

DISPUTING WITH ISLAM IN SYRIAC: THE CASE OF THE MONK OF BÊT ḥĀLÊ AND A MUSLIM EMIR

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I

- [1] Although Islam was born, and became a world religion largely within the ambience of the Syriac-speaking communities of the eastern Christian patriarchates, little study has in fact been focused on the significance of Syriac culture in the early formation of Islam, or on the shaping influence of the academic and literary institutions of the Syriac-speaking churches on the early efflorescence of Islamic culture, particularly in Syria and Iraq. It is almost as if the scholarly world has accepted the apologetic claims of Muslim writers in the eighth and ninth centuries that in the somewhat remote world of the ḥijāz in the prophet Muḥammad's day there was only ignorance (*al-jābilīyyah*) and the worship of idols until the fateful moment when the angel Gabriel brought the earliest lines of the *Qur'ān* down from heaven to an ecstatic Muḥammad.¹ Of course, both the *Qur'ān* itself, and modern Islamicists, admit the

¹ On the early apologetical and polemical claims of Islam see John E. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (London Oriental Series 32; Oxford/New York, 1978).

presence of Jews and Christians in the world in which Islam was born. And there have been a few venturesome studies into what one writer called “the foreign vocabulary of the *Qurʾān*,”² along with several more quixotic proposals about the Christian or the Jewish/Samaritan, or even the Manichee origins of early Islam.³ But for the most part there has been a scholarly silence in modern times about the broader religio-cultural matrix from which Muḥammad and Islam emerged, and especially about that part of it which involves the Aramean heritage of the Syriac-speaking peoples.⁴ The limitations of modern scholars may be largely responsible for this state of affairs, rather than any disinclination to study Islam from the point of view of the methods of *Religionsgeschichte*. Few are the Islamicists who have any skill in Syriac, let alone any sure grasp of the religious history and culture of the speakers of Aramaic more generally. And few too are the Syriac scholars whose command of Arabic and knowledge of early Islam is adequate to the requirements of comparative study in this

² See, e.g., A. Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān* (Baroda, 1938); J. Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen* (Berlin, 1926).

³ On the supposed Christian origins see Günther Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qurʾān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qurʾān* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974); idem, *Der christliche Kult an der vorislamischen Kaaba als Problem der Islamwissenschaft und christlichen Theologie* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1977), idem, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad; eine Kritik am “christlichen” Abendland* (Erlangen, 1981). On the supposed Jewish and Samaritan origins see P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism; the Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977). On Manichaeism and early Islam see Moshe Gil, “The Creed of Abū Amir,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 12 (1992), pp. 9–47.

⁴ A notable exception to this neglect was the work of Tor Andrae, *Les origines de l’islam et le christianisme*, trans. J. Roche (Paris, 1955). Andrae originally wrote this study in German in 1923–1925, and published it in the journal, *Kyrdobistorisk Arsskrift*, which is not available to me. Several early works of Dom Edmund Beck, O.S.B. also are relevant: E. Beck, “Das christliche Mönchtum im Koran,” *Studia Orientalia* 13 (1946): 3–29; idem, “Eine christliche Parallele zu den Paradiesesjungfrauen des Korans?” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 14 (1948): 398–405; idem, “Die Gestalt des Abraham am Wendepunkt der Entwicklung Muhammeds; Analyse von Sure 2,118(124)–135(141),” *Le Muséon* 65 (1952): 73–94; idem, “Iblis und Mensch, Satan und Adam; der Werdegang einer koranischen Erzählung,” *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 195–244.

area. But this was not the case with the Syriac-speaking writers of the oriental churches from the eighth through the thirteenth centuries, who lived in the world of Islam. They have left behind not only accounts of Islam's origins, but a number of fascinating works which had it as their purpose to defend the Christian faith in the face of religious challenges coming from Muslims, and to attempt to stem the tide of conversions to Islam. It is the purpose of the present communication to give a hurried overview of this literature, and then to concentrate on one intriguing work, still unpublished, which affords the modern reader a rare glimpse into how Syriac-speaking Christians met the challenge of Islam perhaps as early as the early eighth century.

II

- [2] Aside from the occasional, brief allusion,⁵ notice of the rise and religious challenge of Islam does not for the most part appear in Christian texts, be they Greek, Syriac, or Arabic, much before the early years of the eighth century. By this time, of course, the Arab conquest was long over and the first surge of creative energy was underway. The reign of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685–705) signifies the inception of the new order. Indeed one Syriac chronicler of later times cites the reign of this caliph as the time of the beginning of what he calls the "Egyptian servitude" of his people. He says of 'Abd al-Malik:

⁵ For example, Jacob of Edessa (633–708), refers to the Muslims in a letter on the genealogy of the Virgin Mary. See F. Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 10 (1905): 197–208, 258–82. See also Han J.W. Drijvers, "The Testament of the Lord: Jacob of Edessa's Response to Islam," *ARAM* 6 (1994): 104–114. Ishô yabh the Great (580–659) speaks briefly of the Muslims in a letter. See H. Suermann, "Orientalische Christen und der Islam; christliche Texte aus der Zeit von 632–750," *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 67 (1983): 128–31; idem, "Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien huitième partie); auteurs chrétiens de langue syriaque: une controverse de Jôhannan de Lîthârb," *Islamochristiana* 15 (1989): 169–74. See other references cited in Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It; a Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13; Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1997) 116–215.

He published a severe edict ordering each man to go to his own country, to his village of origin, to inscribe there in a register his name, that of his father, his vineyards, olive trees, goods, children and all that he possessed. Such was the origin of the tribute of capitation and of all the evils that spread over the Christians. Until then the kings took tribute from land but not from men. Since then the children of Hagar began to impose Egyptian servitude on the sons of Aram.⁶

- [3] The dramatic building programs set underway at this time with the dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus make the point dramatically. Both monuments symbolize not only the Islamic appropriation of the conquered territories, but they embody the religious challenge to Jews and Christians as well, since both buildings were literally founded on the sites of earlier religious structures and both loudly proclaimed the Islamic *ṣabādab* in the land.⁷ As Umayyad power gave way to the confident, new Abbasid dynasty in the mid-eighth century the conditions were already well in place for the full political and social consolidation of the new Islamic commonwealth.⁸ For the socially upwardly mobile elements in the subject Christian communities the pressure to convert to Islam thereafter became overwhelming. By the ninth century the rush of conversions was in its first phase of

⁶ J.B. Chabot, *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum Vulgo Dictum* (part II, CSCO 104; Louvain, 1933, reprint 1952) 154. The English translation is that of D.C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950) 45–6, as quoted in W. Witakowski, *The Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mabrē; a Study in the History of Historiography* (Uppsala, 1987) 45.

⁷ See Sidney H. Griffith, “Images, Islam and Christian Icons: a Moment in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in Early Islamic Times,” in P. Canivet & J.-P. Rey-Coquais (eds.), *La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam VII^e-VIII^e siècles: Actes du Colloque international Lyon-Maison de l’Orient Méditerranéen, Paris-Institut du Monde Arabe, 11–15 septembre 1990* (Damas, 1992) 121–38. See also Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy; Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁸ See Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth; Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

enthusiasm.⁹ An anonymous Syriac chronicler from Ṭūr ʿAbdīn, who completed his narrative somewhere around the year 775, offers this comment on the behavior of some of his contemporaries. He says,

The gates were opened to them to [enter] Islam. ... Without blows or tortures they slipped towards apostasy in great precipitancy; they formed groups of ten or twenty or thirty or a hundred or two hundred or three hundred without any sort of compulsion ..., going down to Ḥarrān and becoming Moslems in the presence of [government] officials. A great crowd did so ... from the districts of Edessa and of Ḥarrān and of Tella and of Resaina.¹⁰

- [4] This state of affairs is what elicited an apologetical and polemical response from the Syriac writers of the early Islamic period. Historians chronicled the conquests and military occupation of the Arabs, and gave some accounts of the origins and basic tenets of Islam. Preachers, epistolographers and Bible commentators took such notice of the teachings of Islam as their own topics seemed to require. Some writers composed apocalyptic treatises that tried to make sense of the hegemony of Islam from the perspective of the traditional Christian readings of the prophecies of Daniel. And some controversialists wrote apologetic and polemical tracts in Syriac that addressed themselves to arguments about religion between Christians and Muslims.

III

- [5] The historians/chroniclers were the ones who gave brief accounts of the rise of Islam and who occasionally furnished a thumb-nail portrait of Muḥammad. But for the most part their narratives

⁹ See Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: an Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), idem, *Islam; the View from the Edge* (New York, 1994).

¹⁰ Translation of J.B. Segal, *Edessa "The Blessed City"* (Oxford, 1970) 206, from J.-B. Chabot, *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo Dictum* (CSCO 104; Louvain, 1952) 381–5. See now the version of Amir Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnān*, Parts III and IV, A.D. 488–775 (Mediaeval Sources in Translation 36; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999) 324.

concentrated on recording current events as they impacted on the Christian communities. And in this connection they seldom failed to mention the disabilities and hardships inflicted on the subject populations by their Muslim masters, all the while taking note of the peculiarities of their rule.¹¹

[6] It is clear that for the most part the historians considered the coming of Islamic rule as a punishment which God allowed to fall upon his people for their sins. In no way can one find in their chronicles any evidence for the thesis sometimes advanced by modern scholars that the Syriac-speaking Christians welcomed the Arab invasion and the Islamic conquest as a liberation from the oppressive fiscal and theological policies of Byzantine rule. It is true that large segments of the population were considered to be "Monophysite" or "Nestorian" heretics by the Byzantine government. But in texts emanating from the 'Syrian Orthodox' or "Church of the East" communities themselves one finds hostility not so much to Byzantine rule in principle, nor the desire for a unity of faith among all the patriarchates and language communities. Rather, the concern, to the degree that it is anti-Byzantine at all, is with the perceived heresy and malfeasance in office of the actual Byzantine rulers, both civil and ecclesiastical.¹² Contrariwise, there is nothing necessarily anti-Byzantine, or anti-Roman, in the occasional remark in favor of the Arabs, such as the one attributed to Patriarch Ishôyahb III, writing to his

¹¹ See Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Translated Texts for Historians 15; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993). See also Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 116–215; Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnîn*.

¹² See C. Cahen, "Fiscalité, propriété, antagonismes sociaux en Haute-Mesopotamie au temps des premiers Abbasides d'après Denys de Tell-Mahré," *Arabica* 1 (1954): 136–52; J.B. Segal, "Syriac Chronicles as Source Material for the History of Islamic Peoples," in B. Lewis & P.M. Holt (eds.), *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962) 246–58; M. Benedicte Landron, "Les relations originelles entre Chrétiens de l'Est (Nestoriens) et Musulmans," *Parole de l'Orient* 10 (1981–2): 191–222; J. Moorhead, "The Monophysite Response to the Arab Invasions," *Byzantion* 51 (1981): 579–91; S.P. Brock, "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam," in G.H.A. Juynboll (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (Carbondale, Ill., 1982) 87–97; idem, "North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century; Book XV of John bar Penkayê's Rish Mellê," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 51–75.

correspondent Simeon of Rewardashir around the year 650, in the heat of the intra-Christian controversy of the time. He said:

As for the Arabs, to whom God has at this time given rule (*sulṭānā*) over the world, you know well how they act toward us. Not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honour the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries.¹³

IV

- [7] Perhaps the earliest Syriac writers to take account of the Islamic hegemony in religious language were those who sought to make sense of the conquest and occupation of the Arabs in terms of the prophecies of the book of Daniel. They wrote in the apocalyptic vein one would expect of anyone who took his cue from Daniel. The most well-known such work is the so-called Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, which was first composed in Syriac, and which was subsequently translated into Greek and Latin, and a number of other European languages. According to its most recent editor, G.J. Reinink, the text was first composed during the reign of the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, around the years 691/2. On the basis of his close analysis of the text, Reinink further proposes that the work was composed in a Syrian Orthodox milieu, in the border area between Byzantium and Persia around the city of Sinjār, probably in reaction to certain acute, political and social developments in the area at that time. The author of this apocalypse is now completely unknown, but over the course of time the work has come to be attributed to a certain Methodius of Patara (a town in Lycia, in Asia Minor), who is said to have been both a bishop and a martyr. In fact, the Syrian author relies heavily on earlier works in Syriac such as the Cave of Treasures, the Alexander legend, and the Julian romance. His thesis is that in due course, after a time of tribulation, God will set the world’s affairs aright and at the end of time the emperor of the Romans will restore the Christian religion, and its symbol, the cross, in Jerusalem, and he will hand the converted world over to Christ at his second coming. To explain how this event will come about the author weaves a somewhat complicated scenario which invokes the apocalyptic vision of history set forth in

¹³ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 181.

the book of Daniel, involving the fate of the four kingdoms of the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans, adjusted now to take account of the rule of the Arabs.¹⁴

[8] Other Syriac writers also used the apocalyptic option to account for the rule of the Arabs over the Christians and to project what they foresaw would be the outcome of it all. While they all agreed that the sinfulness of the community, and particularly doctrinal infidelity, was the root cause of their troubles, not all writers were as optimistic of the eventual outcome as was the author of the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius. A case in point is another apocalypse from the time of ‘Abd al-Malik called the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles. The author of this work seems much more pessimistic, as if he thought that the scourge of Arab rule was a permanent punishment inflicted upon the Christians for their sins.¹⁵

[9] The apocalyptic genre persisted in Syriac, and in later times was even combined with other types of apologetical/polemical writing, such as the Syriac account of the renegade Christian monk, Sargis/Bahîrâ, who is said to have been Muḥammad’s teacher.¹⁶ It had its roots in the patristic traditions of the exegesis of the biblical

¹⁴ See G. J. Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius: a Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam,” in A. Cameron & L. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I; Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam I; Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1992) 149–87; idem, *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (CSCO 540 & 541; Louvain: Peeters, 1993). This latter publication includes a full bibliography of the numerous studies devoted to this text prior to 1993.

¹⁵ See H.J.W. Drijvers, “Christians, Jews and Muslims in Northern Mesopotamia in Early Islamic Times; the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles and Related Texts,” in Canivet & Rey Coquais, (eds.), *La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam*, 67–74; idem, “The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: a Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period,” in Cameron & Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I*, 189–213. See also Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, 222–53.

¹⁶ See Richard Gottheil, “A Christian Bahira Legend,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13 (1898): 189–242; 14 (1899): 203–68; 15 (1900): 56–102; 17 (1903): 125–66. See also Sidney H. Griffith, “Muḥammad and the Monk Bahîrâ: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times,” *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995): 146–74.

book of Daniel, such as had already been in vogue in the Syriac-speaking world since at least as early as the time of St. Ephraem.¹⁷

V

- [10] Beyond the realm of apocalyptic exegesis, the pressure of Islam also forced Christian writers to systematize and to present in a concise and useable form their traditional exegesis of the scriptures more generally. A notable case in point is the remarkable work of the scholar from the Church of the East in the late eighth century, Theodore bar Kônî (fl. c. 792). He wrote a summary presentation of his church's doctrine in the form of an extended commentary on the whole Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament. He called it simply *Scholion* because it is in the form of *scholia*, or commentaries, on what are taken to be difficult passages in the several biblical books. In fact the work also includes numerous definitions of philosophical terms which are important for the proper understanding of church doctrines and creedal statements. There are eleven chapters in the book, the first nine of them follow the order of the biblical books, presenting doctrine in the catechetical style of questions posed by a student and answered by a master. The same literary style appears in Chapter X, which is a Christian response to objections to Christian doctrines and practices customarily posed by Muslims in the late eighth century. Chapter XI is an appendix to the *Scholion*, being a list of heresies and heresiarchs, along with brief statements of their teachings.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Sidney H. Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian,' Meditations on History and Imperial Power," *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987): 238–66.

¹⁸ Text: A. Scher, *Theodorus bar Kônî, Liber Scholiorum* (CSCO 55 & 69; Paris, 1910 & 1912). Versions: R. Hespel & R. Draguet, *Théodore Bar Koni, Livre des Scolies*, 2 vols. (CSCO 431 & 432; Louvain: Peeters, 1981 & 1982). For the *Scholion* in another text tradition see R. Hespel, *Théodore Bar Koni, Livre des Scolies* (CSCO 447 & 448; Louvain: Peeters, 1983). See also Lutz Brade, *Untersuchungen zum Scholienbuch des Theodoros Bar Koni; der Übernahme des Erbes von Theodoros von Mopsuestia in der nestorianischen Kirche* (Wiesbaden, 1975); Sidney H. Griffith, "Theodore bar Kônî's Scholion: a Nestorian Summa contra Gentiles from the First Abbasid Century," in N. Garsoïan et al. (eds.), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982) 53–72.

- [11] It is chapter X of the *Scholion* that is of special interest in the present context. In the preface Bar Kônî states the purpose of the chapter, and in a single sentence he rather pithily states the pastoral problem the Christians faced in the Islamic milieu of his day. He says he is writing,

Against those who while professing to accept the Old Testament, and acknowledging the coming of Christ, our Lord, are far removed from both of them, and they demand from us an apology for our faith, not from all of the scriptures, but from those which they acknowledge.¹⁹

- [12] One notices in this sentence Theodore bar Kônî's statement about the Muslims, whom he calls ḥanpê,²⁰ that "they demand from us an apology (mappaqbrûhâ) for our faith." And this is precisely what he supplies in chapter X of the *Scholion*, a reasoned reply to the challenge of Islam, in the question and answer format of the stylized dialogue between a master and his disciple. The style fits well the essentially controversial character of the theological enterprise in the world of Islam, in which the profile of the Christian self-definition necessarily follows the outline of the questions posed by Muslims. The topics discussed in the dialogue are: the Scriptures and Christ, Baptism, the Eucharistic mystery, the veneration of the Cross, sacramental practice, the Son of God, and, of course, interwoven with all of them, the all-embracing doctrine of the Trinity.²¹ These same issues, *mutatis mutandis*, are the ones which appear in the topical outlines of almost all of the tracts of

¹⁹ Scher, *Liber Scholiorum*, 231.

²⁰ The Syriac term *ḥanpê* was used in the classical language to mean 'pagans'. After the rise of Islam it was often applied to Muslims, doubtless taking into account the double entendre deriving from the use of the cognate Arabic term *ḥanīf* (pl. *ḥunafā*) in the *Qur'ân* on a par with the adjective muslim, to mean devotees of the one God of the patriarch Abraham. See *Āl Imrân* III:67. For further discussion see Sidney H. Griffith, "The Prophet Muḥammad, his Scripture and his Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century," in T. Fahd (ed.), *Vie du prophète Mahomet* (Colloque de Strasbourg, 1980; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983) 99–146.

²¹ See the discussion in Sidney H. Griffith, "Chapter Ten of the *Scholion*: Theodore Bar Kônî's Apology for Christianity," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 47 (1981): 158–88.

Christian theology written under the challenge of Islam. What is striking about the list of them is the obvious intermingling of questions of faith and practice in such a way that it is clear that the shape of theology itself is determined in this milieu by the apologetical imperative to justify religious beliefs in virtue of the public practices they entail. This became the agenda of almost all the theological treatises written by Syriac-speaking Christians from the eighth century onward,²² and especially of the dispute texts, that is to say, texts written with the primary purpose of engaging in controversy with Muslims, or with fellow Christians attracted to Islam.²³

VI

- [13] The earliest Syriac dispute text in the Islamic milieu may well be the report from the early eighth century which purports to be an account of the interrogation of Patriarch John III (631–48) of Antioch by a Muslim emir, now securely identified as ‘Umayr ibn Sa’d al-Anbārî, on Sunday, 9 May 644.²⁴ But the most well-known early dispute text is undoubtedly the one which contains Patriarch Timothy I’s (780–823) account of the replies he says he gave to the questions the caliph al-Mahdî (775–85) put to him on the occasion of two consecutive audiences the patriarch had with the caliph. The questions all had to do with the standard topics of conversation between Muslims and Christians on religious matters. The caliph

²² See for example the texts discussed in G.J. Reinink, “Communal Identity and the Systematisation of Knowledge in the Syriac ‘Cause of all Causes’,” in Peter Binkley (ed.), *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts; Proceedings of the Second COMERS Congress, Groningen, 1–4 July 1996* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 275–88.

²³ For a survey of these texts see Sidney H. Griffith, “Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: from Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286),” in F. Niewohner (ed.), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter* (Wolfenbütteler Mittelalter-Studien 4; Wiesbaden, 1992) 251–73.

²⁴ See F. Nau, “Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l’émir des Agaréens,” *Journal Asiatique* 11th series 5 (1915): 225–79; Kh. Samir, “Qui est l’interlocuteur musulman du patriarche syrien Jean III (631–648)?” in H.J.W. Drijvers et al. (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 229; Rome, 1987) 387–400; G.J. Reinink, “The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam,” *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993): 164–87.

raises the standard Islamic objections to Christian doctrines and practices, and the patriarch provides suitable apologetic replies. In its literary form, the account of this dialogue enjoyed a considerable popularity in the Christian community; it circulated in its original Syriac in a fuller and in an abbreviated form, and it was soon translated into Arabic, in which language the account of the dialogue has enjoyed a long popularity.²⁵ Literarily the dialogue is in the form of a letter from Timothy to an unnamed correspondent.²⁶ And while it undoubtedly does emanate from an occasion when the caliph really did query the patriarch about the tenets and practices of the Christian faith, it is clear that the report of the dialogue had a literary life of its own. It is a dialogue only in a very stylized form; the writer relegates the caliph to the role of posing concise leading questions in the style of a disciple, while the patriarch answers them with a master's discursive reply. In other words, the literary genre of the dialogue has a life and a purpose of its own, independent of the report of Timothy's moment in al-Mahdî's majlis. The dialogue within the compass of a letter-treatise is an apologetical catechism for the use of Christians living in the world of Islam.

[14]

The mention of the letter-treatise reminds one that this was in fact Patriarch Timothy's preferred literary genre. He wrote many letters on theological and even philosophical themes. While they have received some modern scholarly attention, few have

²⁵ A. Mingana, *Woodbrooke Studies; Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic, and Garshuni*, Edited and Translated with a Critical Apparatus, vol. II (Cambridge, 1928) 1–162. For a general study of Timothy and this dialogue, along with an edition, translation, and commentary on the Arabic translation, see Hans Putnam, *L'église et l'islam sous Timothée I (780–823)* (Beyrouth, 1975). For the abbreviated form of the Syriac text see A. Van Roey, "Une apologie syriaque attribuée à Élie de Nisibe," *Le Muséon* 59 (1946): 381–97. See also Robert Caspar, "Les versions arabes du dialogue entre le Catholicos Timothée I et le calife al-Mahdî (II^e/VIII^e siècle)," *Islamochristiana* 3 (1977): 107–75.

²⁶ The letter-treatise was Timothy's preferred literary form. See O. Braun, *Timothei Patriarchea I Epistulae* (CSCO 74 & 75; Paris, 1914); R. Bidawid, *Les lettres du patriarche nestorien Timothée I* (Studi e Testi 187; Città del Vaticano, 1956); G. Chediath, *Letters of Patriarch Timothy I (778–820 A.D.)* (Kerala: Mar Thoma Darmo, 1982). The dialogue with al-Mahdî is not published in these collections, although it is generally reckoned as letter no. 59.

recognized how much Islam and the intellectual pre-occupations of Muslims affected the patriarch's thought and gave shape to his presentation of traditional Christian teaching.²⁷

- [15] While the texts reporting the dialogues of the 'Syrian Orthodox' Patriarch John I and the 'Church of the East' Patriarch Timothy I with Muslim officials are thus the earliest, well-known examples of Syriac dispute texts in the Islamic milieu, there is in fact another such text with its roots in the eighth century which is much less well known, but which is very important for the study of the growth and development of Christian apologetical/polemical literature in the world of Islam. It is the Syriac account of the conversation between a monk of Bêt Hālê and a Muslim emir, to the discussion of which we now turn as to the main feature of the present communication.

VII

- [16] Scholars have long known the report of an account of a "Disputation against the Arabs" featuring a monk named Abraham of the monastery of Bêt Hālê, who answers the questions and objections of a Muslim Arab about Christian doctrines and practices.²⁸ In recent years, members of the Talen en Culturen van het Midden-Oosten at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, the Netherlands, have acquired photographic copies of the text. In the near future a scientific edition, translation, and commentary on the work will appear under the direction of Professor Han J.W. Drijvers of Groningen.²⁹ In the meantime, having, through

²⁷ See the study of Thomas R. Hurst, *The Syriac Letters of Timothy I (727–823): A Study in Christian-Muslim Controversy* (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America; Washington, D.C., 1986).

²⁸ See the notice of Abdîshô · bar Brikâ in J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, vol. III, pt. 1 (Rome, 1735) 205, who knows of an Abraham of Bêt Hālê who wrote a "disputation against the Arabs." Diyarbekir Syriac MS 95, a MS of the early 18th century containing a copy of the 'disputation' is described in A. Scher, "Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés à l'archevêché chaldéen de Diarbekir," *Journal Asiatique* 10th series 10 (1907): 395–8. The *Disputation* is no. 35 of 43 entries, p. 398.

²⁹ See P. Jager, "Intended Edition of a Disputation between a Monk of the Monastery of Bet Hale and One of the Tayoye," in Drijvers et al. (eds.) *IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984*, 401–2. Professor Drijvers also

the kindness of Professor Drijvers, gained access to the text, it is my purpose here briefly to review the contents of the dialogue, in an effort to show its importance for the study of the growth and development of a particular genre of popular Christian apologetics in the Islamic world which I have elsewhere called “the Monk in the Emir’s *majlis*.”³⁰ What I would like to highlight in particular is the fact that not only the genre but the major topics of controversy are here featured in a Syriac work which may emanate from the eighth century, which can be seen as the harbinger for future developments in the style and shape of Christian controversial theology in the Middle East. From the ninth century onward, in Arabic, the genre and its topics will come into full flower as the most popular of all genres of Christian apologetics in the Islamic world.

- [17] There are two initial puzzles to discuss about the encounter between monk and emir which the narrative reports, assuming the integrity of the text in the rather late manuscript copies of it that are available:³¹ the location of Bêt Ḥālê, and the date of the encounter. As for the location, it seems most likely to me, until further study would show otherwise, to assume that the monastery of Bêt Ḥālê of which the text speaks is the site known as *Dayr Mār ‘Abdâ* near Kufa and Ḥīrā in Iraq.³² For in the preface to the work, the monk says that his Muslim dialogue partner was an Arab notable in the entourage of the emir Maslama. In this connection one thinks immediately of Maslama ibn ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 738), who was governor for a brief time in Iraq in the early 720’s, a

discussed the work in a Major Theme presentation at the Oxford Patristic Conference of 1991, but did not publish the presentation in *Studia Patristica*, pending the appearance of the editon and translation. See the discussion of the work in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It*, 465–72.

³⁰ See Sidney H. Griffith, “The Monk in the Emir’s *Majlis*; Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period,” in Hava Lazarus Yafeh et al. (eds.), *The Majlis; Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* (Studies in Arabic Language and Literature 4; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), to appear.

³¹ The two available manuscript copies date respectively from the early 18th century (from Diyarbekir (MS 95), and the year 1890 (Mardin). See Jager, “Intended Edition.”

³² See J.M. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, vol. III (Beyrouth, 1968) 223. For other locations see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It*, 465.

circumstance that suggests both a place and a date for the reported encounter of monk and emir, both of which are plausible.³³

[18] The circumstances of the dialogue that the author mentions in the preface to his account of it are instructive. He says that the Muslim notable was in the monastery for ten days because of sickness. He was a man interested in religion, the author says, “learned in our scriptures as well as in their *Qurʾān*.” At first he spoke with the monks only through an interpreter, as was proper because of his high position in government. And the monk reports that for his part, in discussions about religion with such people, his own custom was to prefer silence to forthrightness. But in this discussion, honesty and love for the truth were to prevail, the author says, and the dialogue went forward without the services of an interpreter. One supposes that the conversation was in Arabic, although the account of it is in Syriac.

[19] The text is Christian apologetics pure and simple. From the preface it appears that the monk involved in the dialogue, who is not named in the text, was himself the author. He says that in setting down the account of the conversation he is responding to the request of a certain Father Jacob for an account of:

Our investigation into the apostolic faith at the instance of a son of Ishmael. And since it seems to me it would be profitable to you to bring it to the attention of your brethren, and because I know it will be useful to you, I am going to set it down in ‘Question’ and ‘Answer’ format.³⁴

[20] Throughout the narrative, the Arab (*Tayyāyā*)³⁵ then poses the questions, and the monk (*ihīdayā*) answers with long explanations of Christian beliefs and practices. At the end, the Arab is made to say,

³³ See H. Lammens, “Maslama ibn Abdalmalik,” *EI*, 1st ed., vol. III, 447–8.

³⁴ All of the quotations from the text are my translations of passages in Diyarbekir MS 95, from a private, typewritten transcript. Preface, pp. 1–2.

³⁵ The term *Tayyāyē* (pl.) was in common use in Syriac since early times to designate Arab nomads, being at root the name of the Arab tribe of aṭ-Ṭayy. After the rise of Islam Syriac writers often used this term to mean simply “Muslims.” See J.S. Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London, 1979) 312.

“I testify that were it not for the fear of the government and of shame before men, many would become Christians.”³⁶

[21] The questioning begins when the Arab complains that although monks are very astute in prayer, “your creed,” he says, “does not allow your prayer to be acceptable.”³⁷ The monk replies to this challenge by inviting the Arab to pose whatever questions he wants, and he proposes to give an answer “either from the scriptures, or from the speculation of reason.”³⁸ The Arab then avers that Islam is the best religion because, as he says:

We are careful with the commandments of Muḥammad, and with the sacrifices of Abraham. ... We do not ascribe a son to God, who is visible and passible like us. And there are other things: we do not worship the cross, nor the bones of martyrs, nor images like you [do]. ... But here is a sign that God loves us and is pleased with our religion (*tawdīthan*): He has given us authority over all religions and all peoples; they are slaves subject to us.³⁹

[22] With this statement the Arab sets the agenda for the whole dialogue. But before he gets into the discussion of the religious issues as such, the monk reminds him that when one puts the rule of Islam in the perspective of world history, “You Ishmaelites are holding the smallest portion of the earth. All of creation is not subject to your authority.”⁴⁰

[23] The first serious question then has to do with Abraham. The Arab wants to know, “why do you not acknowledge Abraham and his commandments?”⁴¹ The monk’s reply is a recitation of the scheme of salvation history in which he explains that Abraham’s life and exploits are the type for Christ’s life and accomplishments; in particular the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is the type for the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. So the Arab asks about Christ at his crucifixion, “How is it possible for divinity to be with him on the cross and in the grave, as you say, neither suffering nor

³⁶ Transcript, p. 16.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴¹ Ibid.

being harmed?”⁴² The monk then explains that divinity truly was with Christ, but that “there was neither a mixture, nor an intermingling, nor a confusion, as the heretics say, but it was by way of the will (*sebyānā’ūth*), in such a way as not to be harmed or to suffer.”⁴³ As for the sacrifice itself, the monk explains, it is continued every day in the Eucharist, about which he then speaks briefly.

- [24] The Arab proclaims himself to be satisfied with the monk’s explanations, and he turns to the question of Christ as the Son of God, and to the Christian faith in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The monk replies with the statement that God “is one; He is known in three *qnômē*.”⁴⁴ And he cites a number of passages from the Old Testament and the New Testament to illustrate the point. Then he queries the Muslim on the issue of sonship. He asks, “Tell me, son of Ishmael, whose son do you make him to be, the one called ‘Īsā, son of Maryam by you, and Jesus the Messiah by us?”⁴⁵ The Arab answers with a quotation from the *Qur’ān*, “the Word of God and His Spirit” (*an-Nisā’* IV:171). The monk then argues that with this affirmation Muḥammad had, in effect, endorsed the teaching of the Gospel of Luke in the pericope of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary:

Peace be to you, full of grace; our Lord be with you, blessed among women. The Holy Spirit will come, and the power of the Most High will cover you. Because of this, the one to be born from you is holy, and he will be called the Son of the Most High (Lk. 1:30).⁴⁶

- [25] In the light of this passage, the monk then challenges the Arab, “Either you estrange the Word of God and His Spirit from Him, or you proclaim him to be the Son of God straightforwardly.”⁴⁷ At

⁴² Transcript, p. 5.

⁴³ Ibid. The incarnational language used here, saying that the union of divinity and humanity was by way of the will (ܫܒܝܢܐܘܬܐ) echoes the so-called ‘Nestorian’ formula, according to which the union of divinity and humanity in Christ was accomplished ܫܒܝܢܐܘܬܐ ܫܘܚܘܬܐܘܬܐ. See L. Abramowski, *A Nestorian Collection of Christological Texts*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1972).

⁴⁴ Transcript, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 9/10.

this point the Arab opts for silence, and he asks the monk what he thinks of Muḥammad.

[26] The monk gives it as his opinion that Muḥammad “was a wise man and a God-fearer, who freed you [i.e., the Arabs] from the worship of demons and made you recognize the true God is one.”⁴⁸ If that is the case, the Arab then wants to know why Muḥammad did not teach his followers about the doctrine of the Trinity. The monk’s reply is that the Arabs were as yet in a child-like state in the matter of the knowledge of God, and not yet ready for the mature teaching of the trinity. So Muḥammad preached only “the doctrine he received from Sargis Baḥirâ.”⁴⁹ This is the name of the monk who in both Islamic and Christian traditions is said to have tutored the youthful Muḥammad in religion and who is said to have recognized his future prophethood.

[27] The monk says that one reason why Muḥammad did not teach the Arabs about the doctrine of the Trinity was the fear that in their immaturity they would take it as a pretext for idolatry. And this concern reminds the Arab of his objection to Christian religious behavior, and particularly “that you worship images, crosses, and the bones of martyrs.”⁵⁰ In answer to this objection the monk cites numerous instances from the Old Testament in which the texts tell of occasions when, in the economy of salvation, and by way of typology, the fathers and prophets made prostration to material things, intending thereby to show honor to God. And he says in regard to Christ, the son of God,

We make prostration and we pay honor to his image because he has impressed it with his countenance (*parçupâ*) and has given it to us. Everytime we look at his icon (*yugnâ*) we see him. We pay honor to the image of the king, because of the king.⁵¹

[28] In this connection the Arab then says that he knows of the icon which Christ “caused to be made of himself and sent it to Abgar, the king of Edessa.”⁵² And, as if the very mention of this

⁴⁸ Transcript, p. 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵² Ibid. On this image see Averil Cameron, “The History of the Image of Edessa: the Telling of a Story,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7

famous icon explained the matter to his satisfaction, the Arab moves on to ask why Christians venerate the cross when there is no command to do so in the Gospel.

- [29] It is in conjunction with his apology for the veneration of the cross that the monk brings up a matter that has been of interest to historians of early Islam ever since this Syriac text became known to scholars. He says to the Arab:

I think that even in your case, Muḥammad did not teach all your laws and commandments in the *Qurʾān*, but you learned some of them from the *Qurʾān*; some of them are in *surat al-Baqarah*, and in *G-y-g-y*, and in *T-n-r-h*.⁵³

- [30] On the face of it, this remark seems to make a distinction between the *Qurʾān* and the second *surah*. And, if one assumes that the Syriac consonants have become somewhat garbled in transmission, it may be the case that the next two terms also refer to *surahs*, viz., *The Spider XXIX* (*al-ʿAnkabūt*, Syriac, *gwāgay*), and *Repentance IX* (*at-Tawbah*, Syriac, *tyābūthā*). However, Professor Drijvers is probably nearer the mark when he suggests that one should understand the two terms to refer to the Gospel (*al-injīl*) and the Torah (*at-Tawrat*), a reading with the least philological difficulty, and one that repeats a word-pair common in the *Qurʾān*.⁵⁴ In either case, there remains what seems to be a reference on the author's part to the *Qurʾān*, and to at least one of its constituent parts, as if they were two distinct texts, two different sources of Islamic law. From the historian's point of view, the question then becomes, does this reference supply evidence from the early eighth century about the collection of the *Qurʾān*, to the effect that it might be used to challenge the customary 'orthodox' view of the time and manner of the coming-to-be of the *Qurʾān*? In other words, did *al-Baqarah*, and other *surahs*, at one time circulate

(1983): 80–94. See also H.J.W. Drijvers, "The Image of Edessa in the Syriac Tradition," in H.L. Kessler and G. Wolf (eds.), *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation* (Villa Spelman Colloquia 6; Band, 1998) 13–31.

⁵³ Transcript, p. 11.

⁵⁴ See also Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 471–2. At least seven times in the *Qurʾān* the text speaks of *at-Tawrah wa l-injīl* together, as in *Āl Imrān* III:3.

as independent compositions, distinct from the *Qur'an* as such?⁵⁵ It is interesting to note in this connection that in some other Christian texts of the early Islamic period, there are also references to *al-Baqarab* as if it were a separate work in its own right, most notably in St. John of Damascus' refutation of Islam in Chapter 101 of his *De Haeresibus*.⁵⁶

- [31] Following what may seem like an interruption in his discussion of the veneration of the cross, the author returns to the subject with the explanation that although there is no explicit warrant for such a practice in the Gospel, Christians have found many symbolic allusions to the cross in nature, and he even cites the case of the famous victory of Constantine at the battle of the Milvian bridge as evidence of the cross' power. He concludes:

Anyone who is a Christian, but does not worship (*sāged*) the cross, like one who will not look upon Christ, truly he is lost from life. When we worship the cross, we are not worshipping it as wood, or iron, or brass, or gold, or silver. Rather, we are worshipping our Lord Christ, God the Word, who dwells in the temple from us, and in this banner of victory.⁵⁷

- [32] Next the Arab inquires about the veneration which Christians show to the bones of the martyrs. The monk explains that "we worship the One who dwells in them and works prodigies and signs by means of their bones."⁵⁸ And he likens the martyrs to the counselors and friends of an earthly king, through whom people are accustomed to seek the favor of the king.

- [33] Changing the subject, the Arab then wants to know why Christians face toward the east when they pray. In answer the monk says,

Our Lord Christ used to pray toward the east. The holy apostles received from him the practice of worshipping toward the east, and so they handed it on to us. The true proof that they received it from our Lord is the

⁵⁵ See e.g., Crone & Cook, *Hagarism*, 12.

⁵⁶ See John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, PG, XCIV, col. 772D.

⁵⁷ Transcript, p. 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

fact that all of the churches on earth worship toward the east.⁵⁹

[34] Impressed with the monk's arguments, the Arab says,

Truly you are in possession of the truth and not error, as men think. Even Muḥammad our prophet said about the inhabitants of the monasteries and the mountain dwellers that they will enjoy the kingdom.⁶⁰

[35] This remark is intriguing because it does echo the positive things said about Christians, and particularly the monks, in both the *Qur'ān* and the *Hadīth*, Islamic tradition which Muslim scholars trace back to Muḥammad himself.⁶¹

[36] Finally, the Arab comes to the question which most puzzles him, and which no doubt would also have puzzled the Christian readers of the dialogue. He puts it this way:

While I know your religion is right, and your way of thinking is even preferable to ours, what is the reason why God handed you over into our hands and you are driven by us like sheep to the slaughter, and your bishops and your priests are killed, and the rest are subjugated and enslaved with the king's impositions night and day, more bitter than death?⁶²

[37] Calling to mind the pertinent biblical precedents, the monk answers this question as follows. He says, "As for you, sons of Ishmael, God did not give you authority over us because of your righteousness, but because of our sins."⁶³ In the end, the Arab then wants to know only one thing. He asks, "Are the sons of Hagar going to enter the Kingdom or not?"⁶⁴ The monk answers with the verse from the Gospel according to John, "Whoever is not born of water and the Spirit will not enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:5) But he immediately adds:

⁵⁹ Transcript, p. 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶¹ On this topic in particular see Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians; an Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. pp. 260–84.

⁶² Transcript, p. 15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

If there is a man who has good deeds, he will live in grace, in abodes far removed from torment. However, he will think of himself as a hired man and not as a son.⁶⁵

[38] The dialogue ends on this note, plus the Arab's final testimony:

I testify that were it not for the fear of the government and of shame before men, many would become Christians. But you are blessed of God to have given me satisfaction by your conversation with me.⁶⁶

VIII

[39] On the face of it, this dialogue, written in Syriac, was intended for Christian readers. It communicates the idea that Christians have answers for the religious challenges of Islam, and that even Muslims themselves would admit it if they dared. The text implies that it was written by the monk who was in conversation with the Arab, and that he wrote an account of it, adopting a Question and Answer format, at the request of a certain Father Jacob, because, as the writer says, "it seems to me it would be profitable for you to bring it to the attention of your brethren, and because I know it will be useful to you."⁶⁷

[40] The setting in which the author places the dialogue is rich in verisimilitude; monasteries were celebrated even in Islamic Arabic poetry as places where one might find a measure of rest and recreation from life's troubles.⁶⁸ The name of Maslama ibn 'Abd al-Malik (d. 738) would, of course, have been well known to Christians and Muslims alike. So a scene in which "an Arab man, one of the notables who was in the entourage of the emir Maslama

⁶⁵ Transcript, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

⁶⁸ Islamic Arabic literature features a sub-genre of poetry 'On Monasteries'. While these compositions have most often to do with wine and revelry, they nevertheless do testify to the popularity of sojourns in monasteries. See a list of Muslim authors who wrote on monasteries in Girgis Awwad, *Kitāb ad-diyārāt* (Baghdad, 1966) 36–48. See also S. Munajid, "Morceau choisis du livre des moines," *MIDEO* 3 (1956): 349–58; G. Troupeau, "Les couvents chrétiens dans la littérature arabe," *La Nouvelle Revue de Caire* 1 (1975): 265–79.

(ܐܘܬܝܪܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ... ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ),”⁶⁹ who would come to a monastery for care in an illness, is realistic. To a Christian reader it might even suggest a certain cultural superiority on the part of Aramean Christianity in Mesopotamia in the eighth century.

- [41] The author adds another important detail to the narrative which enhances its verisimilitude. He mentions the language difference. He says of the monastery’s notable guest, “Because he was a man of office in the emirate, he was engaged in governing much of the time. And because of his high rank, and my own abasement, he used to converse with us by means of an interpreter.”⁷⁰ The wording of this detail suggests that the monks could have communicated with their visitor in Arabic, but that the social circumstances of Christian monks in an Islamic society prevented this at first. (It seems unlikely, but not impossible, that the Arab would have been conversant in Syriac.) That these social circumstances included a reluctance on the part of the subject Christian to speak forthrightly to a Muslim official about religion is borne out by the sequel in the narrative. For at first the author portrays the monk as unwilling to engage in a forthright conversation about religion with the Arab. The monk even says to the Arab, “Because you are asking questions in a passing manner, our preferred choice is to take refuge in silence. ... But if you want accurately to learn the truth, speak with me without an interpreter.”⁷¹ When the Arab agrees to this request the monk says further:

Since you are very great, I know that on every issue, whatever it is, I should show you honor because of your authority and your eminence. Nevertheless, when you are pressing me about the truth of my faith, I know that I shall not be currying favor with your person.⁷²

- [42] This declaration on the monk’s part deftly testifies both to his subordinate position in society, and the courage he musters when it comes to defending his faith. Both of these features are important narrative elements in the other Syriac and Arabic works in the

⁶⁹ Transcript, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 1–2.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷² Ibid.

literary genre that I call, “the monk in the emir’s *majlis*.” They go together with the other apologetic and polemical strategies that the author employs to help him commend to his Christian reader the superiority of Christian faith to Islam, in spite of the social and political dominance of Muslims.

[43] The social verisimilitude of the narrative inevitably raises the question of its historicity. One notices that the work is in fact anonymous; the name Abraham comes from a late bibliographical notice.⁷³ The known manuscript witnesses to the text are late; they come from the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries respectively.⁷⁴ The mention of the name of the emir Maslama serves the narrative purpose of situating the story credibly in time and place. It does not necessarily date the composition of the text to the 720’s. A later Syriac author could well have composed the work, including these details to strengthen the verisimilitude of the story. But until the text is edited, published and fully studied there can be no real answer to this question.

[44] What excites me about this Syriac work of Christian apology in the Islamic milieu is how much it seems to anticipate the apologetical methods that appear in the more popular Arab Christian apologetical texts that were composed from the ninth century onward. In particular, in many details, it foreshadows, if that be the correct verb, discussions one finds in the Arabic works of Theodore Abû Qurrah (c.755–c.830), who wrote very much within the Syriac-speaking milieu.⁷⁵ If the work in fact comes from the first quarter of the eighth century, as its author suggests, it goes together with other Syriac texts we have mentioned here, texts produced in the eighth century, which in the ensemble can then be seen as already determining in large part the stance Christians would take toward Islam in Arabic, and the apologetical strategies

⁷³ See n. 28 above.

⁷⁴ See above, n. 31

⁷⁵ In this connection see especially Sidney H. Griffith, “Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām: Theodore Abû Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion,” in Samir Khalil Samir & Jørgen Nielsen (eds.), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1258)* (Studies in the History of Religions 63; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994) 1–43; idem, *Theodore Abû Qurrah; a Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons* (Eastern Christian Texts in Translation 1; Louvain: Peeters, 1997).

they would develop, when the conversation was taken up in Arabic by Muslims and Christians alike in the ninth century.

IX

[45] Of course, Syriac writers continued to write apologetical and polemical texts in the Islamic milieu, even after the beginnings of Christian *Kalam* in Arabic, when Christian writers accommodated themselves to the Islamic way of doing controversial theology. A typical Christian thinker who wrote in Syriac in the ninth century and whose apologetical method was very much on the order of that of the contemporary Muslim *mutakallimun* was Nonnus of Nisibis (d. c. 870). He was a bilingual writer, with works in both Syriac and Arabic to his credit. He wrote in the service of the Syrian Orthodox community, whose characteristic teachings he energetically defended not only against Muslims, but against ‘Melkites’ and ‘Nestorians’ as well. The work in which he addressed himself to the intellectual challenge of Islam is a Syriac treatise that its modern editor calls simply, *le traité apologétique*.⁷⁶ On internal, literary critical grounds one must date the composition to a point between 850 and 870. It is an apologetical essay on the themes of monotheism, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the doctrine of the Incarnation. What strikes the reader almost immediately is the fact that while Nonnus writes in Syriac, and therefore for Christian eyes alone, he nevertheless expresses his thinking very much in the idiom of the Muslim *mutakallimun* of his day. His work clearly shows how by the second half of the ninth century Christian theology in the world of Islam, even in Syriac, had become thoroughly acculturated to the intellectual milieu of the Muslims.⁷⁷ This feature of the work marks a step beyond the apologetical style of the debate of the monk of Bêt Hālê.

[46] By far the longest and the fullest text in Syriac to do with disputation with Muslims is the one written by Dionysius bar Šalībī (d. 1171), the scholarly Syrian Orthodox bishop of Amida who was one of the bright lights in the world of Syriac letters. Dionysius included a long tract, “Against the *Tayyāyê*,” as we may call it, in

⁷⁶ See A. Van Roey, *Nonnus de Nisibe; traité apologétique* (Bibliothèque du Muséon 21; Louvain, 1948).

⁷⁷ See Sidney H. Griffith, “The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis,” *ARAM* 3 (1991): 115–38.

what appears to have been a comprehensive treatise *Adversus Haereses*. It is composed of thirty chapters, included in three major sections of the work. The three major sections may in fact have originally been separate works, now put together to compose a single tract. In the first section Dionysius gives an account of the rise, the spread, and the divisions of the Muslims, together with an account of the objections they customarily pose for Christians, and the appropriate answers one might give to them. The second section consists of more detailed replies to the challenges Muslims customarily voiced against Christianity, along with a Christian evaluation of Islamic teaching. The third section contains quotations from the *Qurʾān* in Syriac translation, together with comments and refutations from Bar Ṣalībî. What makes Dionysius bar Ṣalībî's tract "Against the *Tayyāʿe*" distinctive, apart from its length and comprehensiveness, is the amount of information about Muslims it contains, about their history, about the *Qurʾān*, and about the various schools of Islamic thought. This feature of the work makes it unique not only among Syriac dispute texts, but among Christian works on Islam in general in the medieval period.⁷⁸ Happily, Professor Joseph P. Amar of the University of Notre Dame is now at work on a critical edition, and English translation of the text.

⁷⁸ For a discussion and further bibliography see Sidney H. Griffith, "Dionysius bar Ṣalībî on the Muslims," in Drijvers et al. (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984*, 353–65.