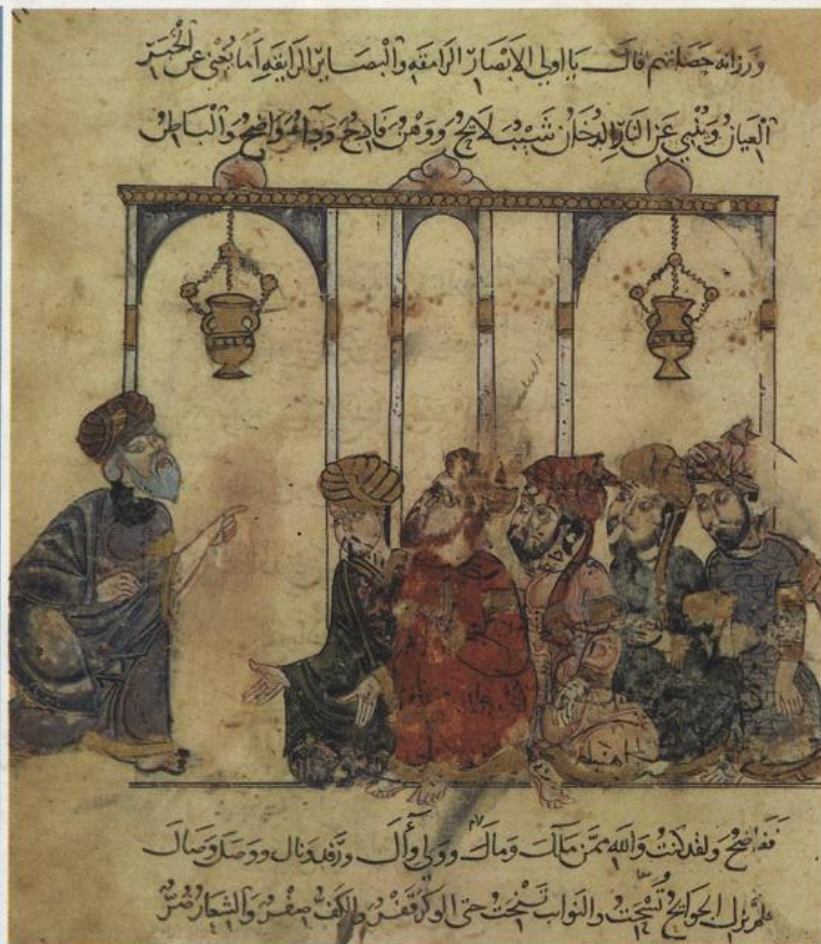


# Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages



**Mena Reda**

menareda010@gmail.com

## Bible and Qur'an in early Syriac Christian-Islamic disputation

GERRIT J. REININK  
(Groningen)

In his introductory words, the author of the disputation (*drāšā*)<sup>1</sup> which an Arab notable had with a monk in the monastery of Bēt Ḥālē (hereafter quoted as *Disputation*)<sup>2</sup> gives a precise definition of the generic character of his work. The author intends to use the *Question-and-Answer* format, in order to frame an appropriate and useful “report of our investigation into the apostolic faith through a son of Ishmael”.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the author wants us to believe that the disputation in the monastery actually took place. We should not doubt the historicity of the visit of the emir Maslama’s notable to the monastery, where the Arab stayed for ten days to recover from some illness.<sup>4</sup> We are also to believe that during his stay the Arab notable came to be on familiar terms with the monks and engaged with them in many disputes concerning the Scriptures of the Christians

---

<sup>1</sup> For the genre of the *drāšā* in the East Syrian tradition and its role in the instruction and in the public debate, see now J.T. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: The University of California Press 2006, 164-205.

<sup>2</sup> Three manuscripts of this still unpublished work are known to exist or to have existed: Siirt 112 (15<sup>th</sup> century?), Diyarbakir 95 (early 18<sup>th</sup> century), Mardin 82 (1890). For details, see G.J. Reinink, “Political Power and Right Religion in the East Syrian Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē and an Arab Notable”, in: *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam (The History of Christian-Muslim Relations 5)*, E. Grypeou, M. Swanson, and D. Thomas, eds., Leiden-Boston: Brill 2006, 153-169, 158. Only Diyarbakir 95 is accessible to me, which I quote according to the folios of the manuscript (Diyarbakir 95, item 35, ff. 1r-8v). I have divided the *Disputation* in 12 sections.

<sup>3</sup> *Disputation*, section 1, Diyarbakir 95, f. 1r.

<sup>4</sup> *Disputation*, section 2, Diyarbakir 95, f. 1r. For monasteries as places of rest and recreation in Islamic tradition, see S.H. Griffith, “Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bēt Ḥālē and a Muslim Emir”, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3, 1 (2000), 1-19, 11 and n. 68.

and his own holy Scripture, the Qurʾān.<sup>5</sup> The modern reader of the *Disputation*, however, needs to be on the alert. The report of the discussions here cast in the *Question-and-Answer* format is not primarily focused on the representation of historical exactitude; rather, it aims at edifying purposes.<sup>6</sup> The report is meant to instruct the readers about the principal differences between “the apostolic faith” of the author’s religious community and the *tawdītā* (confession) of the “sons of Ishmael”.<sup>7</sup> At the same time the report is so constructed as to provide the readers with arguments with which they might refute and combat Muslim criticisms of their religion. At a deeper level, the report suggests a historical context wherein the possibility of Christian apostasy to Islam was considered by the Christian

<sup>5</sup> *Disputation*, section 2, Diyarbakir 95, f. 1r.

<sup>6</sup> In the East Syrian tradition the genre of *Erotapokriseis* was closely connected with the teaching practice in the schools; cf. C. Molenberg, *The Interpreter Interpreted. Išoʿ bar Nun’s Selected Questions on the Old Testament*, Diss. Groningen 1990, 78-79. Another example of the genre of the *Erotapokriseis* in connection with the *drāšā* (also a scholastic genre) and with Christian-Muslim controversy is Theodore bar Koni’s Scholion, book 10, written about 791/2; ed. A. Scher and transl. R. Hespel and R. Draguet, *Theodorus bar Kōnī. Liber Scholiorum II*, CSCO, 69, Script. Syri 26 (text), 432, script. Syri 188 (transl.), Louvain: Peeters 1960, 1982, 232/172. For this treatise, see S.H. Griffith, “Chapter Ten of the *Scholion*: Theodore bar Kōnī’s Apology for Christianity”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 47 (1981), 158-188; idem, “Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: from Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)”, in: *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter (Wolfenbütteler Mittelalter-Studien 4)*, B. Lewis and F. Niewöhner, eds., Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1992, 251-273, 261-262. For a survey of the Syriac literature of *Erotapokriseis*, see B. ter Haar Romeny, “Question-and-Answer Collections in Syriac Literature”, in: *Erotapokriseis. Early Christian Question-and-Answer Literature in Context*, A. Volgers and C. Zamagni, eds., Leuven-Paris-Dudley, MA: Peeters 2004, 145-163.

<sup>7</sup> The author of the *Disputation* uses the noun *tawdītā* seven times. It is only the Arab who distinguishes his *tawdītā* from the *tawdītā* of the monk (four times) and from all *tawdyātā* (confessions) on earth (once). The monk once uses the noun in connection with the name Abraham, when he asks the Arab which *tawdītā* of Abraham he requires from the Christians. At one point the monk speaks of the seventy-two different Christian *tawdyātā* on earth (apparently based on the number of seventy-two nations on earth and the sending of the apostles in Luke 10). One is under the impression that the author is reluctant to make the monk call the belief of the Arab as such a *tawdītā* - and this may be for entirely apologetic reasons, for it is abundantly clear that the author knew about the contemporary claim of the Arab authorities that Islam is the confession which is superior to all religions (for further discussion, see Reinink, “Political Power”). It is interesting to note that Jacob of Edessa (see also below, n. 27) knows about the *tawdītā* *hāgāraytā* (the Muslim confession) which is embroidered on cloth; cf. 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, NJ: The Darwin Press 1997, 161, n. 164: “Jacob of Edessa... may well, then be right that it was ‘Abd al-Malik who first had Muslim slogans printed on cloth as well as on coins and documents.”



clergy an increasing problem.<sup>8</sup>

The *Disputation* is the earliest known Syriac source in which the name Qur'ān emerges (three times), and this very fact evokes several questions. What explicit information about the Qur'ān and its contents is given by the author of the *Disputation*? How did he acquire this knowledge, directly or indirectly? How does he explain or respond to these Qur'ānic materials? These are the issues that I discuss in the first part of this paper. In the second part, I offer some further comments on the author's use of the Bible and on his non-biblical arguments in his refutation of Muslim criticisms of Christian tenets and practices.

The first mention of the Qur'ān is in the introduction of the *Disputation* (section 2).<sup>9</sup> The Arab who visits the monastery is presented as the initiator of the discussions on "our Scriptures and their Qur'ān". In fact, however, the Arab's first question does not concern the Bible and the Qur'ān, but rather raises the issue of the effectiveness of the monks' daily prayers, since the latter do not adhere to the right *tawdītā* (confession) (section 3).<sup>10</sup> Thus, the main issue of the *Disputation* is this: which religion represents the right *tawdītā*, Islam or Christianity? This issue is not defined or sustained by the Arab by means of quotations from the Qur'ān. The Arab defines the superiority of Islam over "all confessions on earth" by listing the outstanding qualities of his confession: "...we carefully keep the commandments of Muḥammad and the sacrifices of Abraham...we do not ascribe a son to God, who is visible and passible like us...we do not worship the cross, nor the bones of the martyrs...". In addition, the Arab accuses the Christians of deceiving pagan people through the promise of the remission of sins through baptism. The list of differences, which, in fact, concentrates on Christianity alone, is concluded by the Arab's statement that the conclusive proof of the Arabs' religious superiority is furnished by the actual situation of their political superiority (section 4).<sup>11</sup> The latter item takes, indeed, a very special place in the *Disputation*.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Reinink, "Political Power", 166-167; idem, "Following the Doctrine of the Demons. Early Christian Fear of Conversion to Islam", in: *Cultures of Conversion (Groningen Studies in Cultural Change 18)*, J.N. Bremmer, W.J. van Bekkum, and A.L. Molendijk, eds., Leuven-Paris-Dudley MA: Peeters 2006, 127-138, esp. 135-137.

<sup>9</sup> Diyarbakir 95, f. 1r.

<sup>10</sup> Diyarbakir 95, f. 1r-v.

<sup>11</sup> Diyarbakir 95, ff. 1v-2r.

<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion of this topic, see my "Political Power".

The second and the third mention of the Qurʾān occur in section 8, and the name of the Muslims' holy writ is now put forward by the Christian interlocutor of the *Disputation*. The Arab asks why the Christians venerate the cross, although Christ in his Gospel did not order them to do so. In his response to this question, the monk draws a parallel between Muḥammad and Christ. Even Muḥammad, the monk says, did not teach all laws and commandments in the Qurʾān: "some of them you learned from the Qurʾān, some [are] in the *sūrat al-baqara*, and in *gygy* and in *tawrāb*".<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the monk continues, while our Lord taught us some of the commandments (i.e. in the Gospel), some others are taught through the inspired Apostles, and some through the teachers (of the Church).<sup>14</sup> As for the latter part of the monk's words, it is interesting to note that we find the same tripartite scheme in the West-Syrian apologetic work known as the *Interrogation of Patriarch John by a Muslim Emir*. Here the patriarch, responding to the emir's demand that the Christians should comply with the Muslim Law, if their laws are not explicitly written in the Gospel, argues that the Christian laws have three sources: the commandments of the Gospel, the rules of the Apostles and the laws of the Church.<sup>15</sup> The first part of the monk's remark raises some questions. Is the author of the *Disputation* here making a distinction between the Qurʾān and its second *sūra* as independent sources of Islamic commandments?<sup>16</sup> And what exactly is meant by *gygy*? As to the latter question, I am inclined to accept the solution already suggested by some scholars, that *gygy* is probably a corruption of *injil* (Gospel), and that the linked terms *injil* and *tawrāb* refer to the same Arabic pair which appear nine times in the Qurʾān, though they appear there together in

---

<sup>13</sup> Diyarbakir 95, f. 6r.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Edition with French translation by F. Nau, "Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716", *Journal Asiatique* 11/5 (1915), 225-279, 251-252/261-262. I agree with those scholars who consider this letter in its present form as a literary apology which was written not before the end of the seventh century, cf. G.J. Reinink, "The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam", *Oriens Christianus* 77(1993), 165-187 (repr. in: idem, *Syriac Christianity under Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Rule*, Aldershot, Variorum, Ashgate Publishing Limited 2005: XIII). See also below, n. 48.

<sup>16</sup> Griffith and Hoyland are inclined to answer this question in the affirmative: Griffith, "Disputes", 9; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 471. Cf. also P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge-New York-New Rochelle-Melbourne-Sydney: Cambridge University Press 1977, 17: "...the monk of Bet Hale distinguishes pointedly between the Koran and the Sūrat al-baqara as sources of the law..".

the reverse order.<sup>17</sup> Anyhow, it is possible that the author of the *Disputation* has a similar tripartite scheme in mind when drawing a parallel between the Christian and the Muslim tradition. If we assume that in his listing he is distinguishing the Qurʾān from the *sūrat al-baqara*, then we have to take the pair *injīl* and *tawrāh* together as a separate third category. If, on the other hand, he considers *sūrat al-baqara* as part of the Qurʾān – only specifying this *sūra*, since it was well-known and contains many important Qurʾānic laws and commandments<sup>18</sup> – then the tripartite scheme may include: (1) Qurʾān, (2) Gospel, and (3) Torah, following a chronological order which begins with the most recent and ends with the oldest writing. In this second case, the author may have been aware of some presentations of the three writings in the Qurʾān. According to the Qurʾān the Torah was given by God to Moses, the Gospel to Jesus and the Qurʾān to the Prophet.<sup>19</sup> The Torah and the Gospel preceded the Qurʾān, giving the right guidance to the people, and this was confirmed by the Qurʾān (Qurʾān 3: 3/2). According to Qurʾān 9: 111/112, God promised Paradise to the believers according to the promises in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qurʾān. The conspicuous role attributed to the Torah and the Gospel in the Qurʾān in these and other places may have brought the author of the *Disputation* to the supposition that, in addition to the Qurʾān, the Torah and the Gospel also served as sources for the laws and commandments of the Muslims.

The three mentions of the Qurʾān in the *Disputation*, then, are not connected with direct quotations from the Muslims' holy book, but consist of no more than references to names or possibly to some elements in its contents. The situation, however, looks different in those places, where pronouncements of Muḥammad are presented. This happens in two places (section 6 and section 11).

Section 6 deals with the Muslim rejection of the Christian concepts of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ. After having demonstrated through Old Testament and New Testament *testimonia* and through examples based on nature why Christians rightly believe in a trinitarian God, the monk, via the following counterquestion, returns to the Arab's question, as to why the Christians proclaim a son to God:

<sup>17</sup> Griffith, "Disputes", 9; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 471-472. Qurʾān 3:3/2, 48/43, 65/58; 5:46/50, 66, 68/72, 110; 9:111/112.

<sup>18</sup> In the Christian Bēḥirā legend (see below, n. 38) the *sūrat al-baqara* appears as the name of the whole book; R. Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend", *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13 (1898), 189-242; 14 (1899), 203-268, 228/222 and 243.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *inter alia* Qurʾān 46:12/11; 57:27; 35:31/28.

“And this, that you said: ‘Why do you make a son to Him (i.e. God)?’, tell me, son of Ishmael, whose son do you make him who is called by you ‘Īsā son of Maryam’ and by us ‘Jesus Christ?’” The Arab answers: “After our Muḥammad we also testify to what he said: ‘Word of God and His Spirit’.<sup>20</sup> For more than one reason this passage is very interesting. The author of the *Disputation* not only knew the Arab Qur’ānic name of Jesus, but he was in all probability also well informed about the Qur’ānic doctrine concerning Mary’s virginal conception of Jesus: “tell me, son of Ishmael, whose son do you make him...?”<sup>21</sup> The author of the *Disputation* makes the Arab answer by quoting Qur’ān 4: 171/169: “Īsā son of Maryam...is His (i.e. God’s) Word...and a Spirit from Him.”

Qur’ān 4: 171/169 provides the author of the *Disputation* with an excellent opportunity to argue that Muḥammad, in fact, proclaimed the correct, i.e. Christian, definition of Christ. Without regard to the anti-Christian context of this passage in the Qur’ān, where, on the contrary, the Christian “misconceptions” related to the Godhead of Christ and the Trinity are challenged,<sup>22</sup> the Syriac author is quick to approve the Qur’ānic definition, arguing that Muḥammad, the crypto-Christian,<sup>23</sup> took his definition of Jesus’ Sonship from the pericope of the Annunciation in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1: 26-38):<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Diyarbakir 95, f. 4v.

<sup>21</sup> Qur’ān 3:47/42; 19:20; for a discussion of these passages, see H. Busse, *Islam, Judaism, and Christianity: Theological and Historical Affiliations*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers 1998, 115-125.

<sup>22</sup> For the discussion of the meaning of “Word” and “Spirit” in Qur’ān 4: 171/169, see H. Räisänen, *Das Koranische Jesusbild. Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Korans (Schriften der finnischen Gesellschaft für Missiologie und Ökumenik 20)*, Helsinki: Finnische Gesellschaft für Missiologie und Ökumenik 1971, 30-37; T. O’Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta 139*, Roma: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum 1953, 57-64; idem, *Word of God in the Qur’ān (Biblica et Orientalia 11a)*, Roma: Biblical Institute Press 1984, 34-41.

<sup>23</sup> In *Disputation*, section 7, Diyarbakir 95, f. 5r, the author represents Muḥammad as a crypto-Christian who was very well instructed in the Christian doctrine, but who kept it back from the Arabs, since he feared that they were not yet ripe for the mystery of the Trinity, would misunderstand it, and would lapse back into their former polytheism. The topic is a known one in the Syriac tradition (for example in Jakob of Sarug’s works), where it is used to demonstrate that the Hebrews in their days were not yet ripe for receiving the doctrine of the triune God, for which reason this doctrine was concealed in Old Testament types and symbols.

<sup>24</sup> Diyarbakir 95, ff. 4v-5r.

“And rightly you say [so]; Muḥammad received this word namely from the Gospel of Luke, as the angel Gabriel proclaimed and announced to the blessed Mary: “Peace be to you, full of grace; and our Lord is with you, blessed among women [Luke 1: 28]; for the Holy Spirit shall come, and the power of the Most High shall rest upon you;<sup>25</sup> therefore the one to be born from you is holy, and he shall be called Son of the Most High [Luke 1: 35]”. Now, give heed to your word and understand what you heard from Muḥammad. Because you testify that he proclaimed him as the “Word of God and His Spirit”, I ask from you now one thing of two: either you remove the “Word of God and His Spirit” from him, or you proclaim him straightforwardly [to be] the Son of God.”

Qurʾān 4: 171/169 is not overtly referring to the Annunciation story, but other Qurʾānic passages, in fact, do (cf. Qurʾān 3: 42/37, 47/42; 19: 20/20). Did the author of the *Disputation* have any knowledge of these passages? We cannot be sure. Anyhow, Qurʾān 4: 171/169 belonged to the publicly known anti-Christian Qurʾānic texts, which in the nineties of the seventh century were propagated by the Umayyad authorities.<sup>26</sup> But Christian sources also testify that since that time they have been informed about the definition in Qurʾān 4: 171/169. Jacob of Edessa, in a letter to John the Stylite (written at the beginning of the eighth century), testifies to his knowledge of the Muslims’ rejection of the Divinity of Christ and their definition of Jesus as the “Word of God” and the “Spirit of God”. The first part of this definition, Jacob says, is, indeed, consistent with the Holy Scriptures. However, in adding the element of the “Spirit of God”, the Muslims show their ignorance, since they are not able to distinguish between “Word” and “Spirit”.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the eighth century the

<sup>25</sup> The verb *naggen*, which I translate with “shall rest”, is that of the Pešitta of Luke 1:35. For the background of this term in the Syriac tradition, see, in particular, S.P. Brock, “The Lost Old Syriac at Luke 1: 35 and the Earliest Syriac Terms for the Incarnation”, in: *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century. Origins, Recensions, Text and Transmission (Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 3)*, W.L. Petersen, ed., Notre Dame-London: University of Notre Dame Press 1989, 117-131.

<sup>26</sup> For Qurʾān 4: 171/169 in the inscription inside the Dome of the Rock built by ‘Abd al-Malik in 691/2 AD, see C. Kessler, “‘Abd al-Malik’s Inscription in the Dome of the Rock: a Reconsideration”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, new series, 1970, 2-14, p. 11; S.S. Blair, “What is the Date of the Dome of the Rock?”, in: *Bayt al-Maqdis. ‘Abd al-Malik’s Jerusalem*, part I, J. Raby and J. Johns, eds., Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992, 59-87, 86-87; O. Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy. Early Islamic Jerusalem*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1996, 60, 63; Reinink, “Political Power”, 153-154.

<sup>27</sup> Syriac text and French transl. by F. Nau, “Lettre de Jacques d’Edesse sur la généalogie de la sainte Vierge”, *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien* 6 (1901), 517-522/522-531, 518-519/523-524; English transl. by Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 166.



Catholicos Timothy I refers to Qurʾān 4: 171/169 in his *Apology*. In the context of the discussion of the name “servant” in connection with Christ, the Catholicos adduces Qurʾān 4: 171/169 as evidence for Christ’s Lordship and His (divine) Sonship:<sup>28</sup>

“Thus, also in the Qurʾān, as I have heard, Christ is called the Word and the Spirit of God, and not a servant. And if Christ is the Word and the Spirit of God, then Christ is not a servant. So then, as appears from the Qurʾān, He is not a servant, but a Lord.”

Jacob and Timothy – we may also add John of Damascus<sup>29</sup> – do not connect Qurʾān 4: 171/169 with the Annunciation story in Luke. The author of the Greek *Dispute between a Saracen and a Christian* (presumably written not before the end of the eighth century),<sup>30</sup> however, also connects Qurʾān 4: 171/169 with Luke 1:35:<sup>31</sup>

“And if the Saracen say to you: “How did God descend into the womb?”, answer then to him: “Let us invoke your Scripture and my Scripture. Your Scripture says, that God purged the Virgin Mary first more than all other women [cf. Qurʾān 3: 42/37] and that the Spirit of God and the Word descended upon her [cf. Qurʾān 4: 171/169]; and my Gospel says: ‘The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you [Luke 1: 35].’ See, then, that both texts [speak with] *one* voice and [express] *one* thought.”

<sup>28</sup> A. Mingana, “The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi”, ed. and English transl., *Woodbrooke Studies* 2 (1928), 1-162, 156/83. Timothy is well aware of the polemical context of Qurʾān 4: 171/169, since a little later he quotes Qurʾān 4: 172/170: “The Messiah is not ashamed of being a servant of God” (pp. 157/85). The English translation is mine.

<sup>29</sup> John of Damascus, *De haeresibus* 100/101, referring twice to Qurʾān 4: 171/169, uses this passage to respond to the Muslim charge, that the Christians are “associators”, people who ascribe a partner to God: “How, when you say that Christ is the Word and Spirit of God, do you revile us as associators? For the Word and the Spirit are inseparable... So we call you mutilators of God” (transl. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 486). For a general view of John of Damascus and Islam, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 480-489, and the bibliographical references there, and A. Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, 76-83.

<sup>30</sup> For the date and author of this text, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 489; R. Gleis and A.T. Khoury, *Johannes Damaskenos und Theodor Abū Qurra: Schriften zum Islam (Corpus Islamo-Christianum, Series Graeca 3)*, Würzburg-Altenberge: Echer Verlag-Oros Verlag 1995, 59-63.

<sup>31</sup> Ed. and German transl. by Gleis and Khoury, *Johannes Damaskenos*, 178/179.

The *Dispute between a Saracen and a Christian* not only connects Qurʾān 4: 171/169 with Luke 1: 35, but it seems also, like our *Disputation*, to interpret the gospel's words "the power of the Most High" as referring to the Word, the Divine Son, the second person of the Trinity.

As to the *Disputation*, this is a remarkable fact, since its author is not following here the exegesis of Luke 1: 35 given by Theodore of Mopsuestia, the interpreter *par excellence* of the East Syrian tradition, but rather the explanation of Ephrem Syrus. It seems that Theodore interpreted "the power of the Most High" as referring to the power of the working of the Spirit. Pointing to Acts 10: 38: *God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power*, Theodore argues that the Holy Scripture, when it mentions the name "Spirit", usually does so in connection with the name "power". In fact, the Evangelist says this in Luke 1: 35:<sup>32</sup>

"The working of the Spirit, whose power is exalted and strong, shall be upon you, since He deems you worthy to be aided by Him, so that you will be able to receive the greatness of this gift."

On the other hand, Ephrem at several places, as Sebastian Brock states, "in common with much of the later Syriac tradition (and with several earlier Greek writers) differentiates the Power from the Holy Spirit, identifying the Power as the Word".<sup>33</sup> Here, as in other instances, the author of the *Disputation* shows himself a faithful heir of Ephrem's realm of thought, and he implicitly assumes that his audience knows about this interpretation of Luke 1: 35.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Theodore's Commentary on Luke as a whole is lost. Theodore's exegesis of Luke 1: 35, however, is preserved in the Anonymous Commentary of the New Testament, which is preserved in the East Syrian manuscript (*olim*) Diyarbakir 22, f. 283v, lines 1-15. This exegesis is taken from the Theodore-source of the author of the Anonymous Commentary and it reflects in every detail Theodore's train of thought and style; cf. G.J. Reinink, *Studien zur Quellen- und Traditionsgeschichte des Evangelienkommentars der Gannat Bussame*, CSCO, 414, Subs. 57, Louvain: Peeters 1979, 218-222; idem, "Die Exegese des Theodor von Mopsuestia in einem Anonymen nestorianischen Kommentar zum Neuen Testament", in: *Studia Patristica* XIX, E.A. Livingstone, ed., Leuven: Peeters 1989, 381-391.

<sup>33</sup> Brock, "The Lost Old Syriac", p. 120.

<sup>34</sup> See below, p. 68. Brock, "The Lost Old Syriac", p. 120, n. 10, rightly observes, that "in later Syriac exegesis most West Syrian writers identify the Power as the Word, while East Syrian writers often equate the Power with the Spirit". The latter tradition in East Syrian exegesis was, as we observed above, inspired by Theodore of Mopsuestia.

In section 11 Muḥammad's words are quoted for the second time. After having admitted that the Christians possess religious truth and not a false confession, as some believed, the Arab adduces Muḥammad's positive view of the Christian monks: "Muḥammad, our prophet, also said about the inhabitants of monasteries and the mountain dwellers that they will enjoy the Kingdom."<sup>35</sup> As already appears from the name "Kingdom", this alleged pronouncement of Muḥammad is not a *verbatim* quotation from the Qur'ān. There are, however, two places in the Qur'ān, which could be interpreted as positive pronouncements concerning the monks (Qur'ān 5: 82/85; 57: 27/27), and there are also some *ḥadīths* which reflect positive views of Christian monasticism.<sup>36</sup> Besides, the author of the *Disputation* knows about the tradition of Muḥammad being instructed by Sargīs Bēḥīrā,<sup>37</sup> whom early Islamic tradition knows as the monk who was the teacher of the young Muḥammad and who recognized the latter's future prophethood.<sup>38</sup> It is also important to note that already by the end of the 680s eastern Christians were under the impression that Muḥammad, at the commandment of God and from the very beginning of the Arab conquests, gave orders to hold the Christians,

---

<sup>35</sup> Diyarbakir 95, f. 8r.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Griffith, "Disputing", p. 10. For a discussion of these Qur'ānic passages, the *ḥadīth* and Muslim exegetical traditions concerning the topic of monasticism, see S. Sviri, "WA-RAHBĀN. ATAN IBTADA'ŪHĀ: An Analysis of Traditions Concerning the Origin and Evaluation of Christian Monasticism", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990), 195-208; J.D. McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*, Cambridge-New York-Port Chester-Melbourne-Sydney: Cambridge University Press 1991, 260-284.

<sup>37</sup> *Disputation*, section 7, Diyarbakir 95, f. 5r: "So Muḥammad also...taught you first one true God, a doctrine that he had received from Sargīs Bēḥīrā."

<sup>38</sup> For this topic in Islamic sources since the eighth century, see, in particular, B. Roggema, "The Legend of Sergius- Baḥīrā: Some Remarks on Its Origin in the East and its Traces in the West" in: *East and West in the Crusader States. Context—Contacts—Confrontations, II*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 92, K. Ciggaar and H. Teule, eds., Leuven-Paris-Dudley MA: Peeters & Departement Oosterse Studies 1999, 107. For the ninth-century Christian Bēḥīrā legend, see S.H. Griffith, "Muḥammad and the Monk Baḥīrā: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from the Early Abbasid Times", *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995), 146-174; S. Gero, "The Legend of the Monk Baḥīrā, the Cult of the Cross, and Iconoclasm", in: *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam, VIIe – VIIIe siècles*, P. Canivet and J.-P. Rey-Coquais, eds., Damas: Institut français de Damas 1992, 47-58; Roggema, "The Legend of Sergius- Baḥīrā", 107-123; eadem, "A Christian Reading of the Qur'ān: The Legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā and Its Use of Qur'ān and Sīra", in: *Syrian Christians under Islam. The First Thousand Years*, D. Thomas, ed., Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill 2001, 56-73.

and in particular the monks, in honour.<sup>39</sup> John bar Penkaye, our witness for this tradition, does not reveal any knowledge of the Qurʾān or of any Qurʾānic statements about Jesus. His knowledge of early Islam is restricted, and seems merely to reflect some general views which were circulating in his time and in his milieu.<sup>40</sup>

It is likely also that the author of the *Disputation*, in quoting Muḥammad's words in section 11, is referring to a tradition that was commonly known in Christian circles. This brings us to the conclusion that there is not much evidence for the assumption that the author of the *Disputation* had any direct knowledge of the Qurʾān. It seems rather that his information about Qurʾānic traditions was based upon reports which were becoming commonly known in society at the time; these would have included the increasing Muslim criticisms of Christianity, which were being vigorously promoted by the Muslim authorities during and following the 690s.<sup>41</sup> It is perhaps not by chance that the Arab interlocutor in the *Disputation* is presented as somebody who possessed a high position at the court of Maslama, the governor of both Iraqs in 720-721, who was a son of the Arabization and Islamization caliph ʿAbd al-Malik.<sup>42</sup>

Still, if we compare the *Disputation* with the Christian sources from the seventh century, we can discover in the *Disputation* a remarkable development in Christian

---

<sup>39</sup> Ed. and French transl. by A. Mingana, *Sources Syriaques I: Mšīḡa-Zkba, Bar Penkayē*, Mossoul: Imprimerie des Pères Dominicains 1908, 141\*, 146\*/175\*; English transl. by S.P. Brock, "North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century. Book XV of John Bar Penkāyē's *Riṣ Mellē*", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987), 51-74, 57, 61 (repr. in: S.P. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, Aldershot: Variorum, Ashgate Publishing Limited 1992: II). For recent studies on John's work, see P. Bruns, "Von Adam und Eva bis Mohammed – Beobachtungen zur syrischen Chronik des Johannes bar Penkaye", *Oriens Christianus* 87 (2003), 47-64; H. Kaufhold, "Anmerkungen zur Textüberlieferung der Chronik des Johannes bar Penkāyē", *Oriens Christianus* 87 (2003), 65-79; G.J. Reinink, "East Syrian Historiography in Response to the Rise of Islam: The Case of John bar Penkaye's *Ktābā d-rēš mellē*", in: *Redefining Christian Identity. Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 134, J.J. van Ginkel, H.L. Murre-Van den Berg, and T.M. van Lint, eds., Leuven-Paris-Dudley, MA: Peeters & Departement Oosterse Studies 2005, 77-89.

<sup>40</sup> Reinink, "The Beginnings", 167-177.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Reinink, "Political Power", 153-154.

<sup>42</sup> For Maslama, cf. G. Rotter, "Maslama b. ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān", in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 7, Leiden: Brill 1991, 740. For ʿAbd al-Malik's Arabization and Islamization politics, see H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, London-New York: Longman, 99; G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam. The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661-750*, London-Sydney: Croom Helm, 63-66; A. Rippin, *Muslims. Their religious beliefs and practices*, London-New York: Routledge, 2005, 68-71; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 16, 48-49, 553-554.



knowledge of early Islam. The confession of the new rulers is considered now to be more than only a continuation of Old Testament Abrahamic monotheism and its practices.<sup>43</sup> It manifests itself not only as a separate *tawdītā* (confession) with its own holy book written by its own Prophet,<sup>44</sup> but also as a *tawdītā* which claims to be superior to all confessions on earth.

By way of conclusion, I offer some preliminary comments on the author's use of biblical and non-biblical arguments against the criticisms of Christian tenets and practices, as these are put forward by the Arab of the *Disputation*.

It strikes one, first of all, that the author of the *Disputation* usually advances quotations from the Bible as part of Tradition. We have already seen that his use of Luke 1: 35 implies a certain exegesis of this passage. In earlier publications I have pointed out that some of the *Disputation's* quotations from the Bible or biblical references were borrowed from intermediary sources, for example from a biblical commentary and an apocalyptic text.<sup>45</sup> It seems very likely that many of the biblical *testimonia* adduced against the Muslims' rejection of the Trinity, the veneration of the Cross and the practice of worshipping towards the East, stem from traditional lore.<sup>46</sup> We encounter several parallels for these

---

<sup>43</sup> See G.J. Reinink, "The Lamb on the Tree: Syriac Exegesis and Anti-Islamic Apologetics", in: *The Sacrifice of Isaac. The Aqedab (Genesis 22) and its Interpretations (Themes in Biblical Narrative 4)*, E. Noort and E. Tigchelaar, eds., Leiden-Boston- Köln: Brill, 2002, 109-124, esp. 123-124 (repr. in: idem, *Syriac Christianity: XV*).

<sup>44</sup> The Arab calls Muḥammad "our prophet", *Disputation*, section 7, Diyarbakir 95, f. 5r. This is one of the oldest witnesses of Syriac Christian knowledge about Muḥammad's prophethood. For the polemics against the Muslims calling their 'warrior' a prophet in the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, which was probably written in the 690s, see my forthcoming article "From Apocalypics to Apologetics: Early Syriac Reactions to Islam". It is typical of the apologetic character of the *Disputation* that its author does not enter into the discussion of Muḥammad's prophethood. For other early witnesses, see R.G. Hoyland, "The Earliest Christian Writings on Muḥammad: An Appraisal", in: *The Biography of Muḥammad. The Issue of the Sources (Islamic History and Civilisation 32)*, H. Motzki, ed., Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill 2000, 276-297, esp. 285-286.

<sup>45</sup> For the typological exegesis of Gen. 22 in the *Disputation* and the commentary source used here, see Reinink, "The Lamb", 114-115. For the biblical references taken from the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, see Reinink, "Political Power", p. 166.

<sup>46</sup> *Disputation*, section 6, Diyarbakir 95, f. 4r (Trinity); section 8, Diyarbakir 95, f. 5v (Cross); section 10, Diyarbakir 95, f. 7v-8r (Worship towards the East).

*testimonia* in anti-Jewish polemical sources.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, one finds the same phenomenon in the *Interrogation of Patriarch John by a Muslim Emir*.<sup>48</sup> This is, of course, not at all astonishing, since the refutation of these Muslim anti-Christian topics had precedents in the tradition of Christian-Jewish polemic-religious discourse.<sup>49</sup>

The *Disputation's* non-biblical arguments are, moreover, firmly rooted in the author's cultural tradition. He very consciously applies non-biblical arguments whenever these are required. When, at the beginning of the *Disputation*, the Arab states that he loves the truth, but does not accept all Christian Scriptures, the monk answers that he will reply either by adducing arguments from the Scriptures, or on the basis of what he calls the *tē'ōriya d-re'yānā*, the "intellectual contemplation" (section 3).<sup>50</sup> What the author, in fact, means with this expression are the arguments based on human reason and the examples taken from nature. The Arab is presented as someone who accepts this category of arguments, since his "intellect" (*re'yānā*) agrees with the "natural" examples adduced by the monk (section 5).<sup>51</sup>

In these "natural" examples the author of the *Disputation* is still far removed from the programmatic use of nature and reason as the principal common ground

<sup>47</sup> For the Trinity, see below n. 49. For the Old Testament *testimonia* of the veneration of the works of hands (comparison of the brazen serpent in Num. 21: 8-9 with the Cross), and of the worshipping towards the East (Paradise situated in the East; Gen. 2:8), the eastern gate of the tabernacle, David (Ps. 68: 33), cf., for example, the anti-Jewish disputation known as the *Trophies of Damascus* (mid to late seventh century), ed. G. Bardy, *Les Trophées de Damas*, PO 15,2, Turnhout: Brepols 1973: III,6 (veneration of images); III,7 (direction of prayer), 245-250, 250-254. Cf. A. Külzer, *Disputationes Graecae contra Iudaeos. Untersuchungen zur byzantinischen antijüdischen Dialogliteratur und ibrem Judenbild* (*Byzantinisches Archiv* 18), Stuttgart-Leipzig: Teubner 1999, 155-158; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 78-87. For Num. 21: 8-9, cf. also M.C. Albl, "And Scripture Cannot Be Broken". *The Form and Function of the Early Christian Testimonia Collections*, Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill 1999, 129.

<sup>48</sup> In the discussion of the Trinity and Divinity of Christ, ed. Nau, "Un colloque", 249-251/259-261. In particular Homily LXX of Severus of Antioch's *Cathedral Homilies* may have been the *Interrogation's* source here, since it has some striking parallels with Severus's work; see Reinink, "The Beginnings", 177 and n. 71.

<sup>49</sup> For example, as Old Testament *testimonia* for the Trinity the *Disputation* adduces successively Gen. 1:26, Gen. 11:7 and Is. 6:3 (section 6, Diyarbakir 95, f. 4r). We find the same proof-texts, in the same order in, for example, Jacob of Serugh's *Homilies against the Jews*, I: 131-142, ed. and French transl. by M. Albert, *Jacques de Saroug. Homélie contre les Juifs*, PO 38, Turnhout: Brepols 1976, 52-53. For Gen. 1: 26, cf. also Albl, *Testimonia Collections*, 122.

<sup>50</sup> Diyarbakir 95, f. 1v.

<sup>51</sup> Diyarbakir 95, f. 3v.

for interreligious Christian-Muslim discourse, as this appears in, for example, Job of Edessa's apologetics against Islam.<sup>52</sup> The examples in the *Disputation* remount to much older Syriac theological and polemical traditions. One of the *Disputation's* traceable sources is again the work of Ephrem Syrus. In the discussion of the triune God, the author adduces the well-known comparison between the sun, which is one sphere, out of which brightness and heat are radiated, and the one God who is known in three hypostases, which differ in their properties.<sup>53</sup> Defending the Christian veneration of the Cross, the author of the *Disputation* falls back on Ephrem's symbolism of the Cross,<sup>54</sup> in which the latter is compared with the four quarters of the earth,<sup>55</sup> the flying bird,<sup>56</sup> and the human body.<sup>57</sup> In another example the omnipresence and unlimitedness of God is compared with water, in which the fishes have their permanent element, wherever they may go.<sup>58</sup> At a certain moment the Arab is worried about the Theopaschite problem: "How is it possible, when the Divinity was with Him on the cross and in the tomb, as you say, that it did not suffer and was not harmed?" The monk first of all reproves the opinion of the heretics who say that the Divinity was with Christ "in a mixture, mingling and confusion", proclaiming the approved, East Syrian opinion of the union

<sup>52</sup> G.J. Reinink, "The 'Book of Nature' and Syriac Apologetics against Islam. The Case of Job of Edessa's *Book of Treasures*", in: *The Book of Nature in Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Groningen Studies in Cultural Change 16)*, A. Vanderjagt and K. van Berkel, eds., Leuven-Paris-Dudley, MA: Peeters 2005, 71-84, 82-83.

<sup>53</sup> E. Beck, *Ephräms Trinitätslehre im Bild von Sonne/Feuer, Licht und Wärme*, CSCO 425, Subs. 62, Louvain: Peeters 1981, esp.119: "Und nun zum Bilde selber bei Ephräam und bei den Griechen. Hier liegt wohl sicher die eigne Leistung Ephräms vor allem darin, daß er für den Geist durchgängig und konsequent die Wärme als dessen Symbol herausgestellt und durchgeführt hat."

<sup>54</sup> *Disputation*, section 8, Diyarbakir 95, f. 6v. For Ephrem's symbolism of the Cross, see P. Yousif, "St. Ephrem on Symbols in Nature: Faith, the Trinity, and the Cross (Hymns on Faith, no. 18)", *Eastern Churches Review* 10 (1978), 52-60; C.A. Karim, *Symbols of the Cross in the Writings of the Early Syriac Fathers*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press 2004, esp. 89-104.

<sup>55</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith*, 18: 3, ed. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide*, CSCO, 154, Script. Syr. 73 (text), 155, Script. Syr. 74 (transl.), Louvain: Peeters 1955, 70/54.

<sup>56</sup> *Hymns on Faith*, 18: 2, 6, ed. Beck, 69-70/54.

<sup>57</sup> *Hymns on Faith*, 18: 12, ed. Beck, 71/55. The image concerns a man extending his arms to put on his tunic.

<sup>58</sup> *Disputation*, section 9, Diyarbakir 95, f. 7r.

through the will.<sup>59</sup> He then adduces two examples from nature, which show that this union left the Divinity unharmed.<sup>60</sup>

“Listen to two examples, which are very trustworthy for the friends of God. Just as when the sun stands on a wall, and you take an axe and ruin the wall, the sun is not harmed and does not suffer, so the body, that [is] from us, died and was buried and rose, whereas the Divinity did not suffer. And just as iron that one leaves in the fire, if one does not throw it into the water, how long it may be, when one want it [so], increases its working, so the eternal Son, who sojourned in the temple which [is] from us, was with him on the cross and in the tomb and in His resurrection and showed His working.”<sup>61</sup>

It is likely that these examples already belonged to a tradition of anti-Theopaschite polemics, to which the author gave a new place in the *Disputation* with the purpose of instructing his East Syrian coreligionists in the rightness of their “apostolic faith” as opposed to the Christian (Monophysite) heretics and the Muslim rejection of the Divinity of Christ.

<sup>59</sup> *Disputation*, section 5, Diyarbakir 95, f. 3r-v. The anti-Theopaschite wording – whereby the Divinity was with the Humanity of Christ without “mixture” (*muzzagā*), “mingling” (*ḥuṭānā*) or “confusion” (*bulbālā*) – concurs with the confession of faith of the East Syrian Synod of 486; English translation by S. Brock, “The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to Early Seventh Centuries: Preliminary Considerations and Materials”, in: *Aksum-Thyateira: a Festschrift for Archbishop Methodios*, G. Dragas, ed., London: Thyateira House 1985, 125-142, 133 (repr. in: idem, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*: XII). For the union “through the will” (*ṣebyānāʿit*), cf. a.o. Michael Malpana’s treatise against the Monophysites, ed. and transl. by L. Abramowski and A.E. Goodman, *A Nestorian Collection of Christological Texts*, vol. I (Syriac Text), vol. II (Introduction, Translation and Indexes), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1972, 109, 23/63, 37; for the background in Theodore of Mopsuestia’s Christology, cf. R.A. Greer, *The Captain of our Salvation (Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese 15)*, Tübingen: Mohr 1973, 213-220.

<sup>60</sup> *Disputation*, section 5, Diyarbakir 95, f. 3v.

<sup>61</sup> The second example may be difficult to understand. The author apparently argues that as longer as one wants to leave iron in the fire, the more its working power increases. Thus also the working of the Divinity was not affected (diminished) by the cross etc., but was rather manifesting its increasing strength.



## Conclusion

In his important article on Christian apologetics in the world of Islam, in which he *inter alia* discusses the different genres of Christian apology, Sidney Griffith notes:<sup>62</sup>

“The characters in the narratives of the popular genres of apologetics and polemics are types; they are usually not recognizable personally, but they suggest readily recognizable *personae* in the society; their names are most often symbolic, even when they are the names of real persons. In the narratives they are playing a role, not representing themselves in any real way. And the role is most often that of a Christian who cannot be bested in an argument about religion by a Muslim.”

The profile of this type of literary apologetics, as sketched by Griffith, applies perfectly to our *Disputation*. The main characters, the monk and the Arab notable, are no more than instruments in the author's hands, and through these *personae* the author is able to touch on the current Muslim objections against the Christian confession and the most adequate Christian counterarguments – all of this with the purpose of instructing and edifying his coreligionists. Although this circumstance makes the *Disputation* a highly sophisticated and in a sense artificial work, it does not at all mean that it is deficient in historical relevance.<sup>63</sup> However, the *Disputation* first of all reveals us what Christians at that time knew of the tenets and practices of the religion of the rulers, how they looked at their politico-religious claims, and how they tried to maintain and reinforce their own religious identity in new, challenging and increasingly difficult historical circumstances.

---

<sup>62</sup> S.H. Griffith, “Answering the Call of the Minaret: Christian Apologetics in the World of Islam”, in: *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 134, Van Ginkel, Murre-van den Berg, and Van Lint, eds., Leuven-Paris-Dudley, MA, Peeters: 2005, 91-126, 120.

<sup>63</sup> It is for several reasons likely that we may accept the suggestion of the author that the *Disputation* was composed in the 720s, in the post-‘Abd al-Malik era, when the Christian clergy was faced with Arab authorities who openly and officially claimed that Islam, the religion of the State, was superior to all religions of the world, and to Christianity in the first place (Reinink, “Political Power”).