

The Qur'an in arab christian texts : the development of an apologetical argument : Abu Qurrah in the maglis of al-ma'mun / Sidney H. Griffith. — In : Parole de l'Orient : revue semestrielle des études syriaques et arabes chrétiennes : recherches orientales : revue d'études et de recherches sur les églises de langue syriaque. — vol. 24 (1999), pp. 203-233.

Cover title : Actes du 5e congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes, Lund, Août 1996. — Bibliogr.

1. Koran — Christian interpretations. 2. Christianity and other religions — Islam. 3. Islam — Relations — Christianity.

PER L1183 / FT71903P

THE QUR'ĀN IN ARAB CHRISTIAN TEXTS;  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN APOLOGETICAL ARGU-  
MENT: ABŪ QURRAH IN THE MAĠĠIS OF AL-MA'MŪN

BY  
Sidney H. GRIFFITH\*

A. A FLAWED SCRIPTURE .....	205
I - The Legend of the Monk Baḥīrā .....	206
II- The Correspondence of al-Hāšimī and al-Kindī .....	210
B. A TESTIMONY TO THE TRUTH .....	214
C. ABŪ QURRAH IN THE MAĠĠIS OF AL-MA'MŪN .....	223
CONCLUSION .....	232

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\*) Abbreviations:

DICK, *Traité* = Ignace DICK, *Théodore Abuqurra, traité du culte des icônes; introduction et texte critique* (PAC 10; Jounieh & Rome, 1986).

GIBSON, *An Arabic version* = Margaret Dunlop GIBSON, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles, with a Treatise on the Triune Nature of God* (Studia Sinaitica, VII; C.J. Clay & Sons, London, 1899) 74-107 (Arabic), 2-36 (English).

GOTTHEIL, *A Christian* = Richard GOTTHEIL, «A Christian Bahira Legend», *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13 (1898) 189-242; 14 (1899) 203-268; 15 (1900) 56-102; 17 (1903) 125-166.

HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam* = Robert G. HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It; a Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 13; The Darwin Press, Princeton, 1997).

LANDRON, *Chrétiens* = Bénédicte LANDRON, *Chrétiens et musulmans en Irak: attitudes nestoriennes vis-à-vis de l'Islam* (Études Chrétiennes Arabes; Cariscript, Paris, 1994).

MARCUZZO, *Le Dialogue* = Giacinto Bülus MARCUZZO, *Le Dialogue d'Abraham de Tiberiade avec 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Hāšimī à Jérusalem vers 820* (Textes et Études sur l'Orient Chrétien, 3; Rome, 1986), # 110.

TIEN, *Risālat* = Anton TIEN (ed.), *Risālat 'Abd Allāh ibn Ismā'īl al-Hāšimī ilā 'Abd al-Masīh ibn Ishāq al-Kindī wa-risālat 'Abd al-Masīh ilā l-Hāšimī yaruddu bihā 'alayhi wa-yadūhu ilā n-naṣrāniyyah* (London, 1885).

It was not uncommon in Christian/Muslim debate texts in Syriac and Arabic from the early Islamic period for the question to arise about what status the Christian was prepared to accord to Muḥammad as a prophet, and to the Qur'ān as an inspired scripture. For the most part the answer was that, at best, Muḥammad was a little less than a prophet, and the Qur'ān not quite a book of divine revelation<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, in spite of this summary judgment the Qur'ān did figure large in Christian texts in a number of ways.

In Arab Christian apologetical texts generally one finds a certain ambivalence about the Qur'ān. On the one hand, some authors argue that it cannot possibly be a book of divine revelation, citing in evidence its composite and, as they see the matter, its all too human origins. But on the other hand, given the progressive inculturation of Christianity into the Arabic-speaking world of Islam from the eighth century onward, most Arab Christian writers themselves commonly quoted words and phrases from the Qur'ān. Inevitably its language suffused their religious consciousness. Some of them even built their apologetical arguments in behalf of Christianity on a certain interpretation of particular verses from the Islamic scripture. In short, while Christian apologists argued that the Qur'ān is a flawed scripture, they nevertheless also often quoted from it as a testimony to the truth.

It is the purpose of the present essay very briefly to survey the Arab Christian discussions of the Qur'ān in the early Islamic period, and to highlight the apologetical use some writers made of it. In particular, the study will examine the function of verses from the Qur'ān in the account of Theodore Abū Qurrah's debate with several Muslim interlocutors in the *maḡlis* of the caliph al-Ma'mūn, said to have taken place in Ḥarrān in the year 829. This text exhibits well the Christian mastery of argument from the Qur'ān. It anticipates in many ways the highpoint of this line of apologetical reasoning,

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1) Quite frequently Arab Christian writers called Muḥammad a 'king'. For example, in the *Dialogue of Abraham of Tiberias* the monk says of Muḥammad, «He is not a prophet (God preserve you); he is only a king with whom God was pleased, by means of whom and in whom God fulfilled his promise to Abraham regarding Ishmael». MARCUZZO, *Le Dialogue*, p. 321. See also the interesting view of Patriarch Timothy I (780-823), expressed in the *maḡlis* of the caliph al-Mahdī, according to which Muḥammad's «walk was on the way of the prophets and of the lovers of God». Robert CASPAR, «Les versions arabes du dialogue entre le Catholicos Timothée I et le calife al-Mahdi (VII<sup>e</sup>/VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)», *Islamochristiana* 3 (1977) 150 [Arabic]. On the same subject, look for the publication of Samir Khalil SAMIR, «Muḥammad as Seen by Timothy I (781-824) and Some Other Arab Christians», in the proceedings of the Third Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposium on Arab Christianity and Islam, «Arab Christianity in *Bilād al-Šām* in the pre-Ottoman Period», Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak, Birmingham, 7-9 September 1998.

as Paul of Antioch later deployed it in his well-known «Letter to Some Friends in Sidon»<sup>2</sup>, the text which in one of its guises elicited a response from no less a figure in the world of Islam than Muḥammad ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) in the fourteenth century<sup>3</sup>.

### A. A FLAWED SCRIPTURE

Not many Christian writers in Syriac and Arabic in the early Islamic period discussed the Qur'ān as a topic in its own right<sup>4</sup>. Those who did, argued that it was a flawed scripture, unfit to rank alongside the Torah and the Gospel as a book of divine revelation. Some said that as a discordant, composite text it lacked the finesse and literary grace Muslims claimed for it. Others found it to be derivative, in some way in debt to earlier scriptures, or the product of Jewish, or even Christian mischief. Yet every Arab Christian text echoed the Qur'ān's words and phrases in its own diction, and some, as we shall see, quoted from it literally, either in testimony to the truth of Christian doctrines, or to make a rebuttal to the claims of Islam.

There is some evidence to suggest that at their first encounter with the Islamic scripture Christians were confused about its composition. At least one Syriac writer thought of the Qur'ān, so-called, not as the integral text we know as the canonical revelation, but as only part of it. This perception is recorded in the account of the dialogue of the Monk of Bēt Ḥālē with a Muslim notable in Iraq around the year 720<sup>5</sup>. Although the writer character-

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2) See L. BUFFAT, «Lettre de Paul, évêque de Saïda, moine d'Antioche, à un musulman de ses amis demeurant à Saïda», *ROC* 8 (1903) 388-425; Paul KHOURY, *Paul d'Antioche, évêque melkite de Sidon (XII<sup>e</sup> s.)* (Recherches de l'Institut de Lettres Orientales de Beyrouth, t. XXIV; Beyrouth, 1964) 169-187 (French), 59-83 (Arabic). See also NASRALLAH, *HMLEM* III, 1 (1983) 257-268.

3) See Thomas F. MICHEL, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity; Ibn Taymiyya's al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* (Caravan Books, Delmar, N.Y., 1964) 87-98.

4) There is a record that the 'Nestorian' scholar, Abū Nūḥ al-Anbārī, a contemporary and supporter of Patriarch Timothy I, who was the Christian secretary of the Muslim governor of Mosul, and probably the first 'Nestorian' to write in defense of Christianity in Arabic, had among his compositions a «Refutation of the Qur'ān» (*tafnīd al-Qur'ān*). While this work was reportedly examined at the turn of this century, in a manuscript of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century in the Sbath collection, it seems now to be inaccessible to scholars. See GRAF, *GCAL* II (1947) 118; LANDRON, *Chrétien*, pp. 53-54.

5) See the description of this still unpublished, but important text in Sidney H. GRIF-FITH, «Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: from Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)», in Bernard LEWIS & Friedrich NIEWÖHNER (eds.), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter* (Wolfenbütteler Mittelalter-Studien, 4; in Kommission bei O. Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1992) 259-261. See also P. JAGER, «Intended Edition of a Disputation between a

izes the Muslim as «learned in our scriptures as well as in their Qurʾān (√مذ)»<sup>6</sup>, he nevertheless at one point in the dialogue also puts the following statement into the mouth of the monk:

I think that even in your case, Muḥammad did not teach all your laws and commandments in the Qurʾān, but you learned some of them from the Qurʾān; some of them are in *ṣūrat al-baqarah* (سورة البقرة), and in *G-y-g-y* (غ-ي-غ-ي) and in *T-w-r-h* (ت-و-ر-ه)<sup>7</sup>.

On the face of it the remark makes a distinction between the Qurʾān and the second *sūrah*. And it may well be the case that the next two terms refer to the Gospel and the Torah respectively, understanding the enigmatic *G-y-g-y* to be a corruption from the Arabic term *inḡīl*, while *T-w-r-h* is taken to reflect the Arabic *at-tawrāh*<sup>8</sup>. On this reading the eighth century writer considers *al-Baqarah* to be a separate source of Islamic law from the Qurʾān, along with the Gospel and the Torah. Similarly, one recalls that the Greek text transmitted as chapter 101 of John of Damascus' *De heresibus* also mentions several *sūrahs* by name as if they were separate compositions. The text calls each one a 'scripture' (ἡ γραφή), and notes that each has its own title<sup>9</sup>. But the Damascene, while he does not use the term 'Qurʾān', nevertheless clearly recognized that these separate 'scriptures' were put together in a Bible-like fashion; he refers to the 'book' (βιβλίον), which he characterizes as «worthy of laughter», into which the several scriptures were gathered<sup>10</sup>.

## I - THE LEGEND OF THE MONK BAḤĪRĀ

By the ninth century, Syrian and Arab Christian writers were using their

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Monk of the Monastery of Bēt Ḥālē and One of the Ṭayyōyē», in H. J. W. DRIJVERS *et al.* (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984; Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*, OCA 229 (Rome, 1987) 401-402. See now HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 465-472.

6) *Diyarbekir Syriac MS 95*, f. 1; HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam*, p. 466.

7) *Diyarbekir Syriac MS 95*, f. 11; HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam*, p. 471.

8) This was the opinion expressed in an unpublished 'major theme' lecture by Prof. H. J. W. Drijvers at the Oxford Patristic Conference of 1991. Alternatively, but perhaps less plausibly, one might suggest that *G-y-g-y* reflects the Syriac term *gwāgay* (ܨܘܦܝܢܐ), 'spider', and thus refers to *sūrat al-Ankabūt* (XXIX), while *T-w-r-h* is a mistaken transcription for *at-Tawbah* (IX). On this reading the writer would be distinguishing three of its *sūrahs* from the Qurʾān, as independent sources of Islamic law. For the significance of such a Christian perception for the history of the collection of the Qurʾān see Patricia CRONE & Michael COOK, *Hagarism: the Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977) 17-18.

9) See *PG*, vol. XCIV, col. 769B.

10) See *PG*, vol. XCIV, col. 765A. See also the discussion of Daniel J. SAHAS, *John of Damascus on Islam; the «Heresy of the Ishmaelites»* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1972) 74-75; 89-93.

knowledge of the composite character of the Qur'ān as an argument against its being considered a book of divine revelation. Perhaps the most ingenious apologetical work to press this point is the Christian legend of the monk Baḥīrā. Already in the eighth century John of Damascus had alleged that Muḥammad had been under the tutelage of an errant monk, whom he supposed was an 'Arian'<sup>11</sup>. The writer of the dialogue between the monk of Bēt Ḥālē and the Arab notable in Iraq around the year 720 was the first Christian to name the monk. He called him Sargīs Baḥīrā<sup>12</sup>, echoing the name by which Muslims called the monk who was known in Islamic lore as the one who had recognized the signs of Muḥammad's prophethood while he was still a boy. Beginning in the ninth century a Christian legend of the monk Baḥīrā was circulating in both Syriac and Arabic<sup>13</sup>. It is an exercise in both apocalypse and apologetic, which depends on earlier Syriac apocalypses from Umayyad times, and Islamic traditions about the monk Baḥīrā, as well as on the current modes of Christian apologetic and polemic discourse in Syriac and Arabic in early Abbasid times<sup>14</sup>. The Christian legend makes the monk Baḥīrā responsible for the Qur'ān.

The story-line is the same in both the Syriac and Arabic versions of the Christian Baḥīrā legend. There is a frame-story in which a monk-narrator tells of his encounter with the fugitive monk Baḥīrā. The narrator recounts the story of Baḥīrā's adventures, tells of his experience of apocalyptic visions, of his encounters with Muḥammad, and of the monk's prophetic vision of the hardships to come with life under the Muslims. Within the text bounded by the frame-work story there are then three major divisions of material in the narrative: the apocalyptic vision of the coming rule of the Arab 'Ishmaelites', the 'sons of Hagar'; an account of the catechizing of Muḥammad by Baḥīrā; and the prediction, or prophecy *ex eventu*, of the course of Islamic history from the time of Muḥammad to the projected coming of the Mahdī, and the end-time when, according to the story, the Christian emperor of the Romans will, by God's grace and dispensation, set the world aright once again.

11) See *PG*, vol. XCIV, col. 765A.

12) See *Diyarbakir Syriac MS 95*, f. 9.

13) See GOTTHEIL, *A Christian* 13 (1898) 189-242; 14 (1899) 203-268; 15 (1900) 56-102; 17 (1903) 125-166.

14) See Sidney H. GRIFFITH, «Muḥammad and the Monk Baḥīrā: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times», in *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995) 146-174. See also Stephen GERO, «The Legend of the Monk Bahira; the Cult of the Cross and Iconoclasm», in P. CANIVET & J.-P. REY-COQUAIS (eds.), *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam* (Institut Français de Damas, Damas, 1992) 47-57; LANDRON, *Chrétiens*, pp. 71-78.

The author's account of the production of the Qur'ān comes in the middle of the narrative, in the section devoted to the catechizing of Muḥammad. In the Arabic version this is the principal part of the work. It claims that effectively Baḥīrā was the author of the Islamic scripture. And originally, as the story goes, the Qur'ān contained Christian truth told in a form suitable for Arab ears. According to the Syriac version, the text subsequently came into the possession of Jews and was distorted into the familiar form of it we now have, at the hands of a scribe variously called Kaḥb, Kalef, and Kaleb, who seems to have been none other than the Jewish early convert to Islam, well-known from Islamic sources, Kaḥb al-Aḥbār<sup>15</sup>.

The Syriac account of the monk's interview with Muḥammad consists of a report of the strategies which the two of them are said to have devised to facilitate the Arabs' acceptance of Baḥīrā's religious teaching. Since Muḥammad was worried that his people would not accept him, «because I do not read scripture and I do not know anything»<sup>16</sup>, the monk proposed to teach him by night what he would preach by day. Muḥammad would then claim that the angel Gabriel had given him instructions. As a warrant for his teaching Baḥīrā is then said to have written a scripture for Muḥammad to set before his people. He tells him:

I shall write a book for you and I shall teach you. On a Friday I will put it on the horn of a cow. You go and assemble the people in one place. Take a seat among them and say, today the Lord will send you from heaven a great book, laws and statutes, by which you are to be guided all your life. When you see a cow coming, rise from your seat, go towards it, and take the book from its horn in the sight of all your people. Then say to them, this book has come down from heaven, from God. The earth was not worthy enough to receive it; so this cow received in on its horn. From that day on the book was called, *sūrat al-Baqarah*<sup>17</sup>.

One notices immediately in this passage not only the belittlement of the Qur'ān as a book of divine revelation, but once again the idea that *sūrat al-Baqarah* is somehow a separate composition.

The main body of the catechesis of Muḥammad in the Arabic version of

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15) See M. SCHMITZ, «Kaḥb al-Aḥbār», *EI*, new ed., vol. IV (1978) 316-317.

16) GOTTHEIL, *A Christian* 13 (1898) 223 (Syriac); 14 (1899) 220 (English). One thinks in this connection of the Qur'ān's description of Muḥammad as *nabī 'ummī*. See *al-Aḥf*, VII:157 & 158.

17) GOTTHEIL, *A Christian* 13 (1898) 227-228 (Syriac); 14 (1899) 222 (English).

the Christian Baḥīrā legend consists of the quotation in a succession of passages from the Qur'ān which the monk says, «I wrote», together with an explanation of their Christian interpretation. This is said to have been in response to Muḥammad's request to the monk to «undertake to write down for me something I might say and learn»<sup>18</sup>. The text then refutes the Islamic charge that Christians have changed and altered their own scriptures by having the monk claim that he wrote *Yūnus*, X:94, «If you are in doubt ... ask those to whom the scripture was given before you»<sup>19</sup> to prove that the Gospel of all the scriptures has not been affected by any deficiency, alteration or corruption. He implicitly explains the Qur'ān's term for 'Christians', i.e., *annaṣārā*, by reference to the phrases *anṣār Allāh* and *anṣār ilā Allāh* used in reference to Christ's apostles (*ḥawāriyyīn*) in *aṣ-Ṣaff*, LXI:14<sup>20</sup>. And he says that the apostles were called God's *anṣār* (helpers) because of the confession of Christ's divinity attributed to Peter in Mt. 16:16, «You are the Messiah, the son of the living God». The monk then ended his first account of how he had tried to express Christian doctrines in the Qur'ān with the following allegation:

Many other things I wrote for him, too numerous to mention, by which I sought to turn him to a belief in the truth and a recognition of the coming of the Messiah into the world, and the condemnation of the Jews in regard to that which they say of our Lord, the true Messiah<sup>21</sup>.

As in the Syriac version, so in the Arabic one, the monk devises the ruse of sending the scripture he wrote for Muḥammad into the assembly of his followers on the horn of a cow to dramatize the allegation that it was not composed by man but was supposed to have come down from God in heaven. Muḥammad is said to have called the scripture *Furqān* «because it was scatter-shot (*mufarraḡ*); it was assembled from many scriptures»<sup>22</sup>. One could hardly miss here one of the Qur'ān's own names for itself and previous revelations (i.e., *al-Furqān* in, e.g., *al-Baqarah*, II:53 & 185; *Āl Imrān*, III:4), polemically used to signify what the author portrays as the Qur'ān's own disparate and derivative character.

One is tempted to cite here more examples of the author's Christian interpretation of various verses of the Qur'ān, but the present writer has

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18) GOTTHEIL, *A Christian* 15 (1900) 58 (Arabic); 17 (1903) 137 (English).

19) The Qur'ān's text actually has «those who read the scripture before you».

20) See the same connection made in MARCUZZO, *Le dialogue*, p. 396.

21) GOTTHEIL, *A Christian* 15 (1900) 64 (Arabic); 17 (1903) 141 (English).

22) GOTTHEIL, *A Christian* 15 (1900) 80 (Arabic); 17 (1903) 153.

highlighted some of them elsewhere<sup>23</sup>, and they can also easily be read in the text itself. Let it suffice for the moment to quote one passage, because it will appear again in other texts under discussion in the present essay. According to the author, the Qurʾān's admonition, «Do not dispute with the scripture people, except for what is better» (*al-Ankabūt*, XXIX:46) means «do not address the Gospel people, except courteously»<sup>24</sup>.

Enough has now been said to make the point that in the Christian legend of Baḥīrā the Qurʾān in its canonical form is presented as a flawed scripture. But there is another claim being made as well. It is that when one reads the Islamic scripture with Christian eyes, it can be seen to be a testimony to Christian truth, at least in the awkward way the renegade monk Baḥīrā, according to the author, tried to express it for the young Muḥammad. In other words, the Christian author of the legend is claiming that the genuine, unadulterated Qurʾān was a testimony to Gospel truth, albeit in a disorderly form, but that in its present state the text has been corrupted by Jews and subsequent Muslim interpreters. It amounts to a reversal of the Islamic charge of the 'corruption' (*at-tahrīf*) of the Torah and Gospel at the hands of Jews and Christians respectively<sup>25</sup>.

## II- THE CORRESPONDENCE OF AL-HĀŠIMĪ AND AL-KINDĪ

The Qurʾān comes up for an extended discussion in another Arab Christian text with its roots in the ninth century, the so-called correspondence between the literary characters ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ismāʿīl al-Hāšimī and ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī<sup>26</sup>. While the author quotes extensively from the

23) See GRIFFITH, «Muḥammad and the Monk Baḥīrā», esp. pp. 167-169. Look for the publication of the exciting new work of Barbara ROGGEMA, «A Christian Reading of the Qurʾān: the Arabic Version of the Legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā and its Use of Qurʾān and Sīrā», to appear in the proceedings of the Third Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposium on Arab Christianity and Islam, «Arab Christianity in *Bilād al-Šām* in the pre-Ottoman Period», Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak, Birmingham, 7-9 September 1998.

24) GOTTHEIL, *A Christian* 15 (1900) 78 (Arabic); 17 (1903) 151 (English).

25) See Jean Marie GAUDEUL & Robert CASPAR, «Textes de la tradition musulmane concernant le *tahrīf* (falsification) des écritures», *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980) 61-104. See also the brief discussion in Jane Dammen MC AULIFFE, *Qurʾānic Christians; an Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991) 168-170.

26) See TIEN, *Risālat*. A summary of the correspondence in English was published by William MUIR, *The Apology of Al Kindy; written at the Court of al-Mamun (c. A.H. 215; A.D. 830) in Defense of Christianity against Islam* (London, 1887). A new edition of the Arabic text, with a French translation, is available in Georges TARTAR, *Dialogue islamo-chrétien sous le calife al-Ma'mūn (813-834); les épîtres d'al-Hāšimī et d'al-Kindī* (2 vols.; Combs-la-

Qur'ān throughout this very polemical text, one whole section of it is devoted specifically to a discussion of the Islamic scripture. Needless to say, the author concludes that the Qur'ān is a flawed scripture, and he states his opinion in very harsh terms. But it is very interesting to follow the course of his argument. Once again we find the idea expressed that the original Qur'ān put forward authentic Christian teachings, albeit in an unsatisfactory way, but that subsequently Jews and Muslims distorted and corrupted the text.

The al-Kindī character begins his discussion of the Qur'ān by telling al-Hāšimī that he is forced to maintain that «the strongest argument (*al-ḥuġġah al-bāliġah*)»<sup>27</sup> in support of his religion is the Qur'ān itself, and that he, the Muslim, is further forced to maintain that:

The proof of the veracity of its having been sent down from God is what is in it of the ancient reports of Moses and the prophets, and of our Lord the Messiah. Since your master was an untutored man (*raġulun ummiyyun*)<sup>28</sup> he did not have the learning, or any knowledge of these reports. So, had it not been given to him in inspiration, or had it not been communicated to him as prophesy, from where did he become aware of it, to the point that he put it forward? Then you say, «Neither men nor Jinn could produce the like of it»<sup>29</sup>.

Clearly, with this remark the al-Kindī character recalls the Islamic doctrine of the miraculous inimitability of the Qur'ān (*iġāz al-Qur'ān*)<sup>30</sup>. He goes on to quote other verses which Muslim scholars customarily cited in support of this apologetic strategem<sup>31</sup>. But he maintains that it was in fact

Ville, Centre Évangélique de Témoignage et de Dialogue, France, 1982). Recently, a hitherto unpublished English translation of the work done by Anton Tien in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been edited, refurbished and published in N. A. NEWMAN, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue; a Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.); Translations with Commentary* (Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, Hatfield, Pa, 1993) 381-516. See also LANDRON, *Chrétiens*, pp. 78-88.

27) See *al-An'ām*, VI:149.

28) Recall the Qur'ān's phrase, *an-nabī al-ummī*, in *al-A'raf*, VII:157 & 158. See Isaiah GOLDFELD, «The Illiterate Prophet (*nabī ummī*): an Inquiry into the Development of a Dogma in Islamic Tradition», in *Der Islam* 57 (1980) 58-67; Khalil ḤATMINA, «*Al-Nabiyy al-Ummiyy*», in *Der Islam* 69 (1992) 61-81; Uri RUBIN, *The Eye of the Beholder: the Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims; a Textual Analysis* (Darwin Press, Princeton, 1995) 23-30.

29) TIEN, *Risālat*, pp. 75-76. The last phrase is an allusion to *al-Isrā'*, XVII:88.

30) See Richard C. MARTIN, «The Role of the Basrah Mu'tazilah in Formulating the Doctrine of the Apologetic Miracle», in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 39 (1980) 175-189.

31) A 'Nestorian' writer of the ninth century, Ḥammār al-Baṣrī, rejects the notion of the inimitable style of the Qur'ān as an evidentiary miracle in testimony to its divine origin by citing the Qur'ān itself against the very idea of evidentiary miracles. He quotes *al-Isrā'*, XVII:59, and alludes to *al-An'ām*, VI:109. See Michel HAYEK, *Ammār al-Baṣrī, apologie et*

not by way of inspiration that Muḥammad got what knowledge he had of «the ancient reports of Moses and the Prophets, and of our Lord the Messiah». Rather, he says, the knowledge came from a Christian monk named Sergius, who was known among his friends as Nestorius, and that he «made [Muḥammad] stop worshipping idols, and then turned him into a propagandist and a disciple for himself, to promote the religion of Nestorius»<sup>32</sup>. Al-Kindī assumes that the monk left Muḥammad a book in which his teachings were recorded. For he goes on to tell al-Hāšimī that later, when in the caliphate of Abū Bakr, ʿAlī was feeling wronged by the political developments of the time, two Jews by the name of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Salām and Kaʿb al-Aḥbār, who had already insinuated themselves into Muḥammad’s entourage before the monk’s death, tried to influence the young ʿAlī, but he was reconciled to Abū Bakr. Nevertheless, al-Kindī claims, by that time,

[The two Jews] had already applied themselves to what there was in the possession of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib of the scripture (*kitāb*) in accordance with the meaning of the Gospel, which his master had handed over to him, and they introduced into it the lore of the Torah, and some of its legal provisions and the usages of its country. They atrociously added things to it and took things out; they put in hideous things<sup>33</sup>.

Then al-Kindī informs his correspondent that ʿAlī told Abū Bakr that «I have been busy with the collection (*jamʿ*) of God’s scripture (*kitāb Allāh*), because the prophet had bequeathed it to me»<sup>34</sup>. The very mention of the ‘collection’ of the scriptures then reminds al-Kindī to bring up here the name

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*controverses* (Beyrouth, 1977) 30.

32) TIEN, *Risālat*, p. 77. In addition to the account of the monk Sargīs/Baḥīrā, Islamic tradition knows another story of Muḥammad’s encounter with a monk. According to tradition, as a young man in the employ of his future wife Ḥadiġah, Muḥammad came once with a merchant caravan to Syria, and there a monk whom Islamic tradition calls *Nasṭūr* is said to have recognized him as a future prophet. See Th. ʿAbd ar-Raʿūf SAʿD (ed.), *As-Sīrah an-Nabawiyyah* (4 vols.; Beirut, 1975), vol. I, p. 172; E. MITTWOCK & E. SACHAU (eds.), *Ibn Saad, Biographien* (vol. I; Leiden, 1917) 82-83. The author of the *Risālat al-Kindī* has simply melded the figures of Sargīs/Baḥīrā and the monk Nasṭūr. Perhaps one should see in the author’s ascription of Nestorian faith to Muḥammad an indication that the Christian author of the al-Hāšimī/al-Kindī correspondence was himself a ‘Melkite’ or a ‘Jacobite’. But see the discussion in LANDRON, *Chrétien*s, pp. 82-83, who concludes that the author was probably a ‘Nestorian’.

33) TIEN, *Risālat*, p. 78. Among the troublesome additions, the author lists *sūrahs an-Nahl* (XVI), *an-Naml* (XXVII), and *al-Ankabūt* (XXIX). On the role of the Jews in Christian apologetical texts in early Islamic times see Sidney H. GRIFFITH, «Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century», in *Jewish History* 3 (1988) 65-94.

34) TIEN, *Risālat*, p. 78.

of al-Ḥaġġāġ ibn Yūsuf, the notorious viceroy of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (685-705) in Iraq, whose own alleged role in the ‘collection’ of the Qurʾān would be the focus of controversy in later times, particularly among the Abbasids, in whose milieu the al-Hāšimī/al-Kindī correspondence is set by its author. Al-Kindī says this is not the way to deal with God’s word. But before he gets any further into the issue of the ‘collection’ of the Qurʾān in later times, al-Kindī tells his Muslim friend about the original scripture:

You know that it is authoritatively transmitted that the original copy is what was in the possession of the Qurayš. Then ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib gave orders for its seizure when matters got worse, so that no addition or deletion would befall it. This was the copy which was unadulteratedly in accordance with the meaning of the Gospel, which Nestorius had handed over to him<sup>35</sup>.

From this point, the al-Kindī character launches himself into a long discussion of the history of the putting together, or the collection (*al-jamʿ*), of the text of the Qurʾān into the form in which it presently exists. He mentions the details of the recensions of Abū Bakr and ʿUṣmān, including the roles of Ibn Masʿūd and Zayd ibn Ṭābit, and in the end what he presents as the tampering of al-Ḥaġġāġ ibn Yūsuf. The author is clearly well acquainted with the Islamic history of the collection and distribution of the canonical text of the Qurʾān, as well as with the matter of the several readings to be found in numerous passages. He puts it all forward here as the record of the corruption of the text from its original form, and argues that all the additions and deletions, the changes in meaning and the interference of the Jews, make it impossible for anyone to think that the Qurʾān as we now have it is an inspired scripture. In the end he also attacks its Arabic style, and argues that not only is it not an evidentiary miracle of the text’s divine origin, but he says that it is not even worthy of the best Arab poets<sup>36</sup>.

The *Risālat al-Kindī* is unique in Arab Christian literature both for the sharpness of its polemical tone against the Qurʾān, and for the detail of its presentation of Islamic erudition. Other Christian texts, if they mention these matters at all, they pass over them relatively quickly<sup>37</sup>. But the fact remains that the author of the al-Hāšimī / al-Kindī correspondence, in his own way, retained the idea that there was an *Urtext* of the Qurʾān which, while it might

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35) TIEN, *Risālat*, p. 79.

36) TIEN, *Risālat*, pp. 85-93.

37) See, e.g., the brief mention of the collection of the Qurʾān and of the persons involved in the apology of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias. MARCUZZO, *Le dialogue*, # 126, p. 331.

not have qualified as a book of divine revelation, nevertheless did contain some religious truth. It was, in his view, a flawed scripture, a corrupted text. The echo of the Islamic view of the Jewish and Christian scriptures is obvious.

## B. A TESTIMONY TO THE TRUTH

While those few Christian apologists writing in Syriac and Arabic who explicitly discussed the Qurʾān in the early Islamic period were quick to dismiss it as a flawed scripture, by invoking the story of Sergius/Bahīrā, alias Nestorius, they nevertheless were equally quick, as we have seen, to give it at least a semi-Christian origin in what they claimed was its archaic form. This position in turn, which amounts to thinking of the Qurʾān as in some ways a flawed or distorted Christian document, then logically opens the way to quoting its testimony in behalf of the truth of Christian doctrines. This was precisely the step taken by almost every Arab Christian writer, from the earliest text we have onwards.

Doubtless the step toward the practice of using the Qurʾān's diction, and even quoting from it in Christian religious compositions in Arabic was facilitated by the fact that in the world of Islam, from the dawn of the eighth century onward, Arabic, the *lingua sacra* of Islam, had also become the *lingua franca* of the burgeoning Islamic commonwealth. As more and more people, Muslims, Christians and Jews together, became Arabophone, the very need to communicate in the world of Islam required reference to the one text that was in many ways the measure of the religious lexicography of the language. And so it is no real surprise to find the Qurʾān very much present in the earliest known work of Christian theology in Arabic, a text which its modern editor presented under the title, *On the Triune Nature of God*, composed in all likelihood in the third quarter of the eighth century<sup>38</sup>.

The treatise *On the Triune Nature of God* in fact discusses most of the issues one customarily finds in the apologetical tracts of the early Islamic period. Near the beginning, the author makes a statement which may well serve as an expression of his purpose in the whole work. He says,

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38) See GIBSON, *An Arabic Version*. See also Samir Khalil SAMIR, «The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c.750)», in Samir Khalil SAMIR & Jørgen NIELSEN (eds.), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1994), pp. 57-114; Maria GALLO (trans.), *Palestinese anonimo: omelia arabo-cristiana dell'VIII secolo* (Città Nuova Editrice, Roma, 1994).

We praise you, O God, and we adore you and we glorify you in your creative Word and your holy, life-giving Spirit, one God, and one Lord, and one Creator. We do not separate God from his Word and his Spirit. God showed his power and his light in the Law and the Prophets, and the Psalms and the Gospel, that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God and one Lord. We will show this, if God will, in those revealed scriptures, to anyone who wants insight, understands things,<sup>39</sup> recognizes the truth, and opens his breast to believe in God and his scriptures<sup>39</sup>.

One notices straightaway the apologist's intention to make his case for the Christian teaching from the scriptures; he names the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel, books that are explicitly named in the Qur'ān. Moreover, in emphasizing God, his Word, and his Spirit, the author recalls the Qur'ān's mention of the three names in *an-Nisā'* IV:171. What is more, he is even willing to include the Qur'ān among the scriptures from which he is prepared to quote in testimony to the credibility of the doctrine of the Trinity. At one point in the argument, in search of testimonies to a certain plurality in the single Godhead, he turns to the scriptures for citations of passages in which God speaks in the first person plural. He then goes on to say,

You will find it also in the Qur'ān that «We created man in misery [Q. XC:4], and we have opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down [Q. LIV:11], and have said, 'And now you come unto us alone, as we created you at first [Q. VI:94]'. He said also, 'Believe in God, and in his Word; and also in the Holy Spirit' [Q. IV:171], but the Holy Spirit has brought it down 'a mercy and a guidance from thy Lord' [Q. XVI:64, 102] 'but why should I prove it from this and enlighten [you] when we find in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Gospel, and you find it in the Qur'ān, that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God and one Lord? You have said that you believe in God and his Word and the Holy Spirit, so do not reproach us, O men, that we believe in God and his Word and his Spirit: and we worship God in his Word and his Spirit, one God and one Lord and one Creator<sup>40</sup>.

Evidently the Christian author is addressing himself directly, at least in part, to devotees of the Qur'ān as well as to those of the Christian Bible. He speaks of what «we find in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Gospel» and of what «you find ... in the Qur'ān»<sup>41</sup>. The question arises, does

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39) GIBSON, *An Arabic Version*, pp. 3 (English), 75 (Arabic). Here the English translation has been adapted from Gibson's version.

40) GIBSON, *An Arabic Version*, pp. 5-6 (English), 77-78 (Arabic). The English translation has been slightly altered here.

41) There are also other intriguing allusions to the Qur'ān in the text. See the interesting study of Mark N. SWANSON, «Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur'ān in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies», in *The Muslim World* 86 (1998) 297-319.

he consider the Qur'ān a revealed scripture on a par with the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms and the Gospel? The answer is surely 'No', given the fact that throughout the treatise arguments from the Bible and Christian tradition are adduced expressly to refute Islamic teaching<sup>42</sup>. But the fact remains that he also thinks that his quotations from the Qur'ān have probative value for his apologetical purposes<sup>43</sup>.

The crucial verse of the Qur'ān to which the author of the treatise *On the Triune Nature of God* appeals in the passage just quoted is *an-Nisā'*, IV:171, where the text clearly speaks of God, and of Jesus, the Messiah, the son of Mary, as «His Word», and «a Spirit from Him». Almost every Christian apologist in the world of Islam from John of Damascus<sup>44</sup> onward quotes or alludes to this Qur'ān verse. One of the earliest Christian reflections on it occurs in the Syriac dialogue of the monk of Bēt Ḥālē with a Muslim notable. In the course of the conversation, as the text presents it, the question is posed by the Muslim about why Christians make Jesus the Son of God. The monk then says,

Tell me, son of Ismael, whose son do you make him to be - the one called ʿĪsā son of Maryam (حَسْبُكَ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ) by you, and Jesus the Messiah by us? The Arab said, as from our own Muḥammad, we testify to what he said, 'the Word of God and his Spirit'. [Q. IV:171] The Monk said, you have said well. This is a saying from the Gospel of Luke. Muḥammad accepted it. The angel Gabriel made the proclamation and announced it to the blessed Mary: ... [Lk. 1:30] Now consider your statement and understand what you have heard from Muḥammad, because you are testifying that he proclaimed him to be the Word of God and His Spirit. Now I require one of two things from you: either you estrange the Word of God and His Spirit from Him, or you proclaim him to be the Son of God straightforwardly<sup>45</sup>.

On the face of it the author claims that the Qur'ān incorporates the teaching of the Gospel of Luke and that Muḥammad accepted it. Therefore the Christian apologist can capitalize on the probative value of *an-Nisā'*, IV:171 for his own purposes. One notices also the acceptance of the idea

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42) See the remarks of GALLO, *Palestinese anonimo omelia*, p. 61, n. 50.

43) There is another early Arab Christian text, a fragmentary papyrus, in which the author quotes the Qur'ān and names the *sūrah*s from which he quotes. But the text is too fragmentary to say much about his overall purposes. See Georg GRAF, «Christliche-arabische Texte, Zwei Disputationen zwischen Muslimen und Christen», in Friedrich BILABEL & Adolf GROHMANN (eds.), *Griechische, koptische und arabische Texte zur Religion und religiösen Literatur in Ägyptens Spätzeit* (Heidelberg, 1934) 8-23.

44) See chap. 101 of the *De heresibus*, in PG, XCIV, col. 765A.

45) *Diyarbekir Syriac MS 95*, ff. 8-9.

that if it is read correctly, in reference to the Gospel, the Qur'ān can be tacitly understood to affirm Christian teaching.

Another Christian apologist, the author of the Greek *Disputatio Sarceni et Christiani*<sup>46</sup>, artfully put together allusions to *an-Nisā'*, IV:171, conflated with *Āl-Imrān*, III:42, and Luke 1:35, to make a single argument from scripture. He gives the following advice to anyone who would argue with a Muslim about the doctrine of the Incarnation:

If he says to you, how did God come down into the belly of a woman? Say to him, let us use your scripture and my scripture. Your scripture says that God purified the Virgin Mary, beyond all feminine flesh [Q, III:42], and the Spirit of God and Word came down on her [Q. IV:171]. My Gospel says, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you' [Lk. 1:35]. See, there is one statement in both texts and one meaning<sup>47</sup>.

Here the author claims that the Gospel and the Qur'ān teach the same thing, about what is in fact a disputed issue between Muslims and Christians. Is he also tacitly claiming that his reading refers to the meaning of the original, uncorrupted Qur'ān?

There are basically two ways in which one finds quotations and allusions to the verses of the Qur'ān used in the works of Arab Christian writers in the early Islamic period. Sometimes they borrow its terms and phrases in the course of constructing their arguments without any explicit appeal to the religious authority of the Islamic scripture. Rather, it is the Qur'ān's underlying power to carry conviction in Arabic discourse generally that seems to dictate the choice of words. One finds this usage not infrequently in theological essays that seem to be more expository in character, rather than primarily apologetical or polemical. At other times, mainly in popular tracts intended for use in arguments about religion, the quotations and allusions are part of the rhetoric, even part of the argument, as the Christian writer exploits the text of the Qur'ān to make his point. Beyond the words and phrases, one can see that in a larger way the Qur'ān also framed the discussion of religious questions in its own distinctive style in early Islamic times,

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46) This work is often attributed to John of Damascus. See SAHAS, *John of Damascus on Islam*, pp. 99-102. More recently scholars are prepared to see it as comprising sayings of Theodore Abū Qurrah as edited by John the Deacon. See Reinhold GLEI & Adel Theodor KHOURY, *Johannes Damaskenos und Theodor Abū Qurra; Schriften zum Islam* (Echter, Würzburg, 1995) 59-62. See also Sidney H. GRIFFITH, «Free Will in Christian Kalām: the Doctrine of Theodore Abū Qurrah», in *ParOr* 14 (1987) 82-91.

47) PG, vol. XCVI, col. 1344C.

even in texts in which Christians are engaged in discussions among themselves.

That the Qur'ān set the parameters in the Arabic-speaking world for the discussion of important religious doctrines, even Christian ones, can be seen in the structures of the Christian *kalām*. For example, the doctrine of the Incarnation is often put forward in the framework of a Qur'ānic prophetology, while the doctrine of the Trinity is inevitably discussed in terms of the *ṣifāt Allāh*, the beautiful names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*) of God as one finds them in the Qur'ān<sup>48</sup>. Similarly, the collection of testimonies from the scriptures to the veracity of Christian teachings and interpretations, gathered from Torah, Prophets, Psalms and Gospel, the scriptures as they are mentioned in the Qur'ān, assumed a major importance in Arab Christian texts<sup>49</sup>. It is not that Arab Christians did not draw on their earlier traditions in Greek, Syriac, and Coptic to support their creed in the face of new challenges. In fact, many of their difficulties stemmed precisely from their efforts to translate the terms of the traditional doctrinal formulae into Arabic in such a way that the connotations of the Arabic words would not belie their intentions. But overall there swayed the ever-present need to present their ideas within the confines of what we might call the hermeneutical circle of the Qur'ān. In a very real way it determined the possibilities of religious discourse in Arabic in the world of Islam.

In theological essays Arab Christian writers not infrequently quoted the Qur'ān in passing, often without acknowledgement. Examples of this usage are numerous. Suffice it for the present, illustrative purpose simply to cite a few of them from the works of Theodore Abū Qurrah. In his tract on human freedom he at one point makes the remark, «Far be it from God to impose a task on a soul, except to its capacity»<sup>50</sup>. The sentence unobtrusively includes a phrase which appears five times in the Qur'ān<sup>51</sup>, with only slight variations. Similarly, in his tract on the veneration of the holy icons, Abū Qurrah

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48) For a discussion of these matters in a particular work see Sidney H. GRIFFITH, «Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām: Theodore Abū Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion», in SAMIR & NIELSEN, *Christian Arabic Apologetics*, pp. 1-43.

49) This is a woefully understudied part of early Christian Arabic literature. For the broader context see Hava LAZARUS-YAFEH, *Intertwined Worlds; Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992).

50) Constantin BACHA, *Les œuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara, évêque d'Haran* (Beyrouth, 1904) 10.

51) See *al-Baqarah*, II:233, 286; *al-An'ām*, VI:152; *al-A'raf*, VII:42; *al-Mu'minūn*, XXIII:62.

quotes or alludes to passages from the Qur'ān a number of times. One of his first arguments against those Christians who allow themselves to be talked out of their habit of venerating icons because it is an ignominy in the eyes of 'outsiders' is to point out that these same 'outsiders' have in their own scriptures statements which seem equally ridiculous to the worldly minded. In this vein, he makes the following statement which incorporates a quotation from the Qur'ān: «For who of those whose minds are too haughty for faith would not laugh to hear that God created things from nothing, and that when He wanted to make something, *innamā yaqūlu lahu kun fayakūnu*»<sup>52</sup>. One easily recognizes here a common phrase in the Qur'ān, as we see it, for example, in *al-Baqarah*, II:117. In another place in the same work Abū Qurrah writes that if the adversaries say that they do not accept what the Christians believe about Christ because it is an abomination, one should remind them that they themselves say that «God sits on the throne, and that God has hands and a face, and other such things»<sup>53</sup>. Clearly this remark refers to such passages in the Qur'ān as *Yūnus*, X:3; *Āl Imrān*, III:73, and *ar-Rūm*, XXX:38.

Abū Qurrah's next citation from the Qur'ān in the tract on the veneration of the icons comes in a chapter in which he is arguing that in spite of what one might think on first reading certain biblical passages, it is not God's will that the act of prostration (*as-suġūd*) be made exclusively to himself. Moreover, there are others than the Jews, Abū Qurrah points out, who say:

It is not permitted that prostration be made to anything other than to God, and they mock the Christians for their prostrating to the icons and to people. They maintain that the act of prostration is an act of worship, all the while themselves recalling that «God commanded the angels to prostrate themselves to Adam, and they prostrated themselves, except Iblis refused, and came to be among the *kāfirīn*. If the prostration was an act of worship, then inevitably, according to what you say, God commanded the angels to worship Adam. Far be it from God to do this»<sup>54</sup>.

One easily recognizes the Iblis passage from *al-Baqarah*, II:34 in this quotation, and Abū Qurrah immediately follows it up with another quotation from the Qur'ān. He argues that Muslims should not mock the Christians for making an act of prostration before one of their bishops, since the Muslim

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52) DICK, *Traité*, p. 100.

53) DICK, *Traité*, p. 106.

54) DICK, *Traité*, p. 131.

himself should recall that Jacob and his sons «bowed down to Joseph as ones making prostration (*suğğadan*)»<sup>55</sup>. With the exception of Joseph's name, Abū Qurrah has here quoted literally from *Yūsuf*, XII:100. His purpose is to argue that the act of prostration may be a gesture of honor and not exclusively one of adoration.

Enough has been said to make the point. Similar passages could easily be quoted from other Arab Christian writers. But the point would always be the same; they frequently wove words and phrases from the Qur'ān, without attribution, into their own discourse. The purpose must have been to purchase a greater verisimilitude for their arguments in a milieu in which the Qur'ān was a potent determiner of religious thought and language. Sometimes writers would borrow the diction of the Qur'ān, the more strikingly to highlight a Christian doctrine, or a situation within the Christian community. For example, the author of the still unpublished *Summary of the Ways of Faith in the Trinity of the Unity of God, and in the Incarnation of God the Word from the Pure Virgin Mary*, or the *Summa Theologiae Arabica*<sup>56</sup>, as the present writer likes to call it for short, throughout his work calls Christ, *rabb al-ālamīn*<sup>57</sup>, borrowing the Qur'ān's common title for God (e.g., in *al-Fātiḥah*, I:2 *et passim*) in order the more forcefully in the world of Islam to state his own faith in Christ's divinity. The same writer also uses the Qur'ān's terminology to refer to those in his own community whom he suspects of too much accommodation with Islam. He calls them 'hypocrites' (*munāfiqīn*) and 'losers' (*ḥāsirīn*), borrowing two common adjectives from the Qur'ān's vocabulary of disdain for Muḥammad's uncertain allies in Medina. Then, in an obvious allusion to *Āl Imrān*, III:67, he says of such people, «They are neither Christians, nor are they *ḥunafā'*, Muslims, but in betwixt and between they are waverers (*muḍabḍabīn*)»<sup>58</sup>.

While it is not at all uncommon thus to find such quotations from the Qur'ān, and echoes of its customary phraseology, in the more scholarly texts

55) DICK, *Traité*, p. 131.

56) The present writer is now finishing the edition and English translation of this work. For orientation see Kh. SAMIR, «La somme des aspects de la foi, œuvre d'Abū Qurrah?» and S. H. GRIFFITH, «A Ninth Century *Summa Theologiae Arabica*», in SAMIR, *Actes II* (1986) 93-121; 123-141.

57) See, e.g., *British Library Oriental MS 4950*, f. 7<sup>r</sup> and *passim*.

58) *British Library Oriental MS 4950*, f. 7<sup>v</sup>. The last term in the quotation is one used by Muḥammad in a tradition recorded by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal about a Muslim celibate, who, being neither a monk, nor a Christian, nor married, was advised by the Prophet, «You should marry, lest you come to be among the waverers». Aḥmad ibn ḤANBAL, in *Musnad* (6 vols.: Beirut, 1389/1969), vol. V, pp. 163-164.

of Arab Christian writers of theology in the early Islamic period, they in no way dominate the discourse, appearing only here and there, as the authors' purposes require them.

Some major theological writers, especially from later times, explicitly included the discussion and refutation of passages from the Qur'ān in their apologetical works. One thinks in this connection the most immediately of the author of the *Kitāb al-Mağdal*, a comprehensive defense of Christian doctrines and practices produced in the 'Nestorian' community in the twelfth century<sup>59</sup>. The author includes testimonies from the Qur'ān in reference to Christ, and in behalf of the faith of Christians<sup>60</sup>. Also in the twelfth century the 'Jacobite' writer Dionysius bar Ṣalībī (d. 1171), bishop of Amida, composed a three-part tract against the Muslims in Syriac<sup>61</sup>. He devoted the third section of it to a somewhat detailed discussion of a number of verses and phrases from the Qur'ān<sup>62</sup>. And, of course, Paul of Antioch, in his *Letter to Some Friends in Sidon* used numerous quotations from the Qur'ān in an effort to prove to Muslims from their own scripture the veracity of Christian doctrines and the religious respectability of Christians<sup>63</sup>.

Unlike the case in the more scholarly theological tracts in the earlier period, in popular works of apologetics and polemics from the same time-frame, the Qur'ān's words and phrases abound. In at least one instance they determine the whole structure of the work. One thinks in particular of the popular dispute texts, which have survived in so many manuscript copies in all of the indigenous Christian denominations of the world of Islam. The most popular works of this sort, to judge by the number of manuscript copies in which they have survived, were: the account of the dialogue of the monk, Abraham of Tiberias with the emir 'Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Hāšimī<sup>64</sup>; the report of the debate between Theodore Abū Qurrah and Muslim scholars in the *mağlis* of the caliph al-Ma'mūn<sup>65</sup>; the *Kitāb al-mağālis* of Elias bar Šināyā of Nisibis<sup>66</sup>; and the account of the debate between the monk George as-

59) See LANDRON, *Chrétien*, pp. 99-108.

60) See LANDRON, *Chrétien*, pp. 220-221.

61) See Sidney H. GRIFFITH, «Dionysius bar Ṣalībī on the Muslims», in H. J. W. DRIJVERS *et al.* (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, OCA 229 (1987) 353-365.

62) See the text, English translation, and discussion in A. MINGANA, «An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Qur'ān Exhibiting New Verses and Variants», in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9 (1925) 188-235.

63) See n. 4 above.

64) See MARCUZZO, *Le Dialogue*.

65) This still unpublished work is discussed in some detail below.

66) See Emmanuel-Karim DELLY, *La théologie d'Élie bar-Šenaya; étude et traduction*

Simʿānī and the Muslim scholars of Aleppo<sup>67</sup>. All of these works have a common literary genre, which the present writer calls ‘the Monk in the Emir’s *Mağlis*’, to highlight the setting in which their authors have put them<sup>68</sup>. They take the popular disputes about religion, at least in a literary form, right into the public space of Islam. And the text of the Qurʾān is the preferred coinage of the arguments. In this respect these texts very much resemble the style of argument one finds in the other popular genre of literary apologetics/polemics in the early Islamic period, the epistolary exchange, represented by the al-Hāšimī/al-Kindī correspondence, the exchange of letters between the caliph ʿUmar II and the Byzantine emperor Leo III<sup>69</sup>, and the correspondence between Ibn al-Munağğim, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, and Qusṭā ibn Lūqā<sup>70</sup>, just to name the most popular works of this genre. The Christian authors of these texts use passages from the Qurʾān both to prove that Christianity is the true religion, to argue that its doctrines are true, and to maintain that Islam cannot then claim that title for itself.

The monk George, in his discussions with the Muslim scholars of Aleppo, gives a succinct statement of the governing claim of the popular

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*de ses entretiens* (Studia Urbaniana; apud Pontificiam Universitatem Urbanianam de Propaganda Fide, Rome, 1957). For the Arabic text see Louis CHEIKHO, «*Mağālis Ilīyā Muṭrān Nusaybīn*», in *Al-Machriq* 20 (1922) 33-44, 112-117, 117-122, 267-270, 270-272, 366-377, 425-434. On this important writer see now the collection of studies by Samir Khalil SAMIR, *Foi et culture en Irak au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle; Élie de Nisibe et l’Islam* (Variorum, Aldershot, Hampshire, 1996).

67) See Paul CARALI, *Le christianisme et l’Islam; controverse attribuée au moine Georges du couvent de st. Siméon (Séleucie) soutenue devant le prince el-Mouchammar fils de Saladin en 1207* (Imprimerie Al-Alam, Beit Chebab, Liban, 1933). An English translation of this controversy is available in Alex. NICOLL, «Account of a Disputation between a Christian Monk and Three Learned Mohammedans on the Subject of Religion», in *The Edinburgh Annual Register for 1816* (vol. IX, parts I. and II.; Archibald Constable & Co., Edinburgh, 1820), pp. CCCCX-CCCCXLII.

68) See Sidney H. GRIFFITH, «The Monk in the Emir’s *Majlis*: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period», in Hava LAZARUS-YAFEH *et al.* (eds.), *The Majlis; Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* (Studies in Arabic Language and Literature, 4; Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1998).

69) See Arthur JEFFERY, «Ghevond’s Text of the Correspondence between ʿUmar II and Leo III», in *Harvard Theological Review* 37 (1944) 269-332; D. CARDAILLAC, «La polémique anti-chrétienne du manuscrit *aljamiado no. 4944* de la bibliothèque nationale de Madrid» (2 vols.; Ph. D. dissertation, Université de Montpellier, 1972); J.-M. GAUDEUL, «The Correspondence between Leo and ʿUmar; ʿUmar’s Letter Re-Discovered?», in *Islamochristiana* 10 (1984) 109-157. See also NEWMAN, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, pp. 47-132.

70) See Khalil SAMIR & Paul NwYIA, «Une correspondance islamo-chrétienne entre Ibn al-Munağğim, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq et Qusṭā ibn Lūqā», in F. GRAFFIN (ed.), *PO* 40, fasc. 4, no. 185 (1981) 522-723.

polemicists about the Qur'ān. Speaking of Jesus' apostles, he says,

Your prophet, Muḥammad, testifies in their behalf, and he verifies their word and their Gospel by his saying in the Qur'ān, «We have sent down the Qur'ān to attest to the truth of what was before it of the Torah and the Gospel (see *Āl Imrān*, III:3). Since your prophet and your scripture have testified to the truth of the Gospel, you too are bound to testify to its truth. If you give it the lie, you will also have given the lie to your prophet and your scripture»<sup>71</sup>.

Operating on the basis of the principle enunciated here, the popular writers range widely over the topics at issue between Muslims and Christians, and they quote frequently from the Qur'ān. Perhaps the easiest way to get a sense of their style is to review one of their works in particular. Since all of the texts mentioned above, save one, are published, and come with translations into modern languages, it may be most useful to review the only unpublished text, that of the account of Abū Qurrah's debate in the *maġlis* of al-Ma'mūn. As we will see, the Qur'ān is at the center of the argument.

### C. ABŪ QURRAH IN THE MAĠLIS OF AL-MA'MŪN

Persistently from the ninth century onward there are reports in the historical record which tell of an occasion on which Theodore Abū Qurrah is alleged to have engaged in a debate about which is the true religion, Islam or Christianity, with a number of Muslim *mutakallimīn* in the *maġlis* of the caliph al-Ma'mūn. What is more, the reports speak of the currency of a book which recounts the course of the debate.

The earliest and most important report of Abū Qurrah's debate is included in the thirteenth century Syriac chronicle now usually called *Ad Annum 1234 Pertinens*. The compiler of this chronicle relied for his history of the early Abbasid period on the now lost chronicle of Dionysius of Tell Mahrē, the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch from 818 to 845, and sometime travelling companion of the caliph al-Ma'mūn. According to the report, in the year 829, while on his way to encounter the Byzantines in battle in Asia Minor:

Ma'mūn arrived in Ḥarrān. Theodore, bishop of Ḥarrān, called Abū Qurrah, had a conversation with Ma'mūn. There was a long debate (*drašā*) between them on the subject of the faith of the Christians. This debate, for anyone who wants to read it, is written in a special book<sup>72</sup>.

71) NICOLL, «Account of a Disputation», p. CCCCX; [CARALI], *Controverse religieuse*, pp. 20-21.

72) I.-B. CHABOT, *Anonymi Auctoris Chronicon ad Annum Christi 1234 Pertinens* (CSCO, vol. XV; Paris, 1916) 23.

Indeed such a book has survived, in two recensions, 'Melkite' and 'Jacobite' respectively, in twenty-six manuscripts, ranging in date from the early fourteenth century to the nineteenth century<sup>73</sup>. The number of manuscripts testifies to the work's popularity, as does the fact that it circulated among both 'Melkites' and 'Jacobites'.

While scholars have long known of this text, no edition or translation of it into a western language has yet been published<sup>74</sup>. Nor have the contents of the debate been adequately reported<sup>75</sup>. Nevertheless, there has been a considerable divergence of opinion about its authenticity. Graf unhesitatingly listed it among the «*unechte Schriften*» attributed to Theodore Abū Qurrah, maintaining that it is a composition of the later middle ages, while Nasrallah, citing the notice from the *Chronicon ad Annum 1234 Pertinens*, which was unknown to Graf, wrote that «this passage ... permits us to restore to Abū Qurrah a work which most authors have denied to him in our day»<sup>76</sup>.

Here we will review the contents of the text as it appears in one of the longer renditions of the 'Melkite' recension, in *Paris Arabic MSS 70 & 71*, manuscripts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively<sup>77</sup>. One is aware that these manuscripts contain a fuller form of the text, suggesting that it was enhanced as it was transmitted by later copyists, who added material not in the earliest, nor in all of the surviving manuscripts. But the heart of the original composition is preserved here, and it is immediately clear, to even the hastiest reader, that the author means to portray Abū Qurrah defending the veracity of the Christian faith on the basis of texts quoted from the Qur'ān. Some sixty-six passages from the Islamic scripture are quoted or alluded to throughout the work, several of them a number of times.

It is clear from the outset that the work is not as such by Theodore Abū Qurrah. Rather, the author presents himself as giving an account of the responses the famous bishop of Ḥarrān made to the questions put to him on the occasion when the caliph summoned him to his *mağlis*. The account begins as follows:

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73) See GRAF, *GCAL* II (1947) 21-23; NASRALLAH, *HMLEM* II, 2 (1988) 124-125.

74) According to a report in the *Bulletin d'Arabe Chrétien* 6 (1990) 8, Father Ignace Dick has been at work on a critical edition of the text.

75) A brief summary appeared in Alfred GUILLAUME, «A Debate between Christian and Muslim Doctors», in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Centenary Supplement, (October, 1924) 233-244. See the same article re-published, with slight changes, under the title, «Theodore Abū Qurra as Apologist», in *The Moslem World* 15 (1925) 42-51.

76) NASRALLAH, *HMLEM* II 2 (1988) 124.

77) See TROUPEAU, *CMAC* I (1972) 50-51.

In the time of the Lord al-Ma'mūn, the Commander of the Faithful, he fetched the father, Bishop Abū Qurrah, into his *maġlis* and he seated him with honor in his presence. He said to him, «Abū Qurrah, I want to ask you about something»<sup>78</sup>.

The caliph begins immediately to interrogate the bishop on questions of religion. Subsequently, others take up the questioning. By the end, a number of Muslim interlocutors are named, in addition to the caliph, most of them identified only very generally. But there are several proper names. They are, in the order of their appearance: Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Hāšimī; Hārūn ibn Hāšim al-Ḥarrāʿī; Sullām ibn Muʿāwiyah al-Hamdānī, who is sometimes addressed as Abū l-ʿAbbās; Ṣaġaṣaġah ibn Ḥālīd al-Bašrī, of whom the text says that «he had applied himself to the books (*kutub*, 'scriptures?') and studied them, and he has taken his stand on the merits of Islam. He has shown the weakness of the opinion of the Christians in their religion»<sup>79</sup>; Abū l-Ḥusayn, from Damascus, ʿAlī ibn al-Walīd, from Syria; al-Ḥusayn ibn Lawī, the Persian, whose name suggests a Jewish origin<sup>80</sup>; and Ismāʿīl al-Kūfī. In addition to these *personae*, the text not infrequently refers to interlocutors vaguely as al-Hāšimī, al-Bašrī, al-Kūfī, and even 'a man of Qurayš'. While none of these names can be shown to designate any known associates of the caliph, and therefore one is inclined to think of them as fictional names, all suitably Islamic and suggestive of backgrounds which might evoke the authority of a *mutakallim* or an Arab aristocrat, the possibility cannot be ruled out that some of the names have been garbled over the centuries of their transmission at the hands of Christian scribes to whom they would perhaps have been unknown. There does not seem to be any plan behind their appearance in the debate with Abū Qurrah; they come forward one after the other to pose questions, and to go down before the bishop's invincible reasoning, as often as not based on interpretations of passages from the Qurʾān.

The debate begins with an exchange between Abū Qurrah and the caliph himself. While the first questions may seem frivolous to the modern reader, it soon emerges that they set a very serious agenda. Al-Ma'mūn asks the bishop, «Do you not know, O Abū Qurrah, that the foreskin is something unclean?». Abū Qurrah adroitly poses a counter-question about Adam, «Did God, mighty and exalted be He, fashion something unclean with his right hand and settle him in his garden?». When the caliph agrees that to say so

78) *Paris Arabic MS 71*, f. 12ʷ.

79) *Paris Arabic MS 71*, f. 21ʷ.

80) This was a point made by GUILLAUME, «Theodore Abū Qurra as Apologist», p. 49.

would be to speak disrespectfully of God, Abū Qurrah replies in behalf of the uncircumcised Christians that «We resemble our father Adam»<sup>81</sup>. This riposte elicits an admiring laugh from the caliph, who praises Abū Qurrah. But the subject then raises the whole issue of the purpose of the legal prescriptions of the Old Law, and why the Christians do not observe them. Abū Qurrah explains that God gave these laws and ordinances to people through Abraham and Moses, but that people did not respond to them. «So», Abū Qurrah says, «the Lord Christ made a new covenant for the nations, and a new, superseding commandment, not like the former commandment»<sup>82</sup>. When al-Ma'mūn wanted to know the difference between the new and the old observances, Abū Qurrah says,

When the Lord Christ came and the peoples put faith in him, he removed us from the shadow into the light. And in the place of the four legal practices (*šarā'i*) which Moses prescribed for them he appointed four new ones, they are: the Gospel in the place of the Torah; Sunday in substitution for the Sabbath; Baptism in substitution for circumcision; and Eucharistic liturgies in substitution for sacrifices<sup>83</sup>.

Abū Qurrah further explained the reason why God discarded the old covenant with the Israelites and instituted the new one with the Christians. Speaking of the devotion of the Christians, in contrast to the record of disobedience among the Jews, Abū Qurrah claimed:

We kept his commandments in all our hearts and we had no doubt about him, that he is the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the son of God, the Word of God, and his Spirit, and his Wisdom, there being no divisions between the two of them<sup>84</sup>.

With this allegation, Abū Qurrah introduces what will be the central point of the whole debate with the Muslim *mutakallimīn*, namely the confession that the 'son of God', a title he accords to Jesus the Messiah, is «the Word of God, and his Spirit», as the Qur'ān itself testifies (*an-Nisā'*, IV:171), and that there are no 'divisions' between God, his Word, and his Spirit. It is, of course, one of the main points of contention between Muslims and Christians, and the reporter of Abū Qurrah's debate in the caliph's *mağlis* says that it was while the bishop and al-Ma'mūn were arguing about it that the first Muslim *mutakallim* joined the discussion, citing passages

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81) *Paris Arabic MS 71*, ff. 148<sup>r</sup>-148<sup>v</sup>.

82) *Paris Arabic MS 70*, f. 150<sup>r</sup>.

83) *Paris Arabic MS 70*, f. 150<sup>v</sup>.

84) *Paris Arabic MS 70*, ff. 151<sup>rv</sup>; *MS 71*, f. 14<sup>r</sup>.

from the Qur'ān to the effect that the Messiah is but a 'servant' (*ʿabd*), a created human being like Adam<sup>85</sup>. The caliph then demanded that Abū Qurrah reply to this allegation. But the bishop demurred, voicing a concern about his safety should he publicly address such a topic. At this point al-Ma'mūn is made to issue the first of several declarations about the safe freedom of speech which disputants enjoy in his *maġlis*. He says,

This *maġlis* is fair; in it no one is going to be assailed. Speak your disclaimer; answer without fear. Here there is «nothing but the fairest». (*al-Ankabūt*, XXIX:46). No one will threaten you with anything, nor should you be distressed personally in regard to anyone. This is the day on which the truth is to be made evident. With whomever there is any knowledge for the verification of his religion, let him speak<sup>86</sup>.

Some five times throughout the debate, al-Ma'mūn is made to quote the phrase from the Qur'ān to the effect that in his *maġlis* there is «nothing but the fairest». While this phrase occurs some half dozen times, in several forms, in the Qur'ān, it seems most likely that the author of the account of Abū Qurrah's debate in al-Ma'mūn's *maġlis* had the passage in *al-Ankabūt*, XXIX:46 in mind. Here it has particular reference to debate with 'People of the Book'. The text says: «Do not debate with the People of the Book except with what is fairest»<sup>87</sup>.

It is noticeable to even the casual reader of the text that the author intended to make a point of al-Ma'mūn's fairness. In the course of the debate the caliph is found reproving the Muslim disputants who complain about Abū Qurrah, but who fail to answer his arguments. The author says:

Al-Ma'mūn was amazed at the exhibition of Abū Qurrah's erudition toward all the notables of the Qurayš because they had disapproved of his affection for him, and of his sitting with him, and of having him near him at every moment<sup>88</sup>.

To one of the Muslims who had reviled Abū Qurrah, the caliph is reported to have said: «Be quiet, God shame you. You are talking nonsense, stupidity and ignorance»<sup>89</sup>. Then, to Abū Qurrah himself he says, «In truth you are the successful one, and the one to be proud of your clear speech because

85) *Āl ʿImrān*, III:59; *an-Nisāʾ*, IV:171; *as-Saġdah*, XXXII:9.

86) *Paris Arabic MS 70*, f. 152<sup>v</sup>.

87) *An-Naḥl*, XVI:125 puts the same advice positively: «Debate them with what is fairest».

88) *Paris Arabic 70*, ff. 163<sup>v</sup>.

89) *Paris Arabic 70*, f. 164<sup>v</sup>.

of your victory. It is embarrassing for the *mağlis* companions of al-Ma'mūn»<sup>90</sup>.

At the beginning of a new session with Abū Qurrah, the caliph is again made to assure him of the fairness of his *mağlis*. He says,

Give us what you have and do not be afraid of anything disagreeable. There is no one here who will address you «except with what is fairest» (*al-ʿAnkabūt*, XXIX:46). I am affirming it to you, whatever you put forward. This is a just *mağlis*; in it, once invited, no one will assail anyone else. Whoever is the winner by rights, his is the victory<sup>91</sup>.

At one juncture in the course of the exchanges, when Abū Qurrah made a particularly telling point, the text says, «al-Ma'mūn smiled and he was very much delighted. Abū Qurrah was glad of his delight, and his heart was strengthened»<sup>92</sup>. On another occasion when Abū Qurrah made a telling point against the caliph himself and the Muslims grew angry at his presumed insolence, al-Ma'mūn is made to say, «Abū Qurrah does not act in a hostile way toward us, so let no one speak to him 'except with what is fairest'. (*al-ʿAnkabūt*, XXIX:46) He speaks only with sound, proven speech»<sup>93</sup>. At another juncture the caliph exclaims, «By God, you are right O Abū Qurrah!»<sup>94</sup>. When the Muslim debaters gang up on the bishop, the caliph exhorts them, «Keep to one of you at a time in debating with Abū Qurrah»<sup>95</sup>. When none of the Muslims in the end can best Abū Qurrah in a fair debate, the author reports that «al-Ma'mūn was filled with joy and intense happiness. Then he said, 'Is there anyone remaining to dispute with Abū Qurrah?'»<sup>96</sup>.

At the end of the account of Abū Qurrah's debate in the caliph's *mağlis*, there is the following conclusion:

Al-Ma'mūn said: «By God, you have done well, O Abū Qurrah; you have shown up your opponents, and you have disclosed to us what had never occurred to our minds».

Then he said: «Is there anyone left to dispute with Abū Qurrah?».

They said: «We have no aptitude against him. May it please our master, the Commander of the Faithful, to excuse us from disputing with him. He would do too well».

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90) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 165<sup>f</sup>.

91) *Paris Arabic* 70, 166<sup>f</sup>.

92) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 170<sup>v</sup>.

93) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 179<sup>v</sup>.

94) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 189<sup>v</sup>.

95) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 192<sup>f</sup>.

96) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 212<sup>f</sup>.

Then they left, ashamed, disgraced.

Al-Ma'mūn said: «Would that I had not seen this day, and I would not behold the discomfiture of the Muslims and the insignificance of their arguments in behalf of their religion».

Then he gave orders for a robe of honor and for annual payments for Abū Qurrah, and he made him a *maġlis* companion of his<sup>97</sup>.

As for the contents of the debate, Abū Qurrah is pictured as building his arguments on texts quoted from the Qur'ān. In the first place is the passage from *an-Nisā'*, IV:171, which appears at least seven times in the text. Abū Qurrah accords it so much importance because on the face of it the verse affirms that in some true sense Christ is both Word and Spirit from God.

In the debate the argument goes as follows. Abū Qurrah begins by saying to his interlocutor, «Tell me about the Messiah, is he created of something or not?». The «Hašemite» answers, «He is the Word of God and his Spirit». Abū Qurrah then asks: «The Word of God and his Spirit, are they delimited and described?». His interlocutor answers: «No». So Abū Qurrah asks again: «Are they comprehensible?». The Muslim says: «No». Abū Qurrah then poses the difficult question: «So tell me, is the Word of God Creator or created?». The text says: «The Hashemite was troubled at once and became quiet. He could not say anything except 'Creator'»<sup>98</sup>.

The reporter of the debate mentions that al-Ma'mūn was astonished at this exchange. And that very astonishment leads Abū Qurrah to a long disquisition on the situation of the Christians *vis-à-vis* the Muslims in the contemporary society, and on the place of the Qur'ān in his own argument. Addressing himself to his Muslim interlocutor he says:

Do not think, O 'Abd Allāh, that we do not have any argument with which to argue in behalf of the confirmation of our religion. Only your dominion over us has imposed this, then your disdain for us and your defamation of us, to the point that every one of you thinks that we do not have any religion (*dīm*), nor any argument to articulate in our own behalf...

Now, my lord, the 'Commander of the Faithful' has given me permission to speak, and I have no way out from giving an answer in behalf of my religion and of making the argument clear by any means to which I might find the way. And if you would reproach me for wronging you, let nothing be heard from you, once our master, the Caliph, has given permission. Hear what your own scripture says and do not show your strength against me. Understand the truth when it is made plain to you from your own scripture and do not address me

97) *Paris Arabic* 70, ff. 214<sup>rv</sup>.

98) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 153<sup>v</sup>.

«except with what is fairest» (*al-ʿAnkabūt*, XXIX:46)<sup>99</sup>.

Having now made his own the phrase from the Qurʾān which the caliph had initially quoted to characterize the open atmosphere of his *maǧlis*, Abū Qurrah proceeds to quote the rest of the verse from which the phrase is taken. In his words, it says: «We believe in what was sent down to us and to you. Your God and our God is one» (*al-ʿAnkabūt*, XXIX:46). Therefore, says Abū Qurrah to his Muslim interlocutor, «It is not for you to deny your prophet’s ennoblement of our religion»<sup>100</sup>. And he goes on from this point to say that when the Muslims say the words of *al-Fātiḥah*, praying that God guide them to «the straight path, the path of those towards whom He has been gracious without being incensed against them, they not going in error» (vss. 6 & 7) the fact is that «those going astray are the ones who are asking God to guide them to ‘the straight path’. The ones ‘toward whom He has been gracious’ are the Christians, who believe in Him and in his Messiah»<sup>101</sup>. So, Abū Qurrah concludes:

Your own scripture testifies in our behalf that we were of the scripture people before you, believers in the Gospel and in the One who sent it down to us. You yourself acknowledge that our Lord, Jesus, the Messiah, is in heaven; to him belongs the superiority over all the peoples, and all the prophets, and over everyone on the earth. Whoever follows him, to him belongs the superiority over all the religions. We are the Believers and you are the Muslims<sup>102</sup>.

Immediately taking issue with Abū Qurrah’s use of the Qurʾān’s own distinction between the ‘Believers’ and the ‘Muslims’, the Muslim interlocutor then cites another passage from the Qurʾān: «Whoever follows a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him; in the hereafter he will be among the losers» (*Āl ʿImrān*, III:85) Abū Qurrah responds with the following allegation:

Your own scripture abrogates this saying with its saying, ‘God has made submit what is in the heavens and on the earth willy nilly’ (*Āl ʿImrān*, III:83). So there have entered into Islam all men, predators, wild animals, birds and other such things. And if it is as it says, then creatures altogether have become Muslims, whether they have willed it or refused it. And your status is only the status of one of them»<sup>103</sup>.

Abū Qurrah next cites two passages in the Qurʾān which tie the distinc-

99) *Paris Arabic* 70, ff. 154<sup>r</sup>.

100) *Paris Arabic* 70, ff. 154<sup>v</sup>-155<sup>r</sup>.

101) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 155<sup>v</sup>.

102) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 156<sup>r</sup>.

103) *Paris Arabic* 70, ff. 156<sup>v</sup>-157<sup>r</sup>.

tion between *imān* and *islām* to a certain truculence on the part of the Arabs in religious matters (*al-Ḥuḡūrāt*, XLIX:14 and *al-Baqarah*, II:6-7). And he then comes to his conclusion with the admonition, «So, do not be too proud O Muslim, to believe in the Word of God and his Spirit (*an-Nisā'*, IV:171), the Creator of everything»<sup>104</sup>. When the Muslim gets angry at this turn in the argument, Abū Qurrah says:

Would your prophet, on God's authority, testify to something other than what He said? Far be it from him! He is the one who declared you devoid of faith. If you deny it, then you know best. As for me, I will put credence in what your scripture sets forth and what your prophet has uttered<sup>105</sup>.

These few quotations give a fair impression of how the character of Abū Qurrah is made to argue in the debate in the caliph's *maġlis*. He can be quite sharp in his polemical indictments. For example, to al-Ma'mūn's statement that the enjoyment of the *ḥūrīs* of Paradise (*ad-Duḥḥān*, XLIV:54; *ar-Raḥmān*, LV:56) is intended for all the Muslims, Abū Qurrah responds,

If the matter is as you have recounted it, who will be the spouses of your Muslim women in the hereafter, when you will have abandoned them and will have chosen the *houris* (*ḥūr 'īn*, *ad-Duḥḥān*, XLIV:54) over them? Then they will be in grief and sorrow, but you will be in joy and happiness with the *ḥūrīs*. If God provides wives for the men, but you do not provide husbands for the women, it is wrong<sup>106</sup>.

For the rest, the major part of the debate is concerned with the proper thing to believe about the Word and the Spirit of God. In the course of it, Abū Qurrah manages to draw support for his Christian point of view from the construction he puts on those passages from the Qur'ān which concern the faith of the Christians. And he rebuts the negative image of the Christians which he says is current among Muslims. For example, at one point in the course of the debate Abū Qurrah says to his Muslim interlocutor:

You, in your mockery against us, and your anger toward us, call us 'unbelievers' (*kāfirīn*). Your scripture says, «Whoever associates aught with God has erred a manifest error» (*an-Nisā'*, IV:116). And again it says, «You will surely find the Christians doing well with what was sent down to them from the Lord»<sup>107</sup>. So how can you say that we are 'Associators' (*mušrikīn*), while your prophet testifies in our behalf in terms of truth and judgment, and

104) *Paris Arabic* 70, f. 158<sup>f</sup>.

105) *Paris Arabic* 70, ff. 158<sup>rv</sup>.

106) *Paris Arabic* 70, ff. 159<sup>rv</sup>.

107) This statement is not as such to be found in the Qur'ān. The author seems to have put it together from elements in *al-Mā'idah*, V:82&68.

we are older than you are<sup>108</sup>.

In the debate, Abū Qurrah convicts the Muslim interlocutors of «belying the Psalms, the Gospel, and the Qur'ān. You deny God's scriptures because of the hardness of your heart»<sup>109</sup>. Whereas, he contends, «Your own scripture has removed all the Christians from polytheism and has acquitted them of disbelief (*kufṛ*) by its mention of them in terms of favor and honor»<sup>110</sup>. This line of argument seems to be at the heart of the debate text. Notice that in the quotation, Abū Qurrah has also included the Qur'ān along with the Psalms and the Gospel as books he calls «God's scriptures».

Suffice it to say now, that the report of Theodore Abū Qurrah's debate with assorted Muslims in the presence of the caliph al-Ma'mūn is an important, and once very popular, example of the apologetical/polemical genre, 'the monk in the emir's *maḡlis*'. It is also one of the best examples of the apologetic use of the Qur'ān among the Arab Christian texts of the early Islamic period.

#### CONCLUSION

This quick sketch has highlighted the use of the Qur'ān by Arab Christian apologists and polemicists in the early Islamic period. We have seen how writers have both polemicized against the Islamic scripture, and have used it, sometimes alongside of the Christian Bible, to testify to the truth of Christian doctrines. Clearly they were very familiar with its text, one of the determinants of literary culture in the world of Islam. But the sketch of how the early Arabophone apologists and theologians used the Qur'ān does not begin to exploit the evidence of these sources for a number of other questions. For example, the text of the Islamic scripture as these Christian writers quoted it, especially in the early period, often differs from the *textus receptus* considerably. Christian writers even cited the Qur'ān for words and phrases which are certainly not in it in the form in which we now have it. Are these variants of any value for tracing the history of the text of the Qur'ān? Or are they simply the product of quotation from memory, or from having heard the text only orally proclaimed? Arab Christian writers of the early Islamic period sometimes spoke of the Qur'ān and its *sūrahs* in such a way as to give one the impression that its structure and format were different, as

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108) *Paris Arabic 70*, f. 162<sup>r</sup>.

109) *Paris Arabic 70*, f. 173<sup>r</sup>.

110) *Paris Arabic 70*, ff. 170<sup>v</sup>.

they knew it, from the one we have in our hands today. Is there some evidence preserved here of the process of the early collection of the Qur'ān, and of no longer extant forms of it before the appearance of the canonical text? No one has seriously raised any of these questions since Alphonse Mingana posed them in 1925<sup>111</sup>. Mingana was arguing for the existence of a Syriac translation of the Qur'ān from a form of the Arabic text which pre-dated the time of the standardization of the Islamic scripture, which he took to have happened in the reign of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik. While he certainly did not conclusively prove the existence of such a version, arguing as he did mostly from very late manuscripts, it is nevertheless true that most of his questions are still on the table. Arab Christian texts remain one of the least exploited sources for early Islamic history<sup>112</sup>. This very brief review of the Qur'ān as a topic in early Arab Christian apologetics calls attention to the need for a thorough study of the text of the Islamic scripture as it circulated in Arab Christian hands in early Islamic times.

Institute of Christian Oriental Research  
The Catholic University of America  
18 Mullen Library  
Washington, D.C. 20064, USA  
Fax: 1-202-319 55 79  
E-mail: griffith@cua.edu

Sidney H. GRIFFITH

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111) See MINGANA, «An Ancient Syriac Translation», esp. pp. 188-216.

112) But see now the important study of Robert HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam*.