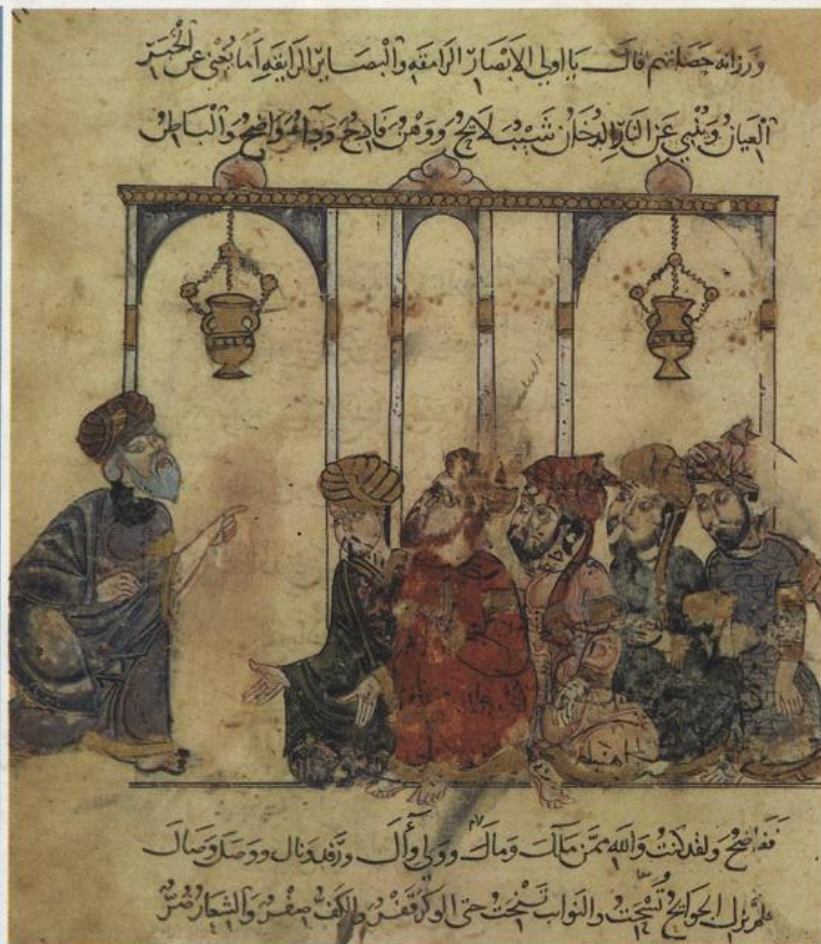


Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages



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Apologetics, catechesis, and the question of audience
in “On the Triune Nature of God” (Sinai Arabic 154)
and three treatises of Theodore Abū Qurrah

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Introduction

With the rapid Arab conquest of the Eastern Byzantine provinces and the Sassanid Persian Empire in the decades following the death of the prophet Muḥammad in AD 632, as well as the collection of the Qurʾan and the development of a specific Islamic identity over the course of the first Islamic century, Christians within the region gradually became aware that core Christian doctrines were being challenged in fundamental ways. The Muslims, while acknowledging al-Masīḥ, ʿĪsā b. Maryam (Jesus the Son of Mary) as a great prophet and apostle sent by God, called a central cluster of Christian convictions into question: namely, that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God who died the death of crucifixion “for our sake and for our salvation.” Over against this, the Qurʾan repeatedly responds to any suggestion that God have a Son with *subḥān Allāh* (or *subḥānaka* or *subḥānahu*), the Qurʾan’s typical response to any suggestion of unworthy notions about God.¹ The saying that “God is the Messiah, Son of Mary”² is explicitly

¹ See D. Gimaret, “Subḥān”, in: The *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 9, Leiden: Brill 1996, 742-743.

² *al-Māʾidab* (5):17, 72. English renderings of the Qurʾan are from A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, London: George Allen & Unwin 1955.

repudiated; “the Messiah, son of Mary, was only an Apostle.”³ Still, the apostolic status of the Messiah, Son of Mary is such that it is impossible that God, who is *khayr al-mākirīn*, “the best of devisers,”⁴ should allow his enemies to succeed in the plots they had devised against him: “they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them.”⁵

As Christian communities within the “New World Order” of *Dār al-Islām* came to adopt the Arabic language in the course of the eighth Christian century, it became a matter of urgency for Christian leaders to find ways of teaching and defending traditional christological teachings in a manner suitable to the new linguistic and religious environment. In the present essay I shall discuss two early Arabic-language presentations of the cluster of christological and soteriological convictions just mentioned. The first is the anonymous Melkite apology found in *Sinai Arabic 154*⁶ and entitled by Margaret Dunlop Gibson, in her edition and translation of 1899, *Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāḥid* or *On the Triune Nature of God*.⁷

Chapter	Folios in <i>Sinai Ar.</i> 154	Pages in Gibson's ed.	Comments
Introduction	99r	74	Opening prayer profoundly influenced by the language of the Qur'an .
I. Trinity and Incarnation	99r-111v	74-87	

³ *al-Mā'idah* (5):75.

⁴ For the use of this phrase with respect to God's protection of Jesus, see *Āl 'Imrān* (3):54-55. Compare 8:30 (with respect to Muḥammad), as well as related expressions in 27:50 (Ṣāliḥ), 86:15-16 (Muḥammad), and 21:70 or 37:98 (Abraham).

⁵ *al-Nisā'* (4):157. On this whole matter, see Willem A. Bijlefeld, “A Prophet and More Than a Prophet?” *The Muslim World* 59 (1969), 1-28.

⁶ For a description of this manuscript, see Aziz S. Atiya, *Catalogue Raisonné of the Mount Sinai Arabic Manuscripts: Complete Analytical Listing of the Arabic Collection Preserved in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai*, vol. 1, translated into Arabic by Joseph N. Youssef, Alexandria, Egypt: Al Maaref Establishment 1970, 296-298.

⁷ Margaret Dunlop Gibson, ed. *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles from an Eighth or Ninth Century MS. in the Convent of St Catherine on Mount Sinai, with a Treatise On the Triune Nature of God*, *Studia Sinaitica* 7 [1899], reprint ed. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press 2003. It should be noted that Gibson's edition is incomplete: of a text that occupies ff. 99r-139v in the manuscript, ff. 106r, 107r, 110v, 111v, and 133v-139v have been omitted.

A. The Trinity	99r-102v	74-78	Arguments from scripture (Bible and Qur'an), simple analogies from nature.
B. Christ	102v-111v	78-87	
1. The story of redemption, from Adam to Christ	102v-108r	78-84	Biblical and Qur'anic material interwoven in the stories of the prophets/apostles.
2. Christ's divinity	108r-111v	84-87	Biblical material predominates.
II. Testimonies	111v-139v	87-107	
A. The Life of Christ	111v-128v	87-103	23 Old Testament <i>testimonia</i> .
B. Baptism	128v-137r	103-107	8 Old Testament <i>testimonia</i> .
C. The Cross (incomplete)	137r-139v (text breaks off)	missing	3 Old Testament <i>testimonia</i> .

These titles are in fact misleading: a chapter on the Trinity merely serves as an introduction to what is, for the most part, a soteriological and christological text, as may be seen from the list of contents below.

Gibson's edition and translation of the text immediately attracted the attention of her friend J. Rendel Harris, who wrote an important review in *The American Journal of Theology* in 1901, which was reprinted in 1916.⁸ After that the text received relatively little attention until Fr. Samir Khalil Samir, who has prepared a new edition of it, called attention to it in presentations at Louvain-la-Neuve in 1988 and Birmingham in 1990.⁹ A few years later, Sr. Maria Gallo made an Italian

⁸ J. Rendel Harris, "A Tract on the Triune Nature of God", *The American Journal of Theology* 5 (1901), 75-86; reprinted in idem, *Testimonies*, Part I, London 1916, 39-51 [= Chapter 5, "Testimonies against the Mohammedans"].

⁹ These presentations were published as Samir Khalil Samir, "Une apologie arabe du christianisme d'époque umayyade?", *Parole de l'Orient* 16 (1990-1991), 85-106; and idem, "The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c. 750)", in: *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen, eds., Studies in the History of Religions 63, Leiden, New York and Köln: Brill 1994, 57-114.

translation of the text.¹⁰

On the Triune Nature of God appears to be the oldest substantial piece of Arabic Christian theological writing in our possession. It was Samir who discovered a date in the text: 746 years since the Christian religion had been established.¹¹ The interpretation of this date poses its own problems, the major question being whether Christianity's "establishment" is to be measured from the Incarnation or from the Crucifixion; the best candidates for the date after conversion are AD 755 or AD 788 respectively – either of which falls in the second half of the eighth Christian century.¹²

After *On the Triune Nature of God*, one of the earliest Arabic-language treatises on soteriological and christological matters is a set of three linked treatises by Theodore Abū Qurrah, to which I give the titles *On the Necessity of Redemption*, *On the Possibility of the Incarnation* and *On the Divine Son*. For convenience, I will refer to the full set simply as the *Three Treatises*. All three were published by Constantin Bacha in 1904,¹³ and translated into German by Georg Graf in 1910.¹⁴ The first of the three attracted the attention of the great French Catholic student of the doctrine of redemption, Jean Rivière, in an article of 1914.¹⁵ But like *On the Triune Nature of God*, these Abū Qurrah treatises were then largely neglected until relatively recent times, when Fr. Sidney Griffith studied them in his dissertation of 1976.¹⁶ Very recently, they have been translated into English

¹⁰ Palestinese anonimo, *Omelia arabo-cristiana dell'VIII secolo*, Maria Gallo, trans., Collana di Testi Patristici 116, Rome: Città Nuova 1994.

¹¹ Samir, "Apologie arabe", 89-92.

¹² I have argued for the later date: Mark N. Swanson, "Some Considerations for the Dating of *Fī ta'līf Allāh al-wāḥid* (Sinai Ar. 154) and *al-Ġāmi' wuġūb al-īmān* (London, British Library or. 4950)", *Parole de l'Orient* 18 (1993), 115-141. Griffith has argued for the earlier: Sidney H. Griffith, "The View of Islam from the Monasteries of Palestine in the Early 'Abbāsīd Period: Theodore Abū Qurrah and the *Summa Theologiae Arabica*", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996), 11, note 20.

¹³ Constantin Bacha, *Mayāmir Thawudūrus Abū Qurrah usqf Ḥarrān, aqdam ta'lif 'arabī naṣranī*, Beirut: Maṭba'at al-Fawā'id 1904, 83-91, 180-186 and 91-104 respectively.

¹⁴ Georg Graf, *Die arabischen Schriften des Theodor Abū Qurra, Bischofs von Ḥarrān*, Forschungen zur christlichen Literatur- und Dogmengeschichte X,3-4, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 1910, 169-198.

¹⁵ Jean Rivière, "Un précurseur de Saint Anselme: La théologie rédemptrice de Théodore Abū Qurrah", *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique*, Sixième Série, 6 (1914), 339-360.

¹⁶ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Controversial Theology of Theodore Abu Qurrah (c.750-c.820 A.D.): A Methodological, Comparative Study in Christian Arabic Literature* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1978).

in a major volume of Abū Qurrah translations by John Lamoreaux; there, unlike the Bacha publication, the three linked treatises are gathered together as a single work in three parts.¹⁷ The work contains no date and may have been written anytime during Abū Qurrah's active career, at the end of the eighth century or the beginning of the ninth.

In this essay I return to and reflect upon two earlier studies. In 1998 I published an article in *The Muslim World* that focused on the use of the *Qur'an* in early Arabic Christian literature,¹⁸ while at the Fifth Woodbrooke-Mingana Symposium on Arab Christianity and Islam in 2005, I delivered a paper on the use of the *Bible* in the same literature.¹⁹ The results of the two studies are in some tension, and here I would like to face that tension. In what follows, I shall first make some brief observations about what we might call the apologetic dimension of these texts, that is, the ways in which they reflect awareness of the Islamic environment, and, in particular, in which they draw upon the Muslims' holy scripture, the *Qur'an*. Next, I shall comment on the traditional Christian dimensions of these texts: how they fit into the patristic tradition of soteriological and christological discourse, with special attention to their use of Old Testament *testimonia*. Then it will be possible to comment on the presumed audience of these texts and their literary genre, and to offer some additional observations about their apologetic character.

The Texts and the Islamic Environment

Both of the works under consideration here are, of course, written in Arabic. *On the Triune Nature of God* in a very simple but in its own way eloquent style, and Abū Qurrah's *Three Treatises* in the sophisticated Arabic of a *mutakallim*. Both put us on notice from their opening paragraphs that their Christian authors have no embarrassment at or hesitation in using the language of the Muslims' sacred

¹⁷ John Lamoreaux, trans., *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, Library of the Christian East, 1 (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), Chapter 11, "On Our Salvation," pp. 119-34. Graf had also put the treatises into their correct order.

¹⁸ Mark N. Swanson, "Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur'an in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies", *The Muslim World* 88 (1998), 297-319.

¹⁹ Mark N. Swanson, "Beyond Proof-texting (2): The Use of the Bible in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies", to appear in: *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, David Thomas, ed., The History of Christian-Muslim Relations 6, Leiden and Boston: Brill 2006 or 2007.

scripture.²⁰ *On the Triune Nature of God* begins with a magnificent prayer²¹ that echoes Qur'anic language from its opening *al-ḥamdu li-llābi*, "Praise be to God," to its concluding

*Lā ilāha qablaka,
wa-lā ilāha ba'daka.
Ilayka l-maṣīr,
wa-anta 'alā kulli shay'in qadīr—*
There is no god before Thee,
and no god after Thee.
To Thee is the homecoming,
and Thou art powerful over everything.

In between, the author again and again incorporates Qur'anic vocabulary into his petitions. He prays, for example, that we might be found to be among those "who give praise using Thy most beautiful names" (*bi-asmā'ika l-ḥusnā*),²² and "who speak using Thy most sublime similitudes" (*bi-amthālika l-'ulyā*).²³ In my earlier study on this opening prayer I devoted 22 footnotes to identifying Qur'anic vocabulary and phrases within it.²⁴

As for the *Three Treatises*, Abū Qurrah dives directly into his theme with *inna-llāha anzala l-nāmūsa 'alā Mūsā bi-Ṭūri Sīnā*, "God sent down the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai"; in choosing the verb *anzala*, "he sent down", Theodore is using the specifically Qur'anic vocabulary of revelation.²⁵

As one continues to read the two works, one discovers that it is *On the Triune Nature of God* in which the Qur'an is quoted most explicitly. In its Part One, Chapter One, on the Trinity, the author shows that in the Qur'an, as in the Bible, God sometimes speaks in the first person plural; examples of this are introduced with: *wa-tajidūnahu fi l-Qur'an*, "You'll find it in the Qur'an!"²⁶ Similar references

²⁰ The paragraphs that follow revisit Swanson, "Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur'an".

²¹ *Sinai Arabic* 154, f. 99r; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 74.

²² Cf. *al-A'rāf*(7):180, *al-Isrā'*(17):110, *Ṭā Hā*(20):8, *al-Ḥashr*(59):23-24.

²³ The Qur'an frequently mentions that God coins similitudes, e.g. *al-Ra'd*(13):17.

²⁴ Swanson, "Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur'an", 305-308.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 312.

²⁶ *Sinai Arabic* 154, ff. 101v-102r; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 77. The author quotes *al-'Ādiyāt*(90):4, *al-Qamar*(54):11 and *al-An'ām*(6):94 as examples of God's use of the first person plural, and *al-Nahl*(16):102 is paraphrased in order to show that the Qur'an speaks of God's Word and God's Spirit.

to “the Qur’an” or “your Book” are found periodically throughout the work.²⁷

The author of *On the Triune Nature of God* uses the Qur’an to greater effect, I believe, in Part One, Chapter Two, the author’s presentation of salvation history.²⁸ The author briefly tells the stories of Adam and Eve and the Fall; of Noah, Abraham, Lot and Moses; and, finally, of Mary and Jesus. In each paragraph, Qur’anic vocabulary and verse-fragments are woven together with biblical material. In the story of Creation and Fall,²⁹ for example, God breathed into Adam, *nafakha fibi*,³⁰ and made him to dwell in the Garden, *askanahu l-jannata*.³¹ But Iblīs made disobedience fair to Adam and his spouse, *zayyana labumā*,³² and as a result, “their shameful parts were revealed to them”, *badat labumā saw’ātubumā*. This last is an exact quotation from *Sūrat al-A‘rāf*(7), which has supplied some of the other vocabulary of the passage.³³

The paragraphs on Noah and Abraham/Lot likewise have some Qur’anic coloring, which is then intensified in the story of Moses.³⁴ There we hear that Pharaoh wished to destroy the children of Israel and “made himself a god”, *ja‘ala nafsahu ilāhan*.³⁵ After Moses had fled Egypt and had reached Mount Sinai, “God spoke to him directly”, *kallamahu -llāhu taklīman*,³⁶ “from the right side of the Mount”, *min jānibi l-Ṭūri l-ayman*.³⁷ Later on in the narrative, we are told that God chose Mary “above all the women of the worlds”, *iṣṭafāba -llāhu ‘alā nisā’i l-‘ālamīn*,³⁸ and when the archangel Gabriel had announced that she would bear the Messiah, the savior of Israel, she responded: “How shall I have a child,

²⁷ “You find it in the Qur’an”: *Sinai Arabic* 154, f. 101v, 102r, 108r and 112r; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 77 (twice), 84 and 88. “It is written in the Qur’an”: *Sinai Arabic* 154, f. 129v; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 104. “You find all this ... in your Book”: *Sinai Arabic* 154, f. 108r; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 84.

²⁸ See the table of contents above. For what follows, see Swanson, “Beyond Prooftexting: Approaches to the Qur’an,” 308-11.

²⁹ *Sinai Arabic* 154, ff. 102v-103r; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 78-79.

³⁰ *al-Sajdah* (32):9.

³¹ Cf. *al-Baqarab* (2):35, *al-A‘rāf*(7):19.

³² Cf. *al-Ḥijr*(15):39.

³³ *al-A‘rāf*(7):22.

³⁴ *Sinai Arabic* 154, ff. 103v-105r; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 80-81.

³⁵ Cf. *al-Shu‘arā’*(26):29, *al-Qaṣaṣ* (28):38, or *al-Nāzi‘āt* (79):24.

³⁶ Cf. *al-Nisā’* (4):164.

³⁷ *Maryam* (19):52.

³⁸ *Sinai Arabic* 154, f. 106v; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 83. Cf. *Āl ‘Imrān* (3):42.

whom no mortal has touched?" *annā yakūnu lī waladun wa-lam yamsasnī bashar?*³⁹ In none of these cases does the author interrupt the flow of his narrative to say, "This is from the Qur'an!" Rather, he deftly weaves the Qur'anic material together with Biblical material into his summary of the story of humanity's fall and redemption.

Examples of this sort do not exhaust the description of the author's engagement with the Qur'an. Not only has he woven the *vocabulary* of the Qur'an into his narrative of human salvation, he has, in a sense, laid claim to an entire *genre* of Qur'anic material: the sequences of anecdotes about the apostles of God – Montgomery Watt called them "punishment stories"⁴⁰ – that are a feature of several Qur'anic *sūrah*s. In *Sūrat al-A'raf* (7), for example, we find passages about Adam and his spouse, and later Noah, Lot and Moses – in the same order in which we find them in *On the Triune Nature of God*. The Christian author is happy to make allusion to these Qur'anic anecdotes – but he shapes the material in a specifically Christian way. In the first place, he *historicizes* material that, in the Qur'an, has only the vaguest of historical referents. The Christian author, however, introduces a *chronology*: in brief transitional statements between paragraphs, he informs us that there were 2270 years between Adam and Noah, 1200 years between Noah and Abraham, and 430 years between Abraham and Moses.⁴¹ The chronological interludes drop out at this point (after a total of 3900 years), but one may well believe that the author had planned to include – or that the text has lost – at least one more passage setting forth an additional 1600 years between Moses and Christ, for the traditional total of 5500. In the second place, these historicized anecdotes are shaped as a coherent *narrative* with a clear *plot*: human beings have sold themselves under Satan, and not even the prophets and apostles of God are able to save them from Satan's tyranny. Thus the stage is set for God's own radical intervention in human history ... through the Incarnation of the Word.

Turning to Theodore Abū Qurrah in the *Three Treatises*, we notice that he does *not* mention the Qur'an explicitly or use phrases such as "your Book"; the closest he comes to that is in the second treatise, *On the Possibility of the Incarnation*,

³⁹ *Sinai Arabic 154*, f. 107v (and absent from Gibson, *Arabic Version*). Cf. *Maryam* (19):20.

⁴⁰ W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, Islamic Surveys 8, Edinburgh: University Press 1973, 127-135.

⁴¹ *Sinai Arabic 154*, f. 103r-v; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 79-80.

in which he argues from the biblical affirmation that God has a Throne to the possibility in general of God's self-localization in a place of God's own choosing. While Theodore knows full well that the Qur'an makes frequent mention of the throne of God⁴² – that is, in fact, the reason for his shaping the treatise the way he does – he alludes to this Qur'anic material only indirectly, saying, at one point:

“[A]ll the prophets agree upon His being seated upon the Throne, and I do not suppose that anyone among the People of Faith will contradict them in this.”⁴³

And again,

“[W]hy do those who contradict us deny to God [the possibility of] self-localization in the body taken from the Virgin Mary, the Purified One, while they themselves say that God has seated himself upon the Throne in Heaven?”⁴⁴

Theodore is a master of indirection, allowing Muslims to find themselves or to be found within the terms “the People of Faith” (*ahl al-īmān*) and “those who contradict us” (*al-mukhālifīna lanā*).

Theodore is likewise a master of Qur'anic *allusion*; his use of the Qur'an does not consist in quotations, but rather in skillfully chosen words that, for those who know the Qur'an well, set off echoes of entire verses and passages.⁴⁵ Theodore's first treatise, *On the Necessity of Redemption*, is a fine case study in this. In one densely worded passage, Theodore wants to argue that human beings have transgressed God's Law in the past and are therefore liable to punishment, and that even were they able to repent and henceforth render God perfect obedience,

⁴² The Qur'an states seven times that God “sat Himself upon the Throne” (7:54, 10:3, 13:2, 20:5, 25:59, 32:4, 57:4), and nine times gives God the title “Lord of the Throne” (9:129, 21:22, 23:86 and 116, 27:26, 43:82) or “Possessor of the Throne” (40:15, 81:20, 85:15). Angels throng about (39:75, 40:7) or bear (40:7, 69:17) the Throne, singing praise.

⁴³ Bacha, *Mayāmīr*, 182.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁴⁵ For what follows, see Swanson, “Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur'an”, 312-314, as well as Mark N. Swanson, “A Frivolous God? (*a-fa-ḥasibtum annamā kbalaqnākum 'abathan*)”, in: *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, David Thomas with Clare Amos, eds., London: Melisende 2003, 166-183, here 168-174.

their *past* disobedience would still doom them to Hell. Here is how Theodore puts it:

“Even were you to arrive at the utmost degree of this [obedience], despite the habit of sin that has taken root in you, to which you voluntarily subjected yourself because you were pleased with its delight ... but you are far from this, and I do not suppose that you have reached this degree [of obedience] at all! However, even if you *have* reached it, there is no way for you to blot out any of your former sin, not even an atom’s measure! Thus it is inevitable that the punishment which overtakes you because of “what your hands have forwarded” will be fixed upon you. You will not be able to remove it at by any means!”⁴⁶

There are two expressions here that might seize the attention of a Qur’anicly competent listener. First, the expression “not even an atom’s measure”, *wa-law miqdāra dbarratin*, echoes *Sūrat al-Zilzāl* (99):8, which states that on the Day of Judgment, “who has done an atom’s weight of evil”, *mithqāla dbarratin sharran*, “shall see it.” Then, with the Qur’anic threat of judgment already resonating in the background of the argument, Theodore uses the expression “because of what your hands have forwarded”, *bi-mā qaddamat yadāka*. This and similar expressions are common in Qur’anic judgment formulae. In *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān* (3):181-182, for example, God says to the damned: “Taste the chastisement of the burning – that, for what your hands have forwarded.”⁴⁷ With a few words, Theodore has brought terrifying Qur’anic threats into the background of his argument – for those with ears to hear them.

Theodore goes on to pose the plight of disobedient humanity as a dilemma: *either* God will “forgive us our sins freely, in his mercy dropping the punishment for them”; *or* God will insist “that punishment be carried out, and we end up in eternal destruction”.⁴⁸ This second possibility is clearly intolerable, but, Theodore argues, so is the first. To claim that God, in a sense, says “Never mind” with respect to God’s own Law is impossible: the person making that claim “has made God’s

⁴⁶ Bacha, *Mayāmir*, 84.

⁴⁷ *al-Hajj* (22):9-10 provides an exact parallel to Abū Qurrah’s formula. See also *al-Anfāl* (8):50-51, *al-Naba’*(78):40.

⁴⁸ Bacha, *Mayāmir*, 84.

Law *bāṭilan*, vain, and God himself ‘*abathan*, frivolous’.⁴⁹ The consequences of this antinomian position for human morality would be disastrous: everyone “would become reckless in following his natural inclinations with respect to his sensual appetites, making his religion his caprice”, *yaj‘alu dīnahu hawābu*.⁵⁰ Again, Qur’anic passages echo in the background, insisting that God has not created and indeed does not do anything *bāṭilan*⁵¹ or ‘*abathan*,⁵² and reminding listeners that a profound aspect of human idolatry is the tendency to make one’s caprice (*hawā*, plural *abwā’*) into a god.⁵³

Summing up so far: both the author of *On the Triune Nature of God* and Theodore Abū Qurrah knew the Qur’an well. While the author of *On the Triune Nature of God* occasionally sought “proof-texts” for Christian doctrines in the Qur’an, as when he claimed God’s use of the first-person plural in several Qur’anic texts as a witness to the reality of the Trinity, he was also able to allude to the Qur’an in ways that were not heavy-handed or forced. As for Theodore Abū Qurrah, many of his Qur’anic allusions are so light that they may have been missed by all but the most competent readers. This allusive lightness of touch may well have been calculated:⁵⁴ it allowed Theodore to bring the Qur’an into the argument without explicitly claiming it as an authority (and thus opening the door to awkward questions about Christian recognition of the Qur’an). But at the same time that Theodore’s allusive use of the Qur’an neatly sidesteps the issue of the Qur’an’s authority, it also allows the Qur’an to speak with its own voice. This fact alone is sufficient, I believe, to make Theodore a significant figure in the history of Christian-Muslim conversation.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵¹ *Āl ‘Imrān* (3):191, *Ṣād* (38):27.

⁵² *al-Mu’minūn* (23):115.

⁵³ E.g., *al-Furqān* (25):43, *al-Jāthiyah* (45):23.

⁵⁴ It is also possible that Theodore made these allusions *without* thinking twice (or even once!) about them. While the question as to whether Theodore *intended* to allude to the Qur’an is an intriguing one, in the end it is probably both unanswerable and unimportant. The allusions are *there*, whether or not Theodore was designing them for maximum effect, or even conscious of making them at all.

The Texts and Old Testament *Testimonia*

While the works under consideration here do reflect their Islamic environment in various ways, it is also important to realize the great extent to which they stand in continuity with specifically Christian tradition and exegetical practice. The narratives of redemption that we find in each work have deep roots in Christian soteriological discourse. The second chapter of *On the Triune Nature of God* narrates the salvation of humankind as the incarnation of the Word of God in order fittingly to overthrow Satan, who had overthrown humanity. But now, this particular redemptive narrative has a rich history including the writings of St. Irenaeus of Lyons and the *Catechetical Orations* of St. Gregory of Nyssa.⁵⁵ Theodore Abū Qurrah's *On the Necessity of Redemption* may plow some new ground in identifying the plight of fallen humanity as its *liability to punishment* as a result of imperfect obedience to God's Law. The overall structure of his argument, however, is remarkably similar to what we find in the opening chapters of *De Incarnatione* (1-10) by St. Athanasius, which describes the plight of fallen humanity as its *plunge into corruption and death* as a result of its turn away from the Word and disobedience to God's commandment. Both Theodore and Athanasius reject the idea that repentance is sufficient to heal humanity's plight. Both of them set up a dilemma with the equally intolerable alternatives of God's Law or commandment becoming void on the one hand, or God's creature perishing on the other. For both of them, the incarnation and death of the Son/Word of God is the only way out of what seems to be an exclusive disjunction.⁵⁶

In addition to standing squarely in old soteriological tradition, both the author of *On the Triune Nature of God* and Theodore Abū Qurrah rely heavily on another ancient Christian tradition, one that goes back at least to the second century and perhaps to the very earliest Christian communities: collections of *testimonia*, that is, of Old Testament witnesses to or "prophesies" of the life of Christ and of Christian doctrines and practices.⁵⁷

On the Triune Nature of God is particularly rich in *testimonia*. Already as part of the narrative of redemption in Chapter Two of Part I, the author presents the

⁵⁵ E.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. Catech.* 24,4.

⁵⁶ See Mark N. Swanson, *Folly to the Hūnafā?: The Cross of Christ in Arabic Christian-Muslim Controversy in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries A.D.*, extract from dissertation, Cairo 1995, 74-85.

⁵⁷ The paragraphs that follow revisit Swanson, "Beyond Prooftexting (2): The Use of the Bible."

prophets pleas to God for salvation from Satan's ongoing tyranny, in the form of a paragraph consisting in seven Old Testament quotations⁵⁸ which Rendel Harris already in 1901 recognized as belonging to ancient Christian tradition.⁵⁹ But this paragraph is merely an appetizer for what follows. The entirety of *On the Triune Nature of God*, Part II consists in *testimonia* with commentary: 23 Old Testament testimonies to the life of Christ, eight to Baptism, and three to the Cross – at which point the text breaks off. These are listed in the table below.⁶⁰

On The Triune Nature of God, Part II

II.A. Life of Christ	II.B. Baptism	II.C. Cross
<i>Sinai Arabic 154</i> , ff. 111v-139v Gibson, 87-103	<i>Sinai Arabic 154</i> , ff. 128v-137r Gibson, 103-107	<i>Sinai Arabic 154</i> , ff. 137r-139v Missing in Gibson
1. Psalm 110:3	1. Psalm 29:3	1. Deuteronomy 28:66
2. Psalm 2:7-9	2. Psalm 74:13b-14a	2. Numbers 21:6-9
3. Psalm 110:1	3. Ezekiel 36:25	3. Zechariah 12:10b
4. Isaiah 59:20	4. Isaiah 1:16	(text breaks off)
5. Isaiah 11:10	5. Psalm 51:2	
6. Isaiah 63:9	6. Isaiah 12:3-4	
7. Isaiah 7:14	7. Micah 7:18-19	
8. Isaiah 9:6	8. Isaiah 49:10b	
9. Isaiah 2:3		
10. Psalm 47:8, 87:6, 22:27		
11. Micah 5:2		
12. Psalm 72:6-12, 17, 5		

⁵⁸ See *Sinai Arabic 154*, f. 105r-v (or Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 82), where we find the following collection of quotations: Psalm 144:5 (with influence of Psalm 18:9); Psalm 80:1b-2; Isaiah 63:9; Psalm 107:20; Habakkuk 2:3; Psalm 118:26a and 25a; and Psalm 50:3. For more on this list, with parallels from other collections of *testimonia*, see Swanson, "Beyond Prooftexting (2): The Use of the Bible".

⁵⁹ Harris saw in the *testimonia* of *On the Triune Nature of God* "the disjecta membra of Justin and Ariston, of Irenaeus, Tertullian and Cyprian, and a number of other writers between whom there is a nexus, as regards both the matter and the manner of their arguments"; Harris, "A Tract", 75 = *Testimonies* 1:40.

⁶⁰ A more detailed table giving parallels from other *testimonia*-collections (like the tables for the testimonies in *On the Necessity of Redemption* and *On the Divine Son* below) may be found in Swanson, "Beyond Prooftexting (2): The Use of the Bible".

13. Isaiah 19:1		
14. Job 9:8		
15. Psalm 33:6		
16. Job 33:4		
17. Daniel 9:24		
18. Isaiah 35:3-6a		
19. Genesis 49:9-10		
20. Baruch 3:35-37		
21. Habakkuk 3:3		
22. Daniel 2:34-35		
23. Zechariah 9:9		

It is worth noting that there is considerable complexity in the way in which these *testimonia* are presumed to bear witness to Christian realities. One of the testimonies found in *On the Triune Nature of God* (II.A, #21 in the above chart) is Habakkuk 3:3: “God shall come from Teman, and the Holy One from a dark shaded mountain.” The author informs us that Teman refers to Bethlehem and that the “shaded mountain” is the Virgin Mary – who, according to Luke 1:35, was *overshadowed* by the power of the Most High when she conceived Jesus.⁶¹ And thus Habakkuk has prophesied the birth of God Incarnate from the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem! Both identifications, that of Teman with Bethlehem and of the shaded mountain with the Virgin Mary may be found in Greek patristic works,⁶² confirming that we are dealing with a centuries-old tradition of typological interpretation – one in which Christians took delight.

This is not to say that the Islamic context is entirely forgotten in Part II of *On the Triune Nature of God*. The Qur’an is quoted twice: *Āl ‘Imrān* (3):55 in support of Psalm 110:3 (on Christ’s ascension and session at the right hand of the Father with his enemies under his feet),⁶³ and later, in the chapter on Baptism, *Āl ‘Imrān* (3):38-39 in the midst of a discussion about John the Baptist.⁶⁴ Occasional

⁶¹ Sinai Arabic 154, f. 124r-v; Gibson, Arabic Version, 100-101.

⁶² E.g., the identification Teman = Bethlehem may be found in Irenaeus, *Contra haereses* 3.20.4, ANF 1:451; while the identification of the “shaded mountain” with the Virgin Mary may be found in pseudo-Methodius, *De Simeone et Anna*, ANF 6:393.

⁶³ Sinai Arabic 154, f. 112r-v; Gibson, Arabic Version, 88.

⁶⁴ Sinai Arabic 154, ff. 129v-130r; Gibson, Arabic Version, 104-5.

turns of phrase suggest that the writer has not forgotten his Islamic environment.⁶⁵ For the most part, though, the chapter could be simply an Arabic rendering of a traditional Christian *testimonia*-list.

When we turn to the *Three Treatises* of Theodore Abū Qurrah, we find that here as well *testimonia*-lists are an important part of the presentation. In the first treatise, *On the Necessity of Redemption*, Theodore's redemption narrative is immediately followed, without introduction, by testimonies.⁶⁶

Testimonies in Theodore Abū Qurrah, *On the Necessity of Redemption*

Testimonies in <i>On the Necessity of Redemption</i> (Bacha, 86-88)	<i>Burban</i> Book 2 "Types" (ed. Cachia)	<i>Burban</i> Book 3 "Son of God" (ed. Cachia)	<i>Burban</i> Book 4 "Career of Christ" (ed. Cachia)	<i>Quaestiones ad Antiochum ducem, Quaestio CXXXVII, PG 28, cols 683- 700</i>
1. Isaiah 50:5-6			626	9. (693A)
2. Isaiah 53:2-7			623, 626	6. (689B), 8. (692C)
3. Psalm 22:16- 18			627	10. (696A)
4. Zechariah 12:10			627	10. (696D)
(5. Leviticus 4)				

⁶⁵ See, for example, the way Deuteronomy 28:66 is introduced in the chapter on the Cross; Mark N. Swanson, "Folly to the *Hunafā'*: The Crucifixion in Early Christian-Muslim Controversy," in: *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson and David Thomas, eds., *The History of Christian-Muslim Relations* 5, Leiden and Boston: Brill 2006, 237-256, here 243-247.

⁶⁶ Bacha, *Mayāmīr*, 86-87, 88. In this and the table for *On the Divine Son*, parallels are given, first with the three *testimonia*-collections preserved in the ninth-century Melkite compilation by Peter of Bayt Ra's known as *al-Burbān*: Pierre Cachia, ed., and W. Montgomery Watt, trans., *Eutychius of Alexandria: The Book of the Demonstration (Kitāb al-Burbān)*, I-II, CSCO 192-193, 209-210 = ar. 20-23, Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO 1960-61; the references in the table are to paragraph numbers. The three collections are of different sorts, the first concentrating on Old Testament *types* of various aspects of the life of Christ; the second on testimonies to *Christ's divinity* (arranged roughly in Old Testament order); and the third on testimonies to the *career* of Christ (in narrative order). "Book 4" of *al-Burbān* is closely related to an earlier Greek work, Question 137 of the pseudo-Athanasian *Questions to Antiochus the Dux* (PG 28, cols. 683-700).

Theodore's second treatise, *On the Possibility of the Incarnation*, is dominated by biblical passages. These are used first in support of the assertion that God has a Throne, which Theodore takes as a commonly accepted religious idea; he argues, however, that this idea implies God's capacity and readiness to self-localize for the sake of creatures.⁶⁷ In response to the objection that God's self-localization could not take place in an unclean human body, Theodore quotes Hebrews 4:15 ("He resembled us in everything except sin") along with several Old Testament testimonies to Christ's sinlessness and righteousness.⁶⁸ And finally, Abū Qurrah presents a variety of traditional Old Testament examples of God's self-localization: the burning bush, the pillar of cloud, the mercy-seat, and the tabernacle.⁶⁹

Old Testament Quotations in Theodore Abū Qurrah,
On the Possibility of Incarnation

That God has a throne (Bacha, 180-182)
1. 1 Kings 22:19-22
2. Isaiah 6:1-3
3. Daniel 7:9-10
4. Daniel 3:54-55 (= Song of the Three Young Men 32-33)
5. Psalm 103:19
On Christ's sinlessness and righteousness (Bacha, 183-184)
1. Isaiah 53:8-9
2. Isaiah 53:11-12
3. Isaiah 11:1-2
4. Isaiah 11:4-5
5. Malachi 4:2
On God's self-localization (Bacha, 185-186)
1. Exodus 3:1-6 (burning bush)
2. Exodus 33:7-11 (pillar of cloud)
3. Exodus 25:17-22; Leviticus 16:2 (mercy-seat)
4. Numbers 7:1, 89 (tabernacle)

⁶⁷ Bacha, *Mayāmir*, 180-182.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 185-186.

Theodore's third treatise, *On the Divine Son*, begins with a *kalām*-argument in which he demonstrates to his own satisfaction, at least, that God possesses the attribute of headship (*ri'āsab*) over one who is God's equal by nature – i.e., the divine Son.⁷⁰ (This is a topic to which I shall return.) When Theodore has completed his *kalām*-argument and has responded to objections, he goes on to say:

“Know that the [existence of the] Son is also established by means other than that which we have just established for you – even if that should have been sufficient, were you possessed of intellect and a desire for eternal life. In addition to [what we have presented] and *even better*: the Prophets have prophesied concerning him, and their books are in the hands of both the Christians and the Jews. They have related his eternal birth from the Father and his second birth from the Virgin Mary; his pains, crucifixion, burial, and the entire course of his life – apart from what the Holy Gospel makes plain about these things.”⁷¹

A set of sixteen testimonies follows:⁷²

Testimonies in Theodore Abū Qurrah, *On the Divine Son*

Testimonies in <i>On the Divine Son</i> (Bacha, 98-103)	<i>Burban</i> Book 2 “Types” (ed. Cachia)	<i>Burban</i> Book 3 “Son of God” (ed. Cachia)	<i>Burban</i> Book 4 “Career of Christ” (ed. Cachia)	<i>Quaestiones ad Antiochum ducem, Quaestio CXXXVII, PG 28, cols 683- 700</i>
1. Psalm 110:3	468	604	616	4. (688A)
2. Psalm 45:6-7		594		
3. Psalm 84:7			619	
4. Proverbs 8:22-30		588		4. (688A)
5. Isaiah 48:12- 16		577		

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 91-94 (presentation of the argument), 94-98 (responses to objections).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 98. Emphasis added.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 98-103.

6. Isaiah 7:14		572	618	5. (688C)
7. Isaiah 9:6		573	618	5. (688C)
8. Baruch 3:35-37		584		1. (684D)
9. Psalm 84:8			619	
10. Micah 1:2-3, 5		560		
11. Hosea 1:6-7		556		
12. Genesis 1:26	465	505		
13. Psalm 33:6		606		
14. Genesis 31:3, 11, 13		515		
15. Genesis 3:22	465, 480		616	4. (688AB)
16. Genesis 11: 5,7		509		

As we observed in the case of *On the Triune Nature of God*, the *testimonia* in the *Three Treatises* sometimes rely on rather complex typologies. For example, it may not be obvious to the uninitiated that one can find the Cross in Leviticus 4, where the priest anoints the four horns of the altar with blood; or in Malachi 4:2, where the prophet says, "I will send you the sun of righteousness, and your healing is upon *his wings*." But in both cases, Theodore provides an explanation. It is the sign of the *cross* that the priests trace in blood.⁷³ And by "his wings", the Prophet Malachi means "his *cross*".⁷⁴

Audience and Genre

We are now perhaps in a position to sense the difficulty of giving a clear response to questions such as: For whom were these texts written? What was their intended function? On the one hand, both *On the Triune Nature of God* and the *Three Treatises* provide textbook examples of subtle uses of the Qur'an, ones that

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

presuppose readers with considerable *Qurʾanic* competence. On the other hand, the two works also provide textbook examples of Christian Arabic *testimonia*-lists, with many examples of traditional and highly imaginative exegeses of the Old Testament, ones that seem to presuppose readers with a very high degree of *Biblical* competence. Looking at the use of the Qurʾan in these texts, it seems natural to label them “apologetic”. But looking at the *testimonia*-lists, however, the label “apologetic” does not seem to fit quite so well. Although the patristic *testimonia*-collections have conventionally been understood as apologetic tools for conversations with Jews, in a recent monograph Martin C. Albl calls this conventional wisdom into question. After a thorough survey of the literature, he concludes:

“This patristic survey has uncovered no indisputable evidence that the *testimonia* were used in actual debates with Jews. Already in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, the form of the dialogue between a Jew and a Christian seems to be a literary fiction; the aim was to instruct Christians or persuade a pagan audience. The overwhelming evidence points towards the development of these *testimonia*-collections in a catechetical life-setting.”⁷⁵

So how are our texts best described? As apologetic, or as catechetical?

The picture does not become immediately clearer if we take each work in turn. Taking the text of *On the Triune Nature of God* at face value, we find that it is addressed to Muslims. As mentioned earlier, the expression “You (will) find (it) in the Qurʾan” is found several times.⁷⁶ The Qurʾan is referred to as “your Book”.⁷⁷ The author can say to his audience, “Christ is a Word of God and his Spirit, as you bear witness. So why do you fault us when we believe in Christ, god from God?”⁷⁸ The assumed reader, it seems, is a Muslim – but apparently one who has a considerable appreciation for complex typological exegesis of the Old Testament!

⁷⁵ Martin C. Albl, *‘And Scripture Cannot Be Broken’: The Form and Function of the Early Christian Testimonia Collections*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 96, Leiden, Boston and Köln: Brill 1999, 158. For Albl’s discussion of the *First Apology and the Dialogue with Trypho* of Justin Martyr, see 101-106.

⁷⁶ See note 27 above.

⁷⁷ See note 27 above.

⁷⁸ *Sinai Arabic 154*, f. 118r; Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 95.

As for the *Three Treatises*, they are, taken at face value, addressed to Christians. The first treatise ends with a prayer that we “live up to the covenant of our baptism” and that we not “eat [Christ’s] flesh and drink his blood without worthiness of them”.⁷⁹ Here the assumed reader, it seems, is a Christian – but apparently one with extremely sensitive ears for Qur’anic allusions!

We cannot, of course, simply take the texts at face value. Sr. Maria Gallo has already pointed this out in the introduction to her Italian translation of *On the Triune Nature of God*, where she wrote: “In my opinion, the analysis of the text leads us to conclude that the author is speaking to Christians and that the Muslim-directed discourse is simply a literary device meant to give greater liveliness and concreteness to his words.”⁸⁰ She does allow that the text may have served the purpose of equipping its Christian audience for their encounters with Muslims. Perhaps, then, we should think of *On the Triune Nature of God* as primarily a work of catechesis – but catechesis with an apologetic dimension, catechesis for Christians living in the sectarian *milieu*.⁸¹

The same may probably be said for Theodore Abū Qurrah: he writes for a Christian audience – but always seems to imagine Muslims reading over their shoulders or listening in the background. Nor should we forget another possible target audience: Christians who were wavering in their faith, and who perhaps were indeed gaining competence in Qur’anic discourse. For them, the treatises we are dealing with here may have served as emergency catechesis, as tools for the re-evangelization of the baptized.

The principal point to be made here is this: as we read these texts it is important not to *exaggerate* the extent to which they were intended for and actually read by Muslims, and also not to *underestimate* the extent to which they served homiletic, catechetical and morale-raising purposes within the Christian community. What we encounter here is theology for Christians who are familiar with the imaginative world of the Bible as elaborated in the Christian tradition, a world that is, as we see from the *testimonia*, diverse and yet typologically knit together into what many Christians would consider a beautiful unity. This world,

⁷⁹ Bacha, *Mayāmir*, 90.

⁸⁰ Gallo, *Omelia arabo-cristiana*, 18.

⁸¹ The phrase is that of John E. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, London Oriental Series 34, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1978, and has been used to excellent effect by Sidney H. Griffith.

however, is not untouched by and immune to developments in the world of human history; rather, it is capable of absorbing and incorporating elements of that world, with the result that *testimonia*-lists may be recited in Arabic, and the story of human redemption told with allusions to the Qur'an .

The Apologetic Dimension

This language of “absorption” or “incorporation” may be helpful in thinking about the “apologetic dimension” of the texts we are studying. There are, in fact, a *variety* of apologetic “moves” to be found in the literature discussed in this volume. One kind of apologetic consists in a program of seeking out truth commonly accessible to *reason*, followed by demonstrating the “fit” of specifically religious symbols to that truth. John Watt’s chapter in this volume gives us splendid examples from the tenth-century *falāsifah*.⁸²

In the works that I have presented here, the closest example to this sort of apologetic comes in Theodore Abū Qurrah’s *On the Divine Son*. Here Theodore, using a dialectical tool typical of the *kalām*, works through a set of exclusive disjunctions in order to demonstrate that (a) God possesses the attribute of “headship” (*ri’āsah*), (b) which is *not* merely over creatures, (c) but must be over what is *equal* to God (and not what is beneath God or above God) ... (d) *by nature* (and not by coercion or good pleasure). But the one over whom God has headship but who is equal to God by nature is, in biblical terms, the divine Son.⁸³

Theodore’s *kalām*-argument in itself is quite impressive, but its premise is questionable. Does God indeed possess the attribute of “headship”? Theodore did not find this attribute, *ri’āsah* in the Qur’an ; perhaps it has migrated here from one of Theodore’s more curious apologetic arguments, in which he attempted to make an argument for the Trinity by analogy with Adam, created in the image of God, who exercised the attribute of *ri’āsah* over the first human family.⁸⁴ It appears to me that the attribute of “headship” simply *presupposes* plurality: a community of which one is made leader or a “body” over which one is the

⁸² See pp. 99.

⁸³ Bacha, *Mayāmīr*, 91-94.

⁸⁴ Ignace Dick, ed. *Theodore Abuqurra: Traité de l'existence du Créateur et de la vraie religion*, Patrimoine arabe chrétien 3, Jounieh: Librairie Saint-Paul 1982, 219-228.

“head”. Theodore’s *kalām*-argument is therefore merely analytic. Perhaps it is the very weakness of the premise of his argument that Theodore attempts to cover with intimidating bluster: “I do not presume that you will treat God with such contempt that you say he has no ‘headship’.”⁸⁵ But this is precisely the point where the interlocutor must, in fact, challenge the premise, in order to avoid falling into Theodore’s trap.

Very different from the kind of apologetic that matches particular Christian symbols to rationally-demonstrated truth – whether “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” to *al-‘aql wa-l-‘āqil wa-l-ma‘qūl*,⁸⁶ or “the Son of God” to “the one equal to God over whom God has headship by nature” – is a discourse in which the Bible and Christian tradition are the primary matter of reflection, but in which outside elements – Qur’anic vocabulary and narrative, for example – are “incorporated” or “absorbed” into the discourse by a capable narrator. The result is an apologetic that is not systematic but rather “ad hoc” in character.

In *On the Triune Nature of God* and the *Three Treatises*, we see numerous examples of such “ad hoc” apologetics:⁸⁷ the use of Qur’anic vocabulary in praise of God in the introduction to *On the Triune Nature of God*; the same text’s drawing on the Qur’anic anecdotes about the prophets and apostles of God, tying them into its narrative of redemption; Theodore’s skillful allusions that allow the Qur’an to whisper its witness about the reality of judgment or about the purposefulness of God; or his suggestion that verses about God’s Throne imply the possibility of God’s self-localization out of mercy towards creatures. Here, the authors’ “catechesis for life in the sectarian *milieu*” offers linguistic and conceptual bridges between the world of the Bible and that of the Qur’an. Just so, they suggest some places where actual conversations between Christians and Muslims might be possible.

⁸⁵ Bacha, *Mayāmir*, 91.

⁸⁶ See J. Watt’s and S. Griffith’s articles in this volume.

⁸⁷ See William Werpehowski, “Ad Hoc Apologetics”, *The Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), 282-301.