are those who say: God is Christ (*inna llāha huwa l-masīḥ*) the son of Mary"(Q 5:7, cf. 5:72). Previous scholars rightly observed the inverted nature of this statement.[67] Usually, Christians do not confess that God is Christ but, rather, that Christ is (the Son of) God. The Qurʾān seems to argue that if Christians say, as Jacob does, that Jesus is one like his Father, similar to Him in everything, and takes no other number than the 'one' of his divine nature, then this would consequently lead to the conclusion that God is Christ. Against this type of reasoning, Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ defends the integrity of the oneness of God.

There is possible evidence that the epithet *al-ṣamad* evocates a Jacobean vocabulary to tackle his credo. In one of his homilies, Jacob says in reference to the creation of Adam as God's icon (Gen 1:26–27), "He fashioned [*gbal*] him and gave him form [*ṣāreh*], He made him into a solid and hard body [*ṣmad ḥāṣeh*]."[68] Manolis Papoutsakis gives an in-depth analysis of the phrase *ṣmad ḥāṣeh*.[69] He refers to a study of Christos Simelidis, which shows:

> A careful examination of the early Muslim understanding of *ṣamad* in Sura 112.2 and the Greek words *holosphyros* and *sphyropēktos* suggests that the latter are not deliberate mistranslations of *ṣamad* in order to prove that Muslims believe in a material God, as various scholars have suggested. The words, which could mean 'solid' or 'massive' and are often mistranslated by scholars, have been found to be accurate and knowledgeable renderings for *ṣamad* and in fact testify to an early Islamic understanding of this term.[70]

Simelidis further explains that a synonymous term to *holosphyros* was applied by Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403) in a metaphorical sense to discuss the creation of man and the unity of his body.[71] Papoutsakis argues that Jacob of Serugh seems to draw on this tradition when applying the phrase *ṣmad ḥāṣeh* in his homily:

> As explained, [...] *ṣmad* ("to make solid"), sharpened by *ḥāṣ* ("to make hard/tight") is used in the context of the creation of man [...] It seems reasonable to conclude: a) that [...] Jacob of Serugh reflects awareness of that same early tradition, and b) that his usage strongly supports the Greek rendering of the enigmatic term *ṣamad*, a *hapax legomenon* in the Qurʾan, and confirms Simelidis' evaluation of the ninth-century Greek translation.[72]

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67 Griffith, "*Al-Naṣārā* in the Qurʾān," 311, 316.

68 Alwan, ed. and tr., *Quatre homélies*, 2:175 (transl. by Manolis Papoutsakis).

69 Papoutsakis, *Vicarious Kingship*, 142–47.

70 Simelidis, "The Byzantine Understanding of the Qurʾanic Term *al-Ṣamad*," 912.

71 Ibid., 898–99.

72 Papoutsakis, *Vicarious Kingship*, 146.

From this background, it is at least worth considering that the qurʾānic epithet *al-ṣamad* possibly utilizes the theological meaning of a verb from the same root attested in the Jacobean vocabulary for discussing the unity of something. The Qurʾān would then be applying a verbal root already employed for discussing the unity of things and to make clear that God is absolutely one without any division. And it is worth taking note that later Greek translations, when translating the epithet *al-ṣamad*, use a Greek term whose synonyms were used centuries before for describing the unity of something.[73]

It is remarkable that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī quotes a tradition from Ibn Abbās, that Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ was revealed when a delegation from Najrān came (*qadima wafd najrān*) and asked the Prophet to describe his Lord.[74] Jacob as well formulates a credo for the Christians in Najrān. So it is at least possible that Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ is reacting to a miaphysite Christology, which circulated in Najrān and in an area where Christians were in conflict with a form of monotheism that was shaped by Jewish tradition.[75] Another possible scenario could be that Q 112 was composed in a context outside of the Ḥijāz, like that of Najrān, and was subsequently included in the Qurʾān.

Overall, there are several *formal*, *stylistic*, *semantic*, and *functional* parallels between Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ and Jacobs's credo. The relevant part of the Christological credo (20 words) and Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (15 words) are comparable in length, even if the *sūrah* is a bit shorter. Stylistically both apply cognate rhetorical forms for structuring the credo with the term *ḥad/aḥad*. While Jacob uses a threefold anaphora, the *sūrah* deploys a fourfold epistrophe. Possibly, identical themes are discussed on the semantic level in both credos: 1) the unity of the Son vs. the unity of God; 2) the begotten Son vs. God, who is not begotten and does not beget; 3) the Son is absolutely like his Father vs. God, who is like no one; and 4) the only Son, who takes the same number and order like his Father vs. God, who is absolute and cannot be divided. Both credos have the polemical function to articulate their own monotheistic belief in discourse with pre-existing creedal claims of monotheistic faith. The Christological credo for the Christians in Ḥimyar formulated by Jacob defends a miaphysite Christology and the trinitarian conception of God against a rival dyophysite Christology. The above discussion of the possible Jewish, pagan, and Christian backgrounds of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ evince its discursive nature, but it seems to be the trinitarian conception of God and miaphysite Christology that are on the horizon of the qurʾānic expression of monotheistic belief. Thus, there are strong indications that the Islamic credo's *style*, *structure*, and *content* were formulated against Christological credos such as Jacob's. Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ is much closer to

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73 In Safaitic inscriptions, the root *ṣmd* is associated with sacrificial sites in *high places* (Al-Jallad, *Religion and Rituals*, 23–26).

74 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 32:175.

75 Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta"; Nebes, "The Martyrs of Najrān," 35–40.

Jacobs's credo than to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (see table 2), which is a lengthy text compared to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. The previously proposed parallel between *pantokrator* (Almighty) and *al-ṣamad* is also not convincing; the terms do not have the same semantics. Rather, the Qur'ān seems to allude to Jacobean vocabulary (*ṣmad*) to articulate the absolute and indivisible nature of God. Also, the parallel between the last verse of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, "And there is none like him (*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad*)," and the phrase "one substance with the Father" (*homoousios tō patri*) in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is not as straightforward a parallel to Q 112 as Jacob's statement, "One, who was like his Father in everything".

Table 2

Jacob's Christological credo	Q 112 (modified order)	Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) (modified order)
One is the **Son** (*ḥad brā*)	(1) Say: He is **God**, **one**, (*qul huwa llāhu aḥad*)	We believe in **one God**,
begotten from the Father before all the worlds (*da-ylid men ʾabā meddem kull-hon ʿālmē*)	(3) **He did not beget, nor is he begotten, (***lam yalid wa-lam yūlad***)**	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, **begotten from the Father** (*ton ek tou patros genēthenta*), the only-begotten; that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, **begotten**, **not made** (*genēthenta ou poiēthenta*),
One is who is the **likeness of the Father** in everything (*ḥad da-dmā l-abu b-kull*)	(4) And **there is none like him** (*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad*)	of **one substance with the Father** (*homoousios tō patri*)
One is the **only-begotten, who takes no other order and number like him** (*ḥad ʾiḥidāyā d-lā mqabbel ʿammeh sedrā w-menyānā ḥrinā*)	(2) **God, the absolute,** (*allāhu l-ṣamad*)	the Father, **almighty** (*pantokrator*), maker of all things visible and invisible;

The comparison to another adaptation of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in the Syriac tradition can strengthen the proposed closeness of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ to Jacob's formulated creed. In his commentary on the *sūrah*, Paul Neuenkirchen[76]

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[76] Neuenkirchen, "Sourate 112: Al-Ikhlāṣ," 2b:2311–28.

referred to a parallel passage in Narsai's *Homily on our Lord's birth from the Holy virgin*.[77] In it, Narsai (d. ca. 500) formulates a creed at the end, which also adapts the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed:

> One confession of one God (*ḥad alāhā*) is fixed in our soul,
> because He is eternal (*d-itaw men mtum*) as He is without change!
> That He has an Offspring who is begotten from him (*da-ylid menneh*) (and) His Offspring is certain to us.
> That the Spirit is also a Person Who (proceeds) from Him, we do not doubt;
> And He is equal with Him in everything (*wa-šwe ʿammeh b-kullhēn*) that He possesses divinely. [...][78]

Since later Muslim exegesis has understood *ṣamad* also in the sense of *eternal*, Neuenkirchen argues that there is a correspondence between Narsai's statements and Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ:[79] both state the unity (*ḥad alāhā/allāhu aḥad*) and the eternity (*d-itaw men mtum/al-ṣamad*) of God. Likewise, the Qur'ān reverses Narsai's positive statements about Jesus being born from God (*da-ylid menneh/lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*) and the equality of God and Christ (*wa-šwe ʿammeh b-kullhēn/wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥad*). And these creedal propositions are in the same *sequence*.

Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ and the formulated creeds of Jacob and Narsai are good evidence for late ancient reception of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed; however, the qur'ānic *sūrah* and Jacob's creed are nearer to one another. While the latter are coherent texts of similar length, in Narsai's homily the parallel statements are interrupted by further propositions. Also, the assumed meaning of *ṣamad* in the sense of *eternal* is in need of explanation (as is the equation of *ṣamad* with *pantokrator*). Against this, I have argued that the Qur'ān may be evoking Jacobean vocabulary with its deployment of *ṣamad* as a divine epithet. Further, it can be argued that the closest inner-qur'ānic parallel to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (Q 4:171, see below) is against creedal statements that divide God into three persons. This favors an understanding of *ṣamad* in terms of indivisible/absolute. Formally, too, Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ and Jacob's credo contain similar stylistic devices in the form of an anaphora/epistrophe with an *-ad* rhyme scheme. And for both creeds, it is possible to identify a Najrānite context (*Letter to the Himyarites* being occasioned by regional persecution, and Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ being revealed when a delegation came from Najrān).

Overall the Christological credo in Jacob's letter can be seen as further evidence for understanding the many faces of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. This does not mean that his credo is the "Vorlage" for Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ or that it solves exclusively all challenges

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77 McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 36–69.

78 Ibid., 68–69 (verses 495–500).

79 Neuenkirchen, "Sourate 112: Al-Ikhlāṣ," 2b:2325.

to fully understanding the *sūrah*. For example, the ending of its first verse with *aḥad* instead of *al-wāḥid* is still explained best as an intended echo to the Shema and testifies to the polyvalent nature of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. But the Christological credo in Jacob's letter represents an adaption of creedal beliefs, whose style and structure are symptomatic of how Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ articulates the creed of the early Muslim community. Jacob's adaption of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed gives us, therefore, evidence for a coherent text of creedal expression very close to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ.

A qurʾānic parallel to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ?

Several scholars have referred to inner-qurʾānic parallels for the use of certain terms and phrases in Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ to explain its structure and meaning, but there has been no attempt to analyze whether there are inner-qurʾānic parallels to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ as a *whole* and whether these are related to a critique of creedal articulations within the Qurʾān. The following verse of Sūrat al-Nisāʾ (Q 4:171) seems to contain a phraseology and structure close to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ while addressing trinitarian creeds:

> O People of Scripture, do not go beyond the bounds in your religion. Do not say anything but the truth about God. Christ, Jesus, the son of Mary, is truly God's messenger, and His word (*kalimatuhu*), which He cast into Mary, and a spirit from Him (*rūḥun minhu*). So believe in God and His messengers and do not say, 'Three' (*wa-lā taqūlū thalāthatun*). Desist. [That is] better for you. God is one god (*innama llāhu ilāhun wāḥidun*). Glory be to Him! He is above having a son (*subḥānahu an yakūna lahu waladun*). To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. God is sufficient trustee (*wa-kafā bi-llāhi wakīlan*).

This verse is primarily concerned with the expression of creeds. The imperative "Do not say!" (*lā taqūlū*) is used twice, and it warns against articulating a trinitarian concept of God. Interestingly, Jesus is positively described as a word (*kalimah*) and a spirit (*rūḥ*). It is important to note that the *word* and the *spirit* are the two persons of three persons who are named in trinitarian invocations of God (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost). The verse insists, furthermore, that no one is allowed to say "Three" (*lā taqūlū thalāthatun*). Hence, the addressees of this verse were most probably Christians who have a trinitarian invocation of God. The verse is at least denying a certain type of trinitarian creeds or even trinitarian creeds *per se*. It further formulates a credo, which is acceptable from the perspective of qurʾānic theology, "God is one God. Glory be to Him! He is above having a son. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. God is sufficient trustee (*wa-kafā bi-llāhi wakīlan*)." There are semantic and lexical parallels between the last part of the verse and Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ:

Table 3

Q 4:171	Q 112
God is one God (*innama llāhu **ilāhun wāḥidun***)	(1) Say: He is **God**, **one**, (*qul huwa **llāhu aḥad***)
	(2) God, the absolute, (*allāhu l-ṣamad*)
Glory be to Him! He is above having a **son** (*subḥānahū an yakūna lahū **waladun***)	(3) **He did not beget, nor is he begotten, (***lam yalid* wa-lam *yūlad***)
God is **sufficient** trustee (*wa-**kafā** bi-llāhi wakīlan*)	(4) And **there is none like him** (*wa-lam yakun lahu **kufuwan** aḥad*)

In both cases, the oneness of God is expressed. While Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ uses the term *aḥad*, in Sūrat al-Nisāʾ (4:171) the term *wāḥid* is applied, which is also contained in alternative readings of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (112:1).[80] Now, Q 112:3 insists that God cannot be father or son because he does not beget (*lam yalid*) and is not begotten (*lam yūlad*). Similarly, Q 4:171 denies that God has a son (*walad*). And while Q 112:4 negates that there could be another entity like (*kufuwan*) God, the parallel statement in Q 4:171 is that God is a sufficient (*kafā*) trustee. This proposed analogy between *kufuwan* and *kafā* requires further justification: *kufuwan* is derived from the root *k-f-ʾ* and not from the root *k-f-y*,[81] from which we have the verb *kafā*. Nonetheless, some scholars have proposed to understand *kufuwan* in the sense of *kafā* so that Q 112:4 would mean that God is self-sufficient.[82] Be that as it may, there is a close contextual affinity at the ending of both verses: they apply terms that have the same root in the first and second radical (*k-f-y* and *k-f-ʾ*) and are interrelated in their content: If there is no entity like God, then he is the only sufficient entity in every respect. The phrase *kafā bi-* + *adjective* is applied frequently in the Qurʾān to articulate that God by Himself is enough as a friend (*waliyy*) (Q 4:45), as a trustee (*wakīl*) (Q 4:132), as a helper (*naṣīr*) (Q 4:45), as an accountant (*ḥasīb*) (Q 33:39), and as a witness (*shahīd*) (Q 48:28), because there is no one like him with the same powers. Overall, Q 4:171 formulates a sequence of statements that have a semantic and structural affinity to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ as a whole and are directed against a trinitarian creed of Christians. While Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ introduces positively a credo, which should be spoken (*qul*), in Q 4:171 an articulation of a trinitarian credo is prohibited (*lā taqūlū*) and followed by a monotheistic credo close to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. That there was at least a strong exegetical connection between Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ and Q 4:171 is evident from the

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80 Khaṭīb, *Muʿjam al-qirāʾāt*, 10:635.

81 The root *k-f-y* is also attested in Sabaic, where it seems to have a similar meaning and usage as the qurʾānic verb *kafā* (cf. http://sabaweb.uni-jena.de/SabaWeb/Suche/Suche/SearchResultList?idSearchRoot=kfy). I owe this reference to one of the peer reviewers.

82 Schedl, "Probleme der Koranexegese," 6–7.

fact that both are contained in the main inscription of the Dome of the Rock.[83] This reveals the early reception and interpretation of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ as an anti-Christian text.

It is also possible that Q 112 was revealed earlier than Q 4:171 and originally addressed only Jewish or pagan audiences. However, the overall structure of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ likely reflects the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. For this reason, I am inclined to infer that there was originally an anti-Christian tendency in both Q 112 and Q 4:171.

Jacob of Serugh's explanation of the Trinity to Jews and Q 4:171

In his homilies against the Jews,[84] Jacob of Serugh discusses several themes that are typical of anti-Jewish polemics in the Christian tradition (circumcision, the Sabbath, Jewish laws, etc.). In one of these homilies, he tackles the Jewish denial of the idea that God has a son. Jacob explains the trinitarian nature of God and defends it against a Jewish polemic:

> God is one (*ḥad alāhā*), and he has a word (*it leh melltā*) and a spirit (*it leh ruḥā*).
> The Lord is one (*māryā ḥad-u*) and his word (*w-mellteh*) and his spirit (*w-ruḥeh*) are (one) with him (*ʿammeh-ennon*).
> Three persons (*qnomē tlātā*), one God (*ḥad alāhā*), limitless (*d-lā mestayyak*).
> The Trinity (*tlitāyutā*), one power (*ḥdā mārutā*), which is not commanded (*d-lā metpaqdā*).[85]

Thus, Jacob insists that God has a word and a spirit. This is the reason one may speak of three persons (*qnomē tlātā*) without this being a denial of the fact that God is one (*ḥad alāhā*). Jacob further argues that he is not testifying to three gods when he confesses to the word and spirit of God:

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83 Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock*, 91–92.
84 For the relationship between Syriac Christianity and Jewish tradition see Butts and Gross, ed., *Jews and Syriac Christianity*. It is not clear whether Jacob is actually polemicizing against real Jews in these homilies or whether they only serve as imagined opponents to explicate his own Christological convictions against Dyophysites (ibid., 12–22). Even if the Jews in Jacob's homilies are imagined, it is interesting to see how he uses this constellation of conversations to profile his own religious convictions. Due to the broad reception of his homilies, it is not impossible that his arguments were also used in missionary activities.
85 Graffin, ed., *Jacques de Saroug: homélies contre les Juifs*, 50 (93–96).

I did not say "three gods" (*law alāhē tlātā emret*), nor will I say (it) (*aw āmar-nā*),
but I confessed that the Father has a word and a spirit (*ellā d-melltā w-ruḥā d-it leh l-abā awdit*).[86]

The trinitarian creed does not lead to tritheism. Jacob exemplifies this by comparing the three persons of God with the sun:

The Sun is one (*ḥad-u šemšā*) and it has light and heat (*w-it leh nuhrā w-ḥammimutā*).
And nobody calls the three of them "three suns" (*w-lānāš qrā tlātā šemsin l-tlātayhon*).
The Sun is the Sun, and the light is the light, and the heat is the heat (*šemšā šemša-w w-nuhrā nuhra-w w-rātḥā rātḥa-w*),
and the three of them are one, and not many (*w-tlātayhon ḥad-u šemšā law saggiʾā*).
Thus, the Father and the Son and the Spirit are one God (*hākan ʾabā w-brā w-ruḥā ḥad alāhā*),
not gods, as foolish people think of it (*law alāhē ak d-sbar leh ʿammā saklā*).
Does he want to say that God has neither a word nor a spirit (*ṣābā d-nemar d-āp lā melltā āp lā ruḥā it l-alāhā*), but there is only one Lord (*ellā ḥad-u māryā balḥod*)?
But I never said lords (*āp lā enā emret memtom mārāwātā*),
rather the Lord and his Word and his Spirit are one (*ellā māryā w-mellteh w-ruḥeh d-itayhon ḥad*).[87]

As the Sun consists of heat (*rātḥā*) and light (*nuhrā*), also God consists of the Spirit and the Word. Nobody would assume that there are three suns because of its nature. Jacob applies this to the nature of God, who has a word and a spirit. They are one together: "Three persons, one God, indivisible (*qnomē tlātā ḥad alāhā d-lā met-pallag*)."[88] Accordingly, the Son of God is like a "ray born from his [God's] essence (*w-ṣemḥā da-ylid men ītuteh*)."[89]

Jacob quotes and interprets several references from the Hebrew Bible as an articulation of God's trinitarian nature. For example, he refers to Isaiah's vision of the Lord (Isa 6:3), where the seraphim say: "Holy (*qaddiš*), holy, holy is the Lord [...]". This threefold repetition of the *qaddiš* is understood as an expression for the Trinity:

They testified that they are the Father and the Son and the Spirit (*d-sāhdin l-abā wa-l-brā w-ruḥā d-itayhon-waw*).
They meant persons, and they were not named gods (*qnomē awdaʿ alāhē dēn lā eštammah*).
There they did not name lords but the Lord (*d-lā qraw tammān mārāwātā ellā māryā*).
Holy is the Father, and holy is the Son and holy is the Spirit (*qaddiš ʾabā qaddiš wa-brā qaddiš ruḥā*),

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86 Ibid., 50 (99–100).
87 Ibid., 50 (101–10).
88 Ibid., p. 52 (140).
89 Ibid., 52 (123); cf. ibid., 50 (118).

and the three are one Lord and not many (*wa-tlātayhon ḥad-u māryā law saggiʾā*) [...]. The Lord is one, there are not three lords (*ḥad-u māryā lā hwā tlātā mārāwātā*).[90]

Jacob denies that the confession to the trinitarian concept of God implies the plurality of Gods. This is why he repeatedly insists that he does not *say* "three gods" or "lords" in the plural.

The qurʾānic discourse in Q 4:171 has close connections to Jacob's defense of the Trinity. In both cases, the true and confessional articulation of God's nature is disputed. The Qurʾān denies that it is permissible to *say* "three," and Jacob defends the trinitarian creed from being an articulation of "three gods." God has a spirit (*ruḥā*) and a word (*melltā*), which are persons (*qnomē*). They constitute one God. And Jacob complains about the Jewish denial of the spirit and word of God. Exactly this kind of argumentation is questioned by Q 4:171; it positively admits that Jesus is a *word* from God (*kalimatuhu*) and that he is a spirit from him (*rūḥun minhu*). Against Jacob the Qurʾān admits the reality of God's word and spirit and still denies that this would *justify* saying and *confessing* "three": "Do not say, 'Three' (*wa-lā taqūlū thalāthatun*)." It seems that the Qurʾān does not accept any kind of differentiation in God, not even as *qnomē*. Ultimately, Q 4:171 articulates a true confession of God's nature, which is reminiscent of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. This would strengthen the idea that surah Q 112 already argues against differentiating God's unity into three persons.

Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ as part of the religious discourse in Late Antiquity

This paper started by describing the philological problems that scholars and exegetes faced in interpreting Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. The many peculiarities of its grammar and style impede a comprehensive understanding of the *sūrah*. The Christological credo of Jacob formulated for the Christians in Najrān does not offer a final way out of these challenges. But it gives us further evidence for a discursive context of religious polemics in Late Antiquity that Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ shares and to which it reacts. In other instances, too, the qurʾānic critique of creedal expressions is phraseologically close to the reasoning of Jacob of Serugh. In Q 4:171, the Qurʾān warns against confessing a trinitarian conception of God and is reacting to an apology of the Trinity as formulated by Jacob.

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90 Ibid., 52–54 (148–54).

I do not have a conclusive answer to the question of how the theological arguments and ideas preserved in Jacob's work found their way into the theological discourse of the Qurʾān. A possible scenario could be missionary activities or cultural exchange from Najrān into the Ḥijāz. Philip Wood has recently pointed out an important reference in the hagiographic collection *Lives of the Eastern Saints* by John of Ephesus (*ca.* 507–590).[91] In a chapter about Symeon of Beth Arsham (d. before 548), he describes his missionary activities in al-Ḥīrah:

> And for this reason he was sedulous in going out among the countries, as far as the camp of the Saracens [ṭayyāyē] of the tribe of Nuʿmān, which he often visited; so that he gained a large number of Saracens in it, and he induced the magnates who were converted by his words to build a Christian church in it.[92]

John further describes how Symeon translated the creed of the people he converted:

> And for this reason, and in order that the certainty of the writing might remain without suspicion of alteration, he made great linen cloths and medicated them, so that they might take writing, […] and on them he would accordingly write the belief of every people in their own language [haymānutā d-kull ʿammā b-leššāneh] from their archbishops […].[93]

Wood considers whether this practice of translating the creed into the local languages also influenced the development of Arabic writing and language.[94] In the context of this article, the question can be asked whether this practice of translating creeds into local languages by bishops is also relevant to Najrān, since two bishops are also attested there. It is possible and probable that they translated their miaphysite confessions into Sabaic or other languages of pre-Islamic Arabia.[95] The creed of Christians in Ḥimyar formulated by Jacob of Serugh could be a candidate for how bishops in Najrān may have formulated their creeds in Syriac and then translated them into Arabic. Accordingly, Q 112 would be an example of engagement with such translated confessions. It could also be possible that the ideas and arguments used by Jacob of Serugh in his homilies against the Jews were relevant in religio-political disputes and missionary activities due to the wide reception of his homilies. After all, the opponents of the Christians in Najrān were influenced by a form of monotheism closer to Jewish tradition.[96]

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91 Wood, "Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula," 237–38.

92 Brooks, ed. and tr., *John of Ephesus*: *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 140.

93 Ibid., 156.

94 Wood, "Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula," 238.

95 For the languages of pre-Islamic Arabia, see Al-Jallad, "The Linguistic Landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia."

96 Robin, "Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and Arabia Deserta," 127–71; Nebes, "The Martyrs of Najrān," 35–40.

Overall, I do not believe that the works of Jacob were present in the environment of the Qurʾān but, rather, that the ideas and motifs described in his writings were symptomatic of theological discourses that also found their expression in missionary activities leading into the Ḥijāz.

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