

JOHN AND THE EMIR
A NEW INTRODUCTION, EDITION AND TRANSLATION*

On August 17, 874 a monk named Abraham completed a 99-page Syriac manuscript now housed in the British Library (*BL Add. 17,193*). Abraham titled his work “a volume of demonstrations, collections, and letters”¹ and included in it 125 short pieces ranging from biblical passages and excerpts from church fathers to lists of councils, caliphs, and calamities². Following a canon of Severus regarding baptism and preceding a list of eighth-century disasters, one finds in this volume three folios (73a-75b) which make up the sole witness to an ancient document that modern scholars have entitled *John and the Emir*.

This document purports to be a letter written by an unnamed companion of the seventh-century Miaphysite patriarch of Antioch, John Sedra (r. 631-648). It relates an alleged conversation between the patriarch and an unspecified Muslim leader. In order to reassure its readers of John’s safety, the letter describes the patriarch’s audience with the emir.

The majority of the text consists of a dialogue between John and the Muslim leader. The emir presents a series of brief questions and John gives more lengthy responses. They discuss the diversity of Christian beliefs, Christ’s divinity, who was controlling the world when Christ was in Mary’s womb, why the Hebrew prophets did not explicitly speak of Jesus, and inheritance law. The narrative interrupts this pattern of question and answer only once in order that the emir might summon a Jew to confirm John’s scriptural citation. After relating the dialogue, the narrator states that even the Chalcedonian Christians present prayed for John because they knew that the Miaphysite patriarch was representing all Christians before the emir. The work ends with a list of people whom the narrator wants the letter’s readers to support in prayer.

* Special thanks go to Mount Holyoke College and to the National Endowment for the Humanities which helped fund my research trips to the British Museum as well as to the National Humanities Center which provided me with the time and the resources to write about *John and the Emir*. I am also most grateful for the comments and suggestions made by an anonymous reviewer, Gabriel Aydin, Chip Coakley, Liz Penland, and especially Lucas Van Rompay.

¹ *BL Add. 17,193*, f. 1b.

² For a description of the manuscript’s contents, see W. WRIGHT, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired Since the Year 1838*, volume 2, London, 1871, p. 989-1002.

It has been almost a century since François Nau published an edition and French translation of *John and the Emir*.³ Given the work's importance for documenting early Christian views of Islam, surprisingly few scholars have written about this text. Most of the early scholarship on *John and the Emir* concentrated on identifying the emir. A consensus eventually emerged that the emir was 'Umayr ibn Sa'd al-Ansari the military governor of Homs from 641 to 644.⁴

Few other issues regarding *John and the Emir*, however, have been resolved so successfully. Particularly contentious are questions concerning what genre best categorizes the work, when was it originally written, and does it reflect an actual meeting that took place between a Christian patriarch and a Muslim emir. The answers to these three questions profoundly affect how one reads *John and the Emir* and are particularly appropriate to consider prior to looking at a new edition and translation of the text.⁵

Genre

One of the keys to interpreting *John and the Emir* is a proper understanding of its genre. The document claims to be a letter providing an accurate, eyewitness account of a discussion between an emir and a patriarch. But is this true? The answer to this question substantially affects all other issues regarding the work's composition. The earliest scholars

³ F. NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716*, in *Journal Asiatique*, 11/5 (1915), p. 248-264 (= NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*).

⁴ The most comprehensive overview of these questions and their commonly accepted resolution appears in K. SAMIR, *Qui est l'interlocuteur musulman du patriarche syrien Jean III (631-648)?* (= SAMIR, *Qui est l'interlocuteur?*), in H.J.W. DRUIVERS et al. (ed.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, Rome, 1987, p. 248-264.

⁵ There have been two prior translations of *John and the Emir* from the Syriac: Nau's French translation of the text (NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 257-264) and Saadi's English translation (A.M. SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh: A New Perspective on Nascent Islam*, in *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society*, 11 no. 1 [1997], p. 69-73 (= SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh [1997]*) reprinted as A.M. SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh: A New Perspective on Nascent Islam*, in *Karmo*, 1 no. 2 [1999], p. 48-54) (= SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh [1999]*). There are also two indirect translations: Newman published an English translation of Nau's French translation (N.A. NEWMAN, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.) Translation with Commentary*, Hatfield, 1993, p. 24-28) (= NEWMAN, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*) and Suermann a German translation of Nau's French translation (H. SUERMANN, *Orientalische Christen und der Islam: Christliche Texte aus der Zeit von 632-750*, in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 67 [1983], p. 122-125). All of these depend on Nau's edition of the text (NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 248-256).

who wrote about *John and the Emir* took the document's truth claims for granted.⁶ Several more recent articles have also suggested that the document is a relatively accurate portrayal of a discussion between a Christian patriarch and a Muslim official.⁷ Few warrants, however, have been presented in support of the document's self-description.⁸ The common assumption appears to be that since the document claims that it is a letter describing specific events, its depictions most likely are correct.⁹

⁶ E.g., NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 226-228; H. LAMMENS, *À propos d'un colloque entre le patriarche jacobite Jean Ier et 'Amr ibn al-'Asi*, in *Journal Asiatique*, 13 (1919), p. 97-98; SAMIR, *Qui est l'interlocuteur?*, p. 388.

⁷ E.g., SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh (1997)*, p. 68-84 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh (1999)*, p. 46-64 and NEWMAN, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, p. 7-8. Similarly, H. SUERMANN, *The Old Testament and the Jews in the Dialogue between the Jacobite Patriarch John I and 'Umayr ibn Sa'd al-Ansari*, in J.P. MONFERRER-SALA (ed.), *Eastern Crossroads: Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy*, Piscataway, NJ, 2007, p. 134 (= SUERMANN, *The Old Testament and the Jews*) writes: "I suppose that the content of the report is fairly rendering a conversation which had taken place in 644." Many arguments that Suermann makes in his article rely upon the belief that *John and the Emir* is an extremely precise depiction of a historical event. For example, Suermann argues that 'Umayr ibn Sa'd could not read Greek or Syriac, that certain Hagarenes present at the discussion could, that the emir never asked other Hagarenes for their theological opinion but rather summoned a Jew, and that the Christian author's knowledge of Muslim beliefs came only from the emir's own statements. All of these points require even the most minute details of *John and the Emir* to be accurate. See SUERMANN, *The Old Testament and the Jews*, p. 134.

⁸ An exception to this more general tendency appears in SUERMANN, *The Old Testament and the Jews*, p. 136. Suermann suggests that the episode in *John and the Emir* where a Jew claims not to know whether the Hebrew Scripture supports a trinitarian concept of God must have been an accurate depiction of actual events. His argument is that if a Christian fabricated this episode he would not have portrayed the Jew as ambivalent but either would have had the Jew say that the Christian was correct, thus validating Christian theology, or have had him say the Christian was wrong so that the author could present further arguments in favor of the trinity. Suermann's reasoning remains unpersuasive on at least two points. (1) The chance of a Jewish scholar actually stating in front of a Muslim official that he does not understand the Torah seems fairly remote. (2) The polemical intent of this passage is clear – Jews do not understand the Old Testament, only Christians do. This is a standard anti-Jewish argument that can be found in sources written as early as the second century (e.g., Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*). Another argument occasionally advanced for the work's accuracy is that several of the ecclesiastical figures named in *John and the Emir* are attested in other documents that discuss the mid-seventh century (e.g., SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh [1997]*, p. 78 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh [1999]*, p. 60). Unfortunately, there is no way to distinguish between a mid-seventh-century writer referring to people he witnessed attending an actual meeting and a later writer using well-known names to give his account the appearance of authenticity. G.J. REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam*, in *Oriens Christianus*, 77 (1993), p. 172, n. 44 raises a similar concern (= REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*).

⁹ A more tendentious assumption is the occasionally repeated statement that *John and the Emir* was written by John's own secretary. SAMIR, *Qui est l'interlocuteur?*, p. 388 asserts a connection between the "Severus," whose name appears at the end of *John and the Emir* as one of several delegates who accompany the patriarch, and a later Syriac text that speaks of John Sedra's secretary as "Severus." There is no indication that these two Severuses are the same individual and *John and the Emir* never makes this claim.

There are, however, very serious reasons for questioning this hypothesis. First, many Syriac writers used the framework of a letter not to accurately chronicle events but as the trappings of theological tractates designed to forward a specific theological agenda¹⁰. Particularly important is Sidney Griffith's observation that Eastern Christians often employed fictitious letters in their discussions of Islam¹¹. Examples include such well-known forgeries as epistles attributed to Leo III, Umar II, al-Hashimi, and al-Kindi. In other words, looking like a letter does not necessarily increase the probability of a document's veracity. This is especially the case with *John and the Emir* which never specifies the "letter's" author, the recipients' names, or their geographic location. Second, the setting of *John and the Emir* and the topics it discusses are standard *topoi* found throughout Syriac discussions of Islam. A defense of Christianity taking place in the court of a Muslim official appears in numerous Syriac and Christian Arabic works – few of which have strong claims to accurately rendering an actual debate¹². Additionally, the seven questions the emir asks the patriarch involve topics common to most early Syriac literature on Islam¹³ and suggest a much greater interest in Christian theology than one would expect a Muslim commander to have had¹⁴. It is, of course, possible that 'Umayr ibn Sa'd inquired only about the very same issues that Syriac apologists would write about for centuries, but this does not seem likely. Third, the narrative details of *John*

¹⁰ S.H. GRIFFITH, *Answering the Call of the Minaret: Christian Apologetics in the World of Islam*, in H.L. MURRE-VAN DEN BERG – J.J. VAN GINKEL – T.M. VAN LINT (ed.), *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam*, Leuven, 2005, p. 108 (= GRIFFITH, *Answering the Call of the Minaret*).

¹¹ GRIFFITH, *Answering the Call of the Minaret*, p. 106-108.

¹² S.H. GRIFFITH, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Princeton, 2008, p. 85-88 (= GRIFFITH, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*); GRIFFITH, *Answering the Call of the Minaret*, p. 98. Later Christian Arabic examples are discussed in S.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 M.R. COHEN, H. LAZARUS-YAFEH, S. SOMEKH, S.H. GRIFFITH (ed.), *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, Wiesbaden, 1999, p. 13-65 (= GRIFFITH, *The Monk in the Emir's Majlis*).

¹³ L.R. SAKO, *Les genres littéraires syriaques dans l'apologétique chrétienne vis-à-vis des Musulmans* (= SAKO, *Les genres littéraires syriaques*), in H.J.W. DRUIVERS et al. (ed.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, Rome, 1987, p. 382-383; S.H. GRIFFITH, *The Prophet Muhammad His Scripture and His Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century*, in T. FAHD (ed.), *La vie du prophète Mahomet*, Paris, 1980, p. 100 (= GRIFFITH, *The Prophet Muhammad*).

¹⁴ REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 175. R.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)*, Princeton, 1997, p. 461 also notes the similarity between several of the patriarch's responses and earlier Syriac anti-Jewish works (= HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*).

and the Emir clearly point toward a greater concern in defending Christianity than accurately representing a conversation. In each case the emir presents a brief question and it is the patriarch who always gets the last word. The emir never challenges John's conclusions and never interrupts him. A simple tally of the words each figure speaks (the emir 130, the patriarch 390) shows a clear bias in the account. Even more telling are a number of highly fortuitous and extremely improbable events¹⁵. Members from three Christian Arab tribes happen to be present on the day when the patriarch meets with the emir; also on the scene are several Arabs who can read both Greek and Syriac, a Jewish scholar who is quite content to admit to the Muslim emir that he has no idea whether the Hebrew Scripture supports trinitarian theology, and Chalcedonian Christians who recognize the Miaphysite patriarch's right "to speak on behalf of the entire Christian community"¹⁶. None of this inspires confidence in the document's accuracy. Even if one believes that *John and the Emir* was written immediately after an actual conversation between John Sedra and 'Umayr ibn Sa'd al-Ansari, it remains essential to recognize that *John and the Emir* is not an unbiased record of such an encounter. Rather, it is a carefully constructed and highly stylized literary work¹⁷.

Date of Composition

Particularly contentious in modern scholarship on *John and the Emir* is the question of when the document originally was written. It is here where the work's genre becomes particularly important. Those scholars who see the work as an authentic letter point to the opening sentence where the author states that John and the emir met on Sunday, the ninth of May. There are three times during John's tenure as patriarch that the

¹⁵ HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 460 characterizes these details as "usual narrative flourishes designed to impart reality to the work" which give it "the appearance of a typical piece of disputation literature."

¹⁶ *BL Add.* 17,193, f. 75a, 74b, 74b, 75a-75b.

¹⁷ Similar conclusions are reached by L. SAKO, *Bibliographie du dialogue Islamo-Chrétien: auteurs chrétiens de langue syriaque*, in *Islamochristiana*, 10 (1984), p. 5 n. 3; HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 160; and A. HARRAK, *Ah! the Assyrian is the Rod of my Hand! Syriac View of History after the Advent of Islam*, in H.L. MURRE-VAN DEN BERG – J.J. VAN GINKEL – T.M. VAN LINT (ed.), *Redefining Christian Identity: Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam*, Leuven, 2005, p. 61 n. 701 (= HARRAK, *Syriac View of History*) and GRIFFITH, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, p. 77-78. REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 171 summarizes this position well when he characterizes *John and the Emir* "as a representative of the literary genre of apologies which were written for certain purposes for the sake of the Christian community itself" (Reinink's emphasis).

ninth of May fell on a Sunday – 633, 639, and 644¹⁸ – and many scholars, choosing the last of these dates, suggest that *John and the Emir* was written in the mid-640s¹⁹. Two recent articles illustrate particularly well the interdependence between questions of genre and date of composition. Their arguments for a 644 dating to the text include: (1) the work's opening states that the recipients are anxious concerning the patriarch's fate and therefore the letter must have been written immediately after the events depicted and before the recipients had otherwise heard of the meeting's outcome²⁰; (2) the emir never quotes from the Qur'an and thus the work must have been written before Uthman standardized the Qur'an in the 650s²¹; (3) in *John and the Emir* Islam is a primitive religion, closely tied to Judaism, thus reflecting the nascent form of Islam one would expect to find in the mid-seventh century²². Arguments such as these depend on *John and the Emir* being a historically accurate rendering of events, otherwise issues such as the lack of explicit Qur'anic citations or the overlap between Islam and Judaism simply reflect the ignorance or the polemical choices of a later Christian author and do not require an early date for the text's composition.

In contrast, a 1993 article by Gerrit Reinink suggests that *John and the Emir* should be read not as an actual letter but as "a carefully composed fiction," "a deliberate piece of Christian apologetics" with "something of a propagandist flavour" in which "the author takes great pains to make the readers believe that it is an authentic document²³." From this perspective, the key to discovering when *John and the Emir*

¹⁸ NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 227.

¹⁹ E.g., P. CRONE – M. COOK, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 11 (= CRONE – COOK, *Hagarism*), NEWMAN, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, p. 8, SUERMANN, *The Old Testament and the Jews*, p. 141, and SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1997), p. 68 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1999), p. 46-47 all suggest a mid-seventh-century date for the text's composition.

²⁰ SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1997), p. 78 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1999), p. 61.

²¹ SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1997), p. 79 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1999), p. 62.

²² SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1997), p. 80 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1999), p. 64 concludes: "Ultimately the Letter makes no reference to Quran, Muhammad, or Islam, which indicates persuasively the nascent nature of this new religion. The Letter, therefore, characterizes the beliefs of Mhaggraye, which would lay the foundation for what later becomes known as Islamic faith." SUERMANN, *The Old Testament and the Jews*, p. 141 writes: "Early texts demonstrate that the close relation of Jews and Muslims at the beginnings of Muslim rule is not a literary fiction... The important role of the Jew and the Old Testament for Muslims is an indicator for the early redaction of our text. In the dialogue the answer of the Jewish scribe is not typical for a pure literary fiction."

²³ REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 176, 181, 182.

was written is to identify the motivation for its composition and to situate its *Sitz im Leben* within what we know about early Christian/Muslim interactions. According to Reinink, the text's principal concerns are the emergence of Islam as a new religious rival to Christianity²⁴, intra-Christian debates preventing Christians from presenting a unified front against Islam²⁵, and the fear of Christians converting to Islam²⁶. Such issues are relatively unattested in mid-seventh-century Christian literature but are quite common starting with the late seventh century consolidation of 'Abd al-Malik's rule²⁷. For Reinink this requires *John and the Emir* to have been written no earlier than the late seventh-century²⁸. Although Reinink's analysis has persuaded several scholars²⁹, others disagree, pointing out that Reinink's conclusions require him to have accurately identified the author's underlining concerns, none of which are made explicit in the text³⁰.

There is another approach to dating the text that Reinink's article briefly addresses which may be even more useful in approximating when *John and the Emir* was written. Reinink suggests that the author's knowledge of Islam is much closer to that of known late seventh- and early eighth-century Christian authors than those writing in the mid-seventh century. He provides two main examples. (1) As in later works, but unlike most seventh-century sources, *John and the Emir* depicts Islam as an independent religion³¹; (2) Both *John and the Emir*'s reference to inheritance law as well as the patriarch alluding only to those biblical patriarchs also found in the Qur'an suggests that the author had at least a rudimentary understanding of Muslim scripture³². Unfortunately, be-

²⁴ REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 176-177, 182.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 178, 182-183.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 176 n. 67, 182, 186.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 182-185.

²⁸ E.g., *Ibidem*, p. 182 summarizes his point: "The work appears to presuppose historical circumstances which can hardly be assumed for the first decade after the Arab conquests."

²⁹ E.g., HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 464-465; A.M. GUENTHER, *The Christian Experience and Interpretation of the Early Muslim Conquest and Rule*, in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 10/3 (1999), p. 374; HARRAK, *Syriac View of History*, p. 61, n. 70; and M.N. SWANSON, *Folly to the Hunafa': The Crucifixion in Early Christian-Muslim Controversy* (= SWANSON, *The Crucifixion*), in E. GRYPEOU – M.N. SWANSON – D. THOMAS (ed.), *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, Leiden, 2006, p. 247 (= GRYPEOU – SWANSON – THOMAS, *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*); and GRIFFITH, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, p. 37-38, 77-78.

³⁰ SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1997), p. 79-80 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1999), p. 59-60; SUERMANN, *The Old Testament and the Jews*, p. 136-138.

³¹ REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 176-177.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 179.

cause Reinink makes these arguments relatively quickly and without extensive support, they are less persuasive than they otherwise would be. Reinink's overarching strategy of comparing *John and the Emir* with works of known dates of composition, however, is quite sound and worthy of further development.

A more detailed comparison of *John and the Emir* with other early Christian texts on Islam yields several data points that more strongly suggest a late seventh- or eighth-century date of composition than one in the 640s. First, Christian discussions of Islam set in a dialogical setting, especially in the context of a religious debate between a Christian and a Muslim, are widely attested from the eighth century onward³³. If *John and the Emir* were written in the mid-seventh century it would predate every other known example of this genre by over seventy years. Second, when speaking of Muslims, *John and the Emir* uses a word rarely found in seventh-century Syriac sources, calling them "Hagarenes" (*mhaggrāyē*). This term occurs in a single extant mid-seventh-century writing, one of Isho'yhab III's letters (d. 659)³⁴. Among late seventh-century sources *mhaggrāyē* appears in only two additional places, the writings of Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) and the colophon of *BL Add. 14,666* (dated 682)³⁵. In contrast, most seventh-century sources speak of Muslims as "Arabs" (*tayyāyē*), for example the *Record of the Arabic Conquest 637*, the *Chronicle Around 640*, two letters from Isho'yhab III, the *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, the *Maronite Chronicle*, the *Letter of George I*, the *Canons of George I*, John bar Penkaye's *Book of Main Points*, Jacob of Edessa's *Chronicle*, and the colophon of *BL Add. 14,448*³⁶. If one examines

³³ Among Syriac sources, the closest parallels to *John and the Emir* are *The Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Hālē and a Muslim Notable* (ca. 720) and the *Disputation of Timothy I* (ca. 780). Chapter Ten of Theodore bar Koni's *Scholion* (ca. 790), although framed as a discussion between a master and his disciple, is another clear example of a Syriac disputation text concerning Islam. There are also several ninth-century dispute texts in Christian Arabic such as the dialogue of Abraham of Tiberius with Abd al-Rahman al-Hashimi, the debate of Theodore Abu Qurra, and the questions and answers found in Chapter Eighteen of the *Summa Theologiae Arabica* (here see GRIFFITH, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, p. 77-85; GRIFFITH, *The Monk in the Emir's Majlis*, p. 13-65; and GRIFFITH, *Answering the Call of the Minaret*, p. 99-105). Among Greek-speaking Christians one finds late eighth- and ninth-century disputation texts such as the *Disputation Between a Saracen and a Christian* attributed to John of Damascus and the pistolary exchange attributed to Leo III and Umar II.

³⁴ Isho'yhab III, *Letter 48B* (R. DUVAL, *Isho'yhab III patriarch., Liber epistularum* [CSCO 11], Leuven, 1904, p. 97) (= CSCO 11).

³⁵ Jacob of Edessa, *Questions of Addai* (HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 604-605), *Letter II to John Stylites* (A. VOÖBUS, *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition. I* [CSCO 367], Leuven, 1975, p. 237) (= CSCO 367); *BL Add. 14,666*, f. 56.

³⁶ *Record of the Arabic Conquest 637* (E.W. BROOKS, *Chronica minora* [CSCO 3], Leuven, 1904, p. 74) (= CSCO 3); *Chronicle Around 640* (ibid., p. 147-148); Isho'yhab

eighth-century texts, however, "Hagarenes" becomes much more common. It appears, for example, in the *Life of Theodute*, the *Caliph List of 724*, the *Chronicle of 775*, the *Canons of Giwargi*, a scribal addition to the letter of Athanasius of Balad, and two Syriac inscriptions³⁷. Third, as Reinink notes, *John and the Emir's* reference to inheritance law appears anachronistic. Although Syriac Christians eventually came under increased pressure to define Christian inheritance law, this concern is not found in any known mid-seventh-century documents³⁸. Furthermore, the case discussed in *John and the Emir* seems much closer in form and content to what is attested in the Qur'an than what had been discussed in earlier Syriac canon law³⁹. It is so unlikely that a mid-seventh-century Christian would have knowledge of Qur'anic material that several scholars who maintain that *John and the Emir* was written in the 640s have suggested that this reference to inheritance was a later interpolation⁴⁰.

III, *Letters 48B, 14C* (CSCO 11, p. 97, 251); *Chronicle of Khuzistan* (I. GUIDI, *Chronica minora* [CSCO 1], Leuven, 1903, p. 30, 31, 35, 36, 37, 38) (= CSCO 1); *Maronite Chronicle* (CSCO 3, p. 70, 71, 72, 73, 74); *Letter of George I* (J.B. CHABOT, *Synodicon orientale ou recueil de synodes nestoriens*, Paris, 1902, 227); *Canons of George I* (ibid., p. 216); John bar Penkaye (A. MINGANA, *Sources syriaques I*, Leipzig, 1907, p. 142*, 160*) (= MINGANA, *Sources syriaques I*); Jacob of Edessa, *Chronicle* (E.W. BROOKS – I. GUIDI – J.B. CHABOT, *Chronica minora* [CSCO 5], Leuven, 1905, p. 326) (= CSCO 5); *BL Add. 14, 448*, f. 209b. Seventh-century Syriac sources will also employ several other terms to describe Muslims such as "Ishmaelites," "Sons of Hagar," and "Sons of Ishmael." For a discussion of these various Syriac terms, see GRIFFITH, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, p. 24 n. 6; Id., *The Prophet Muhammad*, p. 118-225; and Id., *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam*, Kerala, 1995, p. 8-15.

³⁷ *The Life of Theodute* (unpublished; discussed in A. PALMER, *Amid in the Seventh-Century Syriac Life of Theodute*, in GRYPEOU – SWANSON – THOMAS, *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, p. 111-138); the *Caliph List of 724* (CSCO 3, p. 155), the *Chronicle of 775* (CSCO 5, p. 348), the *Canons of Giwargi* (A. VOÖBUS, *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition. II* [CSCO 375], Leuven, 1976, p. 4), Athanasius of Balad (F. NAU, *Littérature canonique syriaque inédite*, in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 14 [1909], p. 128), Syriac inscriptions dated 714/715 (P. MOUTERDE, *Inscriptions en syriaque dialectale à Kamed (Beq'a)*, in *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph*, 22 [1939], p. 83, 96). SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1997), p. 79-80 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John of Sedreh* (1999), p. 63 argues that *John and the Emir's* exclusive use of *mhaggrāyā* suggests an early date for *John and the Emir*. But many eighth-century sources such as the *Caliph List of 724*, the *Chronicle of 775*, the *Canons of Giwargi*, and the scribal addition to Athanasius of Balad also exclusively use *mhaggrāyē*.

³⁸ In contrast, as noted by HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 202, Ḥṅnanisho' (d. 700) wrote extensively on issues of inheritance.

³⁹ CRONE – COOK, *Hagarism*, p. 168 n. 20 and HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 461.

⁴⁰ CRONE – COOK, *Hagarism*, p. 168 n. 20 supports the possibility of a later interpolation by noting that at this point the text uses *mhaggrā* instead of *mhaggrē* and, unlike other sections where the patriarch directly responds to the emir's questions, here John ignores what the Emir had asked. Neither of these observations seem particularly strong indicators of this section being a later addition to the text. As pointed out by HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 462 n. 29, it is much more likely that the scribe simply

The manuscript gives no evidence for this and it is much less problematic simply to date *John and the Emir* later than to resort to a conjectural interpolation. Fourth, *John and the Emir* states on multiple occasions that Muslims accept the Torah as authoritative but not other writings in the Hebrew Scripture⁴¹. Although eighth- and ninth-century Syriac works such as Theodore Bar Koni's *Scholion* (ca. 790) and Job of Edessa's *Book of Treasures* (ca. 815) discuss what writings Muslims consider to be authoritative⁴², if *John and the Emir* were written in the 640s it would substantially precede the other known discussion of Muslim scriptural beliefs.

The strongest argument for a later dating of *John and the Emir*, however, can be found by moving from these specific points to a more general observation. Reinink briefly speaks of *John and the Emir* depicting Islam "as a new religion"⁴³. Because the very definition of what constitutes a religion, especially a "new religion," is fairly subjective, Reinink's word choice is unfortunate and has led to easy criticism⁴⁴. But one can safely say that *John and the Emir* sees Hagarenes as having a different set of beliefs than Christians do – they do not think that Christ is divine, they do not believe Christ to be God's son, and they do not accept the Christian scriptures⁴⁵. More importantly, the very narrative of a disputation, as well as the questions posed by the emir, clearly indicate that the author sees Hagarenes as presenting a direct challenge to Christian doctrine. This is without precedent among early Syriac texts. Seventh-century Syriac chronicles – the *Chronicle of 640*, the *Chronicle of Kurzistan*, the *Melkite Chronicle*, the *Maronite Chronicle*, John of Penkaye's *Book of Main Points*, Jacob of Edessa's *Chronicle* – speak of Arab invaders, the horrors of the conquest, and the ravages of civil wars⁴⁶.

forgot a dot than that an orthographic variation indicates multiple authors. Similarly, the patriarch's response to the question of inheritance law (i.e., Christians have laws which agree with the gospel and apostolic traditions) appears as a direct response to the Emir's question and does not seem to be as "uncharacteristically dislocated" as Crone and Cook suggest. SUERMANN, *The Old Testament and the Jews*, p. 138 also briefly suggests that the reference to inheritance law may be a later addition to the text.

⁴¹ *BL Add.* 17,193, f. 73b, 74b.

⁴² Theodore bar Koni, *Scholion* 10 (A. SCHER, *Theodorus bar Koni. Liber Scholiorum*, II [CSCO 69], Leuven, 1912, p. 231, 235); Job of Edessa, *Book of Treasures*, 6.8 (A. MINGANA, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical and Natural Sciences as Taught in Baghdad about A.D. 817 or Book of Treasures by Job of Edessa* [Woodbrooke Scientific Publications, 1], Cambridge, 1935, p. 458).

⁴³ REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 181-182.

⁴⁴ E.g., SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1997), p. 77 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1999), p. 59 and especially SUERMANN, *The Old Testament and the Jews*, p. 133-136.

⁴⁵ *BL Add.* 17,193, f. 73b, 73b, 74b.

⁴⁶ For an English translation of many of these chronicles, see A. PALMER, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Translated Texts for Historians, 15), Liverpool,

But never, not once, do they speak of Arabs disputing Christian doctrine⁴⁷. Similarly, the closest Isho'yhab III's letters ever come to outlining Islam's religious challenges to Christianity is one brief allusion to apostasy which Isho'yhab attributes to monetary motivation. Otherwise he notes that Muslims do not generally help Miaphysites and actually aid East Syrian churches and monasteries⁴⁸. The canons of Isho'yhab's successor George I (written in 676) state that believers cannot collect the poll tax from bishops, that legal disputes should be settled in the church, and that Christian women should not live with or marry nonbelievers⁴⁹. Again, no discussion of Muslim challenges to specific Christian beliefs. In response to 'Abd al-Malik's efforts to more aggressively spread Islam, the late seventh-century apocalypses – the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem*, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, the *Eddessene Apocalypse*, the *Apocalypse of John the Little* – depict Arabs as violent persecutors of Christians and as harbingers of the end-time⁵⁰. Although here, too, there are occasional allusions to apostasy, the only discussion of specific religious differences between Christians and Muslims is a brief reference in *Pseudo-Methodius* to "the Sons of Ishmael" claiming that "The Christians have no savior"⁵¹.

At the end of the seventh century, works such as an exegetical fragment from H'nanisho' (d. 700) and the writings of Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) begin to show greater specificity regarding Muslim beliefs and their religious challenge to Christianity. H'nanisho' refers to those who say Jesus was only a prophet⁵². Jacob of Edessa speaks of Christians who convert to Islam, Christian converts to Islam who later came back

1993. For a bibliographic overview of editions, translations, and recent discussions of the chronicles, as well as other seventh- through ninth-century Syriac sources on Islam, see M. PENN, *Syriac Sources for Early Christian/Muslim Relations*, in *Islamochristiana*, 29 (2003), p. 59-78.

⁴⁷ Of the seventh-century Syriac chronicles John of Penkaye's *Book of Main Points* provides the most detailed knowledge of Islam but, even here, this only amounts to the "Sons of Hagar" being led to monotheism by Muhammad (MINGANA, *Sources Syriacques I*, p. *146).

⁴⁸ Isho'yhab III, *Letters* 14C, 48B (CSCO 11, p. 251, 97).

⁴⁹ Canons 19, 6, and 14 of George I (CHABOT, *Synodicon orientale*, p. 225-226, 119-220, 223-224).

⁵⁰ For an overview of these works, see C. VILLAGOMEZ, *Christian Salvation through Muslim Domination: Divine Punishment and Syriac Apocalyptic Expectation in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries*, in *Medieval Encounters*, 4/3 (1998), p. 203-218 and G.J. REININK, *Early Christian Reactions to the Building of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem*, in *Xristianskij Vostok*, 2 (2002), p. 227-241.

⁵¹ *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, 13.6 (G.J. REININK, *Die Syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* [CSCO 540], Leuven, 1993, p. 38).

⁵² *BL. Or.* 9353, f. 253a transliterated with German translation in G.J. REININK, *Fragmente der Evangelienexegese des Katholikos Henanišo' I*, in R. LAVENANT (ed.), *V Symposium Syriacum*, Rome, 1990, p. 90.

to Christianity, Muslims defiling a Christian altar, and Muslims entering a church to mock the Eucharist⁵³. He also notes that Muslims pray toward the Kaaba and deny that Christ is God's son⁵⁴. Early eighth-century sources such as the exegetical fragments of Mar Aba written against those who deny Jesus's incarnation (ca. 700) or *The Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Hālē and a Muslim Notable* (ca. 720) become increasingly explicit about Muslim challenges to Christian doctrine⁵⁵.

When one tries to place *John and the Emir* on this trajectory it certainly does not correspond to what we know of the 640s. Even if one combines all mid-seventh-century Syriac works, the total discussion of Islam's challenge to Christian beliefs is an occasional reference to Christian apostasy. It is only once the Umayyads under 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705) begin actively polemicizing against Christian beliefs in very public venues, such as inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock or on widely circulating coins, that we begin to find sources such as Ḥṇanisho', Jacob of Edessa, Mar Aba, and *The Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Hālē and a Muslim Notable*⁵⁶. It is these later documents, not earlier mid-seventh-century works, that come closest to *John and the Emir* in their discussion of Muslim challenges to Christian doctrine.

Dating anonymous Christian texts is notoriously difficult and it is for this reason that excellent scholars are on both sides of this debate. Certainty is an unrealistic goal. It is possible that *John and the Emir* is the only extant seventh-century Syriac disputation text. It is possible that it is one of the few seventh-century documents that refers to Muslims as *mhaggrāyē*. It is possible that it is the only extant seventh-century Syriac document to speak of inheritance law. It is possible that it is the only

⁵³ Jacob of Edessa, *Replies to Addai*, 75 (HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 604-605); Jacob of Edessa, *Letter I to John the Stylite*, 15 (CSCO 367, p. 161); Jacob of Edessa, *Replies to Addai*, 25 (T.J. LAMY, *Dissertatio de Syrorum fide et disciplina in re eucharista*, Leuven, 1859, p. 126); Jacob of Edessa, *Letter II to John the Stylite*, 9 (CSCO 367, p. 237).

⁵⁴ Mar Abba, *Fragment on Jn 20:17* (G.J. REININK, *Studien zur Quellen- und Traditionsgeschichte des Evangelienkommentars der Gannat Bussame* [CSCO 414], Leuven, 1979, p. 64-65); Jacob of Edessa, *Letter III to John the Stylite* (F. NAU, *Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse sur la généalogie de la sainte vierge*, in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 6 [1901], p. 518-519); Jacob of Edessa, *Letter IV to John the Stylite* (BL Add. 12,172, f. 124a).

⁵⁵ An edition of *The Disputation between a Monk of Bet Hale and a Muslim Notable* has not yet been published. For a discussion of this document's content, see GRIFFITH, *The Monk of Bēt Hālē and a Muslim Emir*, and G.J. REININK, *Political Power and Right Religion in the East Syriac Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Hālē and an Arab Notable*, in GRYPEOU – SWANSON – THOMAS, *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, p. 153-170.

⁵⁶ For a concise discussion of 'Abd al-Malik's policies after the second Arab civil war, see GRIFFITH, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, p. 14-15 and G.J. REININK, *An Early Syriac Reference to Qur'an 112?*, in H.L.J. VANSTIPHOUT (ed.), *All Those Nations... Cultural Encounters within and with the Near East*, Groningen, 1999, 125-126.

extant seventh-century Syriac document to speak of Muslim views of scriptural authority. It is possible that its author's knowledge and concern of Muslim challenges to Christian doctrine is much more advanced than any other known seventh-century Syriac writer. But especially since, other than the work's self-attribution, there is no *prima facie* reason to date the text as early, it appears much more likely that *John and the Emir* was written in the late seventh or in the eighth century than in the 640s⁵⁷.

Historicity

Although modern scholars may disagree on when *John and the Emir* was written, most suggest that the work witnesses, however distantly, a real encounter between the Patriarch John and a Muslim emir⁵⁸. Several arguments are put forward to support the historicity of this event. (1) A number of ancient sources attest that interreligious debates between Christians and Muslims did occur in the first Islamic centuries and thus an encounter between John and 'Umayr is at least plausible⁵⁹. (2) The last section of *John and the Emir* instructs the reader to pray for several named members of the patriarch's entourage. Four of these ecclesiastical officials appear in other Syriac documents that discuss the time of John's reign⁶⁰. (3) The flow of questions and answers in *John and the Emir* seems to preserve an agenda for each figure, suggesting that it was modeled after an actual dialogue⁶¹. (4) Dionysius of Tel Mahre (d. 845) speaks about just such an encounter between John Sedra and a Muslim commander⁶².

The first three arguments are not particularly persuasive. Just because there were debates between Christians and Muslims does not mean that

⁵⁷ Of course the *terminus ante quem* is 874 when Abraham writes *BL Add.* 17,193. If, as is likely, Dionysius of Tel Mahre's story of John Sedra's encounter with a Muslim emir is dependent on *John and the Emir*, the latest it could have been written would be in the 840s. Because *John and the Emir's* discussion of Islam, however, is not as detailed as that found in most ninth-century sources, no modern scholar has suggested a date of composition later than the eighth century.

⁵⁸ E.g., NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 226-227; CRONE – COOK, *Hagarism*, p. 11; SAMIR, *Qui est l'interlocuteur?*, p. 388; NEWMAN, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, p. 7; HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 462. Cf. REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 186; HARRAK, *Syriac View of History*, p. 61 n. 70.

⁵⁹ For a discussion regarding the evidence for open religious debates in early Islamic society, see GRIFFITH, *Answering the Call of the Minaret*, p. 118-123.

⁶⁰ HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 464. SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1999), p. 78 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1999), p. 60-61.

⁶¹ HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 462.

⁶² SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1997), p. 73-74 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1999), p. 54-55.

in the 640s John participated in one. Similarly, if someone invented the story of such an encounter, one would expect him to use well-known names to give the account verisimilitude. Finally, even assuming that one has properly detected two different agendas, this simply could be the mark of a well-constructed narrative or knowledge of what Muslims and Christians were most concerned about. The final point, Dionysius of Tel Mahre's account, is more complex.

Dionysius's own writings are no longer extant. Because both the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) and the *Chronicle of 1234* independently use Dionysius as one of their sources, however, passages that these two chronicles share most likely originated from Dionysius⁶³. The encounter of John and an emir occurs in one such section. The two versions read:

*Chronicle 1234*⁶⁴

And the emir Bar Sa'd, either because of hatred toward Christians or that he might stop the name of Christ from being called God, wrote and sent for the patriarch John. And when he came and entered before him, (the emir) began to speak with him unusual words and to ask cunning questions. But the patriarch, with divine power, resolved all his questions.

Then, when he saw that (the patriarch) defended himself courageously and with confidence, he commanded the patriarch and said to him, "Translate for me your gospel into Arabic and do not change anything in it. Only the name of Christ, that he is God, and baptism, and the cross, do not put in it." But when he heard this the patriarch was strengthened by the

Michael the Syrian⁶⁵

And 'Amrou

wrote for our patriarch John. And when he entered before him, (the emir) began to say unusual words foreign to the scriptures and he began to ask cunning questions. But the patriarch resolved all of them with arguments from the Old Testament and the New and also from arguments from nature. And when he saw his courage and the extent of his knowledge, (the emir) was amazed. And then he commanded him saying, "Translate for me your gospel into the Saracen language, that is Arabic. Only the name of Christ, that he is God, and baptism, and the cross, do not put (in it)." But the blessed one was strengthened by the Lord and said, "(God) forbid that I

⁶³ J.J. VAN GINKEL, *The Perception and Presentation of the Arab Conquest in Syriac Historiography: How did the Changing Social Position of the Syrian Orthodox Community Influence the Account of their Historiographers?*, in GRYPEOU – SWANSON – THOMAS, *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, p. 180-181, however, appropriately notes that Michael and the author of the *Chronicle of 1234* must have shared other sources as well and thus "not every account common to Michael and the Anonymous Chronicler necessarily comes from Dionysius."

⁶⁴ *Chronicle 1234* (J.B. CHABOT, *Chronicon ad A.C. 1234 pertinens, I* [CSCO 81], Leuven, 1920, p. 263-264).

⁶⁵ *Chronicle of Michael the Syrian*, 11.8 (J.B. CHABOT, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche [1166-1199]*, vol. 4, Paris, 1910, p. 421-422) (= CHABOT, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*).

spirit and without fear he answered saying, "Christ my God forbid that I would take away a yod or character from my gospel, even if all the spears in your camp would pierce me. And regardless, I surely will not write it." And when the emir saw his courage as well as the might of the patriarch's mind he said, "Go, write as you like." Then the patriarch sent for certain God-loving (men) from the nations of the Tanukyē and 'Aqulayē. And he chose from them those who were particularly expert in Arabic and Syriac and knew how to translate words clearly from language to language. And he commanded that they would translate the gospel.

And after with great difficulty it was translated and they had collated (it) various times and immediately put it into elegant writing on clean parchment and it was very skillfully and gloriously overlaid, it was brought to the ruler 'Amrou bar Sa'd.

would remove a yod or character from the gospel, not even if all the arrows and spears in your camp would pierce me."

And when (the emir) saw that he would not be persuaded he commanded, "Go, write as you like." And he gathered bishops and he sent for and summoned (men) from the Tanukyē, the 'Aqulayē, and the Tu'ayē who were experts in Arabic and Syriac.

And he commanded that they translate the gospel into Arabic.

And he commanded that every word that they translated pass before each translator.

And thus it was translated and given to the king.

The question immediately arises, is Dionysius independently attesting this story or has he, like us, read *John and the Emir*? Reinink and Hoyland provide two arguments in favor of Dionysius's dependence on *John and the Emir*. First, the context of this passage is 'Amr forbidding Christians to display the cross. This easily explains the reference to 'Amr hating Christians. It does not, however, account for the reference to 'Amr wanting to stop Christians from declaring Christ to be God. This motivation, however, could easily be derived from reading *John and the Emir*. Second, if Dionysius had read *John and the Emir* this would account for him also referring to the same three Christian Arab tribes that appear in *John and the Emir*. Their appearance in *John and the Emir* also may have motivated Dionysius to speak about a translation of the Gospel into Arabic⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 174; HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 463. The case for Dionysius's dependence on *John and the Emir* is further strengthened by the twelfth-century polemicist Dionysius bar Šalībī quoting a passage from *John and the Emir* (J. AMAR, *Dionysius bar Šalībī, A Response to the Arabs* [CSCO 614], Leuven, 2005, p. 99 [= CSCO 614]).

If Reinink and Hoyland are correct, Dionysius's account depends on *John and the Emir* and lends no further credence to the historicity of this encounter. Even if they are wrong, Dionysius's narrative simply shows that in the ninth century a story claiming that these figures met each other still circulated; although this speaks to the popularity of this tradition, it says little about its veracity⁶⁷. Especially as modern scholars almost universally reject the existence of a mid-seventh-century Arabic gospel translation, there is no compelling reason why the rest of Dionysius's account should be considered as particularly accurate⁶⁸.

One can quite easily argue against the four reasons most commonly cited to support the historicity of a meeting between John and 'Umayr in the 640s. It still, however, remains possible that John and 'Umayr actually met and discussed Christian doctrine. But without further evidence, one should remain wary of claims such as *John and the Emir* witnesses the earliest "inter-faith dialogue" between Christians and Muslims⁶⁹.

Reading John and the Emir

An analysis of *John and the Emir* and a comparison of its form and content with other early Christian texts on Islam yields several important conclusions regarding the work's genre, date, and historicity: (1) it is almost certain that *John and the Emir* is not an entirely accurate representation of an encounter between a Christian and a Muslim ruler, rather it is a carefully crafted piece of apologetics; (2) it is quite probable that the text was not originally composed in the 640s but rather was written in the late seventh or in the eighth century; and (3) it is quite possible that a meeting between John Sedra and 'Umayr ibn Sa'd never actually took place but is rather a later literary construct. In sum, it is extremely unlikely that a Miaphysite patriarch and a Muslim commander ever exchanged the very words preserved in *John and the Emir*. To read *John and the Emir* as if it were a transcript filled with unbiased empirical data misconstrues both the text itself and the circumstances under which it was written. As with most other disputation texts, *John and the Emir* does not reflect an attempt at objective historiography as much as an act

⁶⁷ REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 174 expresses a similar caution.

⁶⁸ S.H. GRIFFITH, *The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First 'Abbasid Century'*, *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985), p. 126-167; D. COOK, *New Testament Citations in the Hadith Literature and the Question of Early Gospel Translations into Arabic*, in GRYPEOU – SWANSON – THOMAS, *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, p. 185-224.

⁶⁹ E.g., NEWMAN, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, p. 8.

of apologetics, polemics, and meaning-making⁷⁰. This conclusion does not lessen the importance of *John and the Emir* for the study of early Christian/Muslim interactions, but it does highlight the need for particular reading strategies to effectively analyze this document, strategies that focus more on questions of ideology and representation than on historical reconstruction.

In order to make future investigations of this text increasingly productive I have produced a new edition and English translation of *John and the Emir*. Nau's edition, which has been the basis for all published translations, contains a number of errors. Even if the edition's typesetters, rather than Nau himself, may have been responsible for many of these inaccuracies, it remains appropriate to produce a more faithful transcription of this important text. Similarly, a more precise translation of the work also seems to be in order.

Although Abraham had an excellent scribal hand and *BL Add. 17,193* is well preserved, nevertheless certain of the work's diacritical and punctuation marks remain ambiguous. Through multiple visits to view the manuscript directly, computer enhancement of a microfilm copy, and digital measurement of the distances and angles between markings, I have tried to make my transcription as accurate as possible⁷¹. As with any document, there is no perfect translation of *John and the Emir*. I have attempted to provide a more literal version of this text than those previously published while at the same time trying to avoid overly stilted prose. Although there undoubtedly remains room for improvement, I hope that this new edition and translation will provide a useful starting point for others to study in greater depth one of the most fascinating early Christian depictions of Islam.

Department of Religion
Mount Holyoke College
50 College Street
South Hadley, Massachusetts
01075, USA
mpenn@mtholyoke.edu

Michael Philip PENN

⁷⁰ For further discussion of the genre, purpose, and audience of Syriac disputation texts on Islam, see SAKO, *Les genres littéraires syriaques*, p. 383-385, S.H. GRIFFITH, *Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: from Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)*, in B. LEWIS – F. NIEWÖHNER, *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, Wiesbaden, 1992, p. 255-257 (= GRIFFITH, *Disputes with Muslims*), and REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 167-187.

⁷¹ For example, I have represented only double dots that are within 20 degrees of each other as a colon. Those double dots that the scribe Abraham wrote at an angle greater than 20 degrees I indicate with slanted dots. Thanks go to my research assistants Raquel Dorman and Holly Norwick for their help in analyzing the manuscript.

Sunday, we entered before the glorious commander, the emir. And the blessed one and father of all⁷⁷ was asked by him⁷⁸ if the gospel that all those in the entire world who are and are called Christians hold is one and the same and does not vary in anything. And the blessed one answered him⁷⁹, "It is one and the same to the Greeks and the Romans and the Syrians and the Egyptians and the Ethiopians and the Indians and the Arameans⁸⁰ and the Persians and the rest of all peoples and languages⁸¹."

⁸²And he also inquired, "Why when the gospel is one, is the faith diverse?" And the blessed one answered, "Just as the Torah is one and the same and is accepted by us Christians and by you Hagarenes and by the Jews and the Samaritans, but each people differs in faith, so also concerning the gospel's faith: each sect⁸³ understands and interprets it differently, and not like us."

And he also inquired, "What do you⁸⁴ say Christ is? Is he God or not?" And our father answered, "He is God and the Word that was born from God the Father, eternally and without beginning. And, at the end of times, for humanity's salvation, He took flesh and became incarnate from the Holy Spirit and from Mary – the holy one and the virgin, the mother of God – and He became man."

⁷⁷ Syriac: ܐܘܢܝܢܐ. NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 257 translates as "de l'ensemble." SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 69 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 48 translates as "of the community."

⁷⁸ It is often difficult to determine if a given passage is direct or indirect speech. For example, SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 69 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 48 and HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 459 translate this question as direct speech while NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 259 translates it as indirect speech. In general, I have favored the translation of dialogical passages as direct speech unless, as in this case, the sentence structure flows better as indirect discourse.

⁷⁹ NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 257 and SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 69 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 48 translate as indirect speech.

⁸⁰ Nau's edition erroneously has ܐܘܪܝܢܐ while the manuscript reads ܐܘܪܝܢܐ (NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 248). As a result, all published translations list "Armenians" instead of "Arameans." It remains possible that this is a scribal error and the work originally read "Armenians" but the manuscript gives no indication of this.

⁸¹ The same passage appears almost verbatim in Dionysius bar Šalibi, *A Response to the Arabs*, 23 (CSCO 614, p. 99).

⁸² My paragraph divisions often, but not always, correspond with a rosetta in the manuscript.

⁸³ Syriac: ܡܫܝܚܐ. Although this term can more neutrally mean "sect" it also can be used to designate a "heresy" and is translated as such by NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 258; REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 178; SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 70 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 49.

⁸⁴ All second person pronouns in *John and the Emir* are in the plural.

And the glorious emir also asked him this: "When Christ, who you say is God, was in Mary's womb, who bore and governed the heavens and the earth?" And our blessed father immediately⁸⁵ replied to him: "When God descended to Mount Sinai and was there speaking with Moses for forty days and forty nights, who bore and governed the heavens and the earth? For you say that you accept Moses and his books." And the emir said, "It was God and He governed the heavens and the earth." And immediately he heard from our father, "Thus Christ (is) God; when He was [74a] in the womb of the virgin, as almighty God He bore and governed the heavens and the earth and everything in them."

And the glorious emir also said, "As for Abraham and Moses, what sort of belief and faith did they have?" And our blessed father said, "They had and held this belief and this faith of the Christians – Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Aaron and the rest of the prophets and all the just and righteous ones." And the emir said, "And why then did they not write openly and make (it) known concerning Christ?" And our blessed father answered, "As (God's) confidants and intimates they knew. But (there was) the childishness and uneducated state of the people at that time who were inclined and attracted toward a multitude of gods to the point of considering even pieces of wood and stones and many things (to be) gods and erecting idols and worshipping them and sacrificing to them; the holy ones did not want to give the errant occasion to depart from the living God and to go after error⁸⁶. But cautiously they said that which is the truth: 'Hear Israel that the Lord your God⁸⁷, the Lord is one⁸⁸.' For they truly knew that God is one and (that there is) one divinity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And because of this, they spoke and wrote secretly⁸⁹ concerning God, that He

⁸⁵ Syriac: ܐܘܢܝܢܐ. NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 258 reads "lui rétorqua le même argument." SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 70 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 49 translates as "argued with him concerning the question" and continues the phrase in indirect speech. Variations of this phrase, especially ܐܘܢܝܢܐ, occur throughout *John and the Emir* and have caused translation difficulties. Although the most common meaning of ܐܘܢܝܢܐ is "word" it can also be used in adverbial constructions to indicate "immediately." See L. COSTAZ, *Dictionnaire Syriac-Français* (ed. 3), Beirut, 2002, p. 183; R.P. SMITH, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, Oxford, 1879, col. 2111, col. 2903.

⁸⁶ NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 259 n. 1 notes that Severus in his *Cathedral Homily 70* makes almost the identical argument.

⁸⁷ Nau's edition erroneously has ܐܘܢܝܢܐ while the manuscript reads ܐܘܢܝܢܐ (NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 250). As a result, all published translations mistakenly read "God" instead of "your God."

⁸⁸ Deut. 6:4. Unlike the Peshitta, *John and the Emir* reads "your God" instead of "our God."

⁸⁹ Syriac: ܐܘܢܝܢܐ. NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 259 translates as "de manière mystérieuse." SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 71 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 50 translates as "symbolically."

is one and the same in divinity and is three hypostases and persons. But He is not nor is He confessed (to be) three gods or three divinities or, by any means, gods and divinities. Because (there is) one divinity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, as we have said. And from the Father are the Son and the Spirit. And if you want, I am willing and ready to confirm all these things from the holy scriptures.”

And after the emir also heard these things he inquired only that if Christ is God and was born from Mary and if God has a son that it be shown to him immediately⁹⁰ [74b] also from the Torah. And the blessed one said, “Not only Moses but also all the holy prophets prophesied before hand and wrote these things concerning Christ. And one wrote concerning his birth from a virgin, and another that He would be born in Bethlehem, another concerning his baptism. All of them, so to speak, (wrote) concerning his salvific suffering and his life giving death and his glorious resurrection from among the dead after three days.” And he immediately⁹¹ brought forth examples and began⁹² to confirm (these things) from all the prophets and from Moses.

84 → And the glorious emir did not accept these things from the prophets but wanted it to be shown to him (from) Moses that Christ is God⁹³. And the same blessed one, along with many other (passages), brought forth this (one from) Moses⁹⁴: “The Lord brought down from before the Lord fire and sulfur upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah⁹⁵.” The glorious emir asked that this be shown in the scripture. And without delay our father showed (this) in the full Greek and Syriac scriptures. For there were also present with us in (that) place certain Hagarenes and they saw with their

⁹⁰ Syriac: ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ. NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 260 translates as “par le raisonnement.” HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 260 translates as “in one exposition.” SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1997), p. 71 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1999), p. 51 translates as “literally.”

⁹¹ Syriac: ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ. SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1997), p. 71 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1997), p. 51 translates “according to their writings.” But NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 260 unexpectedly switches to a temporal meaning and translates as “en même temps.”

⁹² I am reading ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ instead of the manuscript’s ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ.

⁹³ HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 462 notes that Theodore Abu Qurra also speaks of Muslims who only accept the authority of Moses and not the prophets (PG 97, 1556). Similarly, SWANSON, *The Crucifixion*, p. 247 notes that the mid-eighth-century Christian Arabic apology, *On the Triune Nature of God*, limits its proof texts to those that appear in the Pentateuch.

⁹⁴ NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 260 n. 2 notes that Severus’ *Cathedral Homily 70* uses the same prooftext. REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 177 n. 71 emphasizes the close parallels to Severus and suggests that the author of *John and the Emir* is drawing directly from Severus’ *Cathedral Homily 70*.

⁹⁵ Gen. 19:24. *John and the Emir*’s word order and prepositions vary slightly from the Peshitta.

eyes those writings and the glorious name of “the Lord”⁹⁶ and “the Lord.” Indeed, the emir summoned a Jewish man who was and was considered by them an expert of scripture. And he asked him if this was so in the wording in the Torah. But he answered, “I do not know exactly.”

From here the emir moved to asking about the laws of the Christians⁹⁷, what and what sort (of laws) they are and if they are written in the gospel or not. And he also (asked)⁹⁸, “If a man dies and leaves sons or daughters and a wife and a mother and a sister and a cousin, how should his property be divided among them⁹⁹?” And after our holy father said, “The gospel is divine for it teaches and commands the heavenly teachings and life giving commandments and rejects all sins and evils and through itself teaches virtue and righteousness,” many things were discussed regarding this subject – while there were gathered there (many) people [75a], not only nobles of the Hagarenes, but also chiefs and leaders of cities and of believing and Christ-loving people: the Tanukyē and Tu’ayē and the ‘Aqlayē¹⁰⁰.

And the glorious emir said, “I want you to do one of three (things)¹⁰¹: either show me that your own laws are written in the gospel and be guided by them or submit to the Hagarene law¹⁰².” And when our father

⁹⁶ Nau’s edition reads this as plural and in his footnotes Nau suggests that this be corrected to the singular (NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 260 n. 3). The mistake, however, was not Abraham’s. Rather, Nau read a seyame when in fact the two dots he saw did not both go with ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ. The first dot was from the resh of ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ. The second, however, came from the marker of the past participle of the word ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ which appears on the preceding line directly above ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ. As a result Nau’s edition erroneously marks the word as a plural (NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 251). Published translations wrongly read “Lords” (NEWMAN, *Christian-Muslim Dialog*, p. 26; NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 260; SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* [1997], p. 72 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* [1999], p. 51; SUERMANN, *Orientalische Christen*, p. 124).

⁹⁷ SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1997), p. 72 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh* (1999), p. 52 renders as direct speech.

⁹⁸ NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 261 renders as indirect speech.

⁹⁹ CRONE – COOK, *Hagarism*, p. 168 n. 20 and REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 179 n. 81 discuss comparisons with Qur’an 4:4-16.

¹⁰⁰ NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 261 n. 3 notes that these were the most prominent seventh-century Arab Christian tribes. Also see GRIFFITH, *Disputes with Muslims*, p. 258 n. 32.

¹⁰¹ The difficulty, of course, is that the Emir lists only two things. REININK, *The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature*, p. 180-181 n. 84 suggests several possible explanations including that the three items simply parallel the three verbs used in the rest of the sentence.

¹⁰² Syriac: ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ ܘܨܘܕܘܗܘܢܐ. CRONE – COOK, *Hagarism*, p. 168 n. 20 suggest that the unexpected use of the singular indicates that the work of a later writer. HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 460 presents the much more likely solution that the scribe simply forgot a seyame. If Hoyland is correct, the phrase should be translated “the law of the Hagarenes.”

answered¹⁰³, “We Christians have laws that are just and upright and agree with the teaching and commandments of the gospel and the canons of the apostles and the laws of the church,” thus and in such a way that first day’s assembly was concluded. And we have not yet come to enter before him again.

Indeed it was commanded by him that also some people from the bishoprics¹⁰⁴ of the Council of Chalcedon come. Indeed, everyone who was present (both) from the Orthodox and from the Chalcedonians prayed for the life and the safety of the blessed lord patriarch. And they glorified and magnified God who generously provided the word of truth for his eloquence and filled him with the power and the grace which is from him, according to his true promises when He said, “~~They will~~ stand you before kings and governors on account of me. ⁸⁵ But do not worry what you will say and be not concerned. At that hour, what you should say will be given to you. For you will not speak but the spirit of your Father will speak through you¹⁰⁵.”

We have reported to your love these few of the many things that were very recently discussed so that you might diligently and continually pray for us without ceasing and entreat the Lord that He, in his mercy, would care¹⁰⁶ for his church and his people and that Christ would make a resolution to this affair that pleases his will¹⁰⁷ and aids his church and comforts his people. For also those of the Council of Chalcedon, as we said¹⁰⁸ above, prayed for the blessed Mar patriarch, because he spoke on behalf of the entire Christian community and did not speak against them. And they continually communicated with him and sought his blessedness to thus speak on behalf of the entire community and not to stir up

¹⁰³ NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 262 and SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 72 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 52 render as indirect speech.

¹⁰⁴ Syriac: ܟܠܟܘܢܐ. NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 262 translates “principaux tenants du concile de Chalcedoine.” SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 72 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 53 translates as “Chalcedonian leaders.”

¹⁰⁵ Mt 10:18-20. There are several minor differences from the Peshitta.

¹⁰⁶ Syriac: ܘܫܝܬ. NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 263 and SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 73 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 53 translate as “visit.”

¹⁰⁷ NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 263 translates as “Le Christ donne à cette affaire l’issue qui plaît.” SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, p. 73 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 54 translate as “may make an exit from such trial.”

¹⁰⁸ I am reading ܘܫܝܬ while the manuscript reads ܘܫܝܬ. Nau translates likewise, but his edition erroneously has ܘܫܝܬ as the manuscript’s wording instead of this being Nau’s correction.

[75b] anything against them. For they knew their weakness and the greatness of the danger and the anguish that awaited if the Lord did not care¹⁰⁹ for his church in accord with his mercy.

Pray for the glorious emir, that God would give him wisdom and enlighten him toward that which is pleasing to the Lord and is beneficial. And the blessed father of all¹¹⁰, and the revered fathers with him – Abba Mar Thomas and Mar Severus and Mar Sergius¹¹¹ and Mar Aitilaha¹¹² and Mar John and their entire holy synodal board¹¹³ – and the leaders and the believers who are gathered here with us and especially our beloved, both a wise leader and one guarded by Christ, Mar Andrew and we, least in the Lord, ask for your peace and your holy prayers always.

¹⁰⁹ Syriac: ܘܫܝܬ. NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 263 and SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1997)*, 73 reprinted as SAADI, *The Letter of John Sedreh (1999)*, p. 54 translate as “visit.”

¹¹⁰ Syriac: ܘܫܝܬ. NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 263 translates as “père de l’ensemble.”

¹¹¹ NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 263 n. 3 notes that Michael the Syrian speaks of a Thomas, Severus, and Sergius as clergy who accompanied John’s predecessor Athanasius on his visit to Heraclius (CHABOT, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, vol. 2, p. 412).

¹¹² NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 263 n. 4 cites Michael the Syrian as speaking of an Aitilaha who was named bishop of Marga and Gomal in 629 (CHABOT, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, vol. 2, p. 416, 419).

¹¹³ Nau’s edition erroneously has ܘܫܝܬ while the manuscript reads ܘܫܝܬ (NAU, *Un colloque du patriarche Jean*, p. 253).