

Scriptural Interpretation at the Interface between Education and Religion

In Memory of Hans Conzelmann

Edited by

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BRILL

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Jesus and Mary: Qur'ānic Echoes of Syriac Homilies?

Clare Wilde

1 Late Antique Christological Disputes

Both the Qur'ān and the Bible preserve memories of challenges to the truth of their respective prophets. While the Qur'ānic prophet is maligned by his detractors as a sorcerer (e.g., Q 38:4), poet (e.g., Q 37:36), liar or one possessed by jinn (e.g., Q 52:29), the Bible attests to criticisms of Jesus from his contemporaries that ultimately result in his crucifixion (e.g., Mark 15:1–15). The Bible also indicates that Jesus' disciples disputed amongst themselves about his power (e.g., John 20:24–29).

1.1 *Christological Divisions*

For centuries after Jesus' own lifetime, Trinitarian and Christological questions occupied Christian theologians. Ecumenical councils were called (by the emperor) in order to attempt a resolution to the disputes. While the Council of Nicea (325) addressed, among other issues, the relationship of God the Father to God the Son (Christ), among the topics at the Council of Chalcedon (451) was how the second person of the Trinity was both human and divine.

Needless to say, the ecumenical councils did not result in unanimous consent among all the Christian communities. For example, concerning the issues debated at the Council of Nicea, it was reported:

If you went to a shop in Constantinople wanting to buy a loaf, the baker instead of telling you the price, will argue that the Father [i.e., God] is greater than the Son. The money-changer will talk of the Begotten and the Unbegotten instead of giving you your money, and if you want a bath the bathkeeper assures you that the Son surely proceeds from nothing.¹

While Christian groups who disagreed with Nicene orthodoxy would not survive, theological pronouncements from the Council of Chalcedon were

1 See the account in GIBBON (1994, 28 [vol. 3, ch. XXVII]).

met with long-standing opposition. In fact, both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christians survive until this day.

Although the various groups agree with the general concept of the Incarnation (God taking on flesh), they have different understandings as to how, in the second person of the Trinity, divinity and humanity are united. The theological pronouncement at Chalcedon emphasized the union of two natures, one divine and one human, in the one hypostasis of the person of Christ. This is the understanding of the majority of Latin and Greek Christians.² Those who would come to be associated with the Church of the East (with a heavy concentration of adherents in contemporary Iraq and Iran) are sometimes termed Nestorian,³ as, like the fifth century bishop of Constantinople of that name, they refused to term Mary “theotokos” (God-bearer). These Christians understand the person of Christ as containing two hypostases, one for the divine nature, and the other for the human nature. The other major group dissenting view from the Chalcedonian definition is termed Monophysite (or, more accurately, Miaphysite) as its members emphasised the unity of the natures (φύσεις) in the hypostasis. Fearing that Chalcedon’s definition might lead Christians to – erroneously – classify the activities, if not the natures, of Christ into divine and human categories, they insisted on the “oneness” of the nature, albeit both divine and human. Due to the efforts of Jacob Baradaeus to preserve this anti-Chalcedonian Christianity in Syria and Iraq, Monophysite Syriac-speakers are often termed Jacobites.⁴

It should be noted that dissent from conciliar decisions in many cases was not merely based on theological (or philosophical) grounds.⁵ Furthermore, ecclesiastical councils that addressed such theological issues would also consider other matters. For example, Chalcedon also discussed issues of ecclesiastical administration, such as the obedience of monks to bishops. Given the multi-faceted nature of the Councils and the various Christian communities, there was rarely a uniform acceptance or rejection of conciliar pronouncements in a given region. Thus, after Chalcedon, it was possible to find both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christians in a single city. In such circumstances, the various groups were well aware of each other’s existence and competing ideologies, as attested to by the rich legacy of debate texts produced by Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian authors. Emperors, too, were all too

2 On the history of this group in the Arabic speaking world, see GRIFFITH (2006).

3 On this nomenclature, see BROCK (1996).

4 For further discussion on these divisions, see GRIFFITH (2001).

5 For one example, see FRIEND (1982).

aware of these divisions and, for at least the next two centuries, would attempt to reconcile the various factions.⁶

1.2 *Qur'ānic Christology?*

The Qur'ān also reflects an awareness of Christian divisions (e.g., Q 19:34) and takes issue with Christian doctrines:

O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say [anything] about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, was but a messenger of Allah and His word which He directed to Mary and a soul [created at a command] from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers. And do not say, "Three"; desist – it is better for you. Indeed, Allah is but one God. Exalted is He above having a son. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. And sufficient is Allah as Disposer of affairs.

Q 4:171

For example, it consistently calls Jesus both "the Messiah" and "son of Mary", but its interpretation of these names is different from that of Christian tradition. The Qur'ān insists that God "does not beget, nor is He begotten" (Q 112:3). Much of the qur'ānic quarrel is not with Jesus himself, but with the distortions of his followers:

Allah will say, "O Jesus, Son of Mary, did you say to the people, "Take me and my mother as deities besides Allah?" He will say, "Exalted are You! It was not for me to say that to which I have no right. If I had said it, You would have known it. You know what is within myself, and I do not know what is within Yourself. Indeed, it is You who is Knower of the unseen."

Q 5:116

In fact, Jesus is not treated like other humans in the Qur'ān. It acknowledges something unusual about his apparent death (Q 4:157). And although it denies Christ's divinity, it generally agrees with the Christian narrative of his birth – to Mary, whose chastity it extols (e.g., Q 66:12). But, in the qur'ānic narrative, the conception of Jesus (without a human father) was no different from that of Adam (Q 3:59): God need only say "be" and something "becomes". And while

⁶ On imperial concern with ecclesiastical matters, see, e.g., VAN ROMPAY (2005), who provides an excellent overview of the various communities of the Christian East in the age of Justinian.

it acknowledges Jesus' ability to perform miracles (Q 3:49), the Qur'ān insists he only does so through "the permission of God" (rather than through his own divinity). It should also be noted that it names Jesus many more times than Muḥammad, and the only sūra (chapter) named after a woman is Q 19, "Mary" (the mother of Jesus).

Although Christian communities are attested on and near the Arabian peninsula in Late Antiquity,⁷ little is known about the precise doctrinal persuasion(s) of the Christians known to the Qur'ān. Both Nestorians and Monophysites were present on the Arabian peninsula and in neighboring lands, among both settled and nomadic Arabs, as well as among other peoples: while "Nestorians" were found among the Lakhmids and along the southern coast of Arabia, Monophysites were also found in southern Arabia, at Najrān,⁸ as well as among the Ghassanids (a rival tribe of the Lakhmids, both of whom served as border guards between Byzantium and Persia) and in Abyssinia (whose ruler hosted the first Muslim refugees, according to Islamic tradition).⁹ Given the complex situation of Christianity in and around Late Antique Arabia, might the Qur'ān, especially if read in conjunction with Late Antique Christian literature, shed light on the Christians it expects its auditors to know?

According to the Qur'ān, messengers speak the language of the people to whom they are sent (Q 14:4). It follows that the revelation would also use concepts and categories familiar to its auditors. What, then, might Qur'ānic allusions to Jesus and Mary reveal about the Christians (or Christianity/Christianities) in its milieu? This question is particularly complex when the Qur'ān is understood as a text with a message of its own. It has to be considered whether, at places where Christians or Christianity are mentioned, the Qur'ān is intending a precise description of a group (or groups) it expects its auditors to know. Or is its presentation of Christians or Christianity intentionally polemical or exaggerated, in order to make its own point more forcefully? It should also be noted that, while the Qur'ān exhibits an intimate familiarity with, and strong critique of, Christianity, in Arabic, the earliest Arabic Bible translations post-date the advent of Islam, leading to speculation about the language(s) of the Christian communities it appears to know.¹⁰

7 For Christianity among the pre-Islamic Arabs, see the classic study of TRIMINGHAM (1979), as well as HOYLAND (2001).

8 On whom see SHAHID (1971).

9 For some discussion and bibliography on Islamic accounts of Abyssinia in the time of Muḥammad, see RAVEN (1988).

10 For the history of the Arabic Bible, see GRIFFITH (2013).

2 Deciphering God's Language(s)

Judaism, Christianity and Islam each claim that their scriptures preserve a record of God's communication with humanity, as revealed through various individuals. As their theologies are predicated on a communicative God, polemics arose around the nature of God's own language. In fact, medieval polemics among Christians, Jews and Muslims concerned the pre-Lapsarian language: Was it Arabic, with Syriac, for example, as a punishment? Or, was it Hebrew (or Syriac), with Arabic being the post-Lapsarian tongue?¹¹ Such discussions have been extended to the critical examination of the sacred texts themselves, often in the hope of finding, or gaining a deeper understanding of, the "original" text. The Bible has a rich manuscript tradition for its various books, in multiple languages and various locations. The Qur'ān, on the other hand, attests to its own clear/clarifying Arabic (Q 16:103) and this Arabic text has generally been considered the only "true" record of what was revealed to the prophet Muḥammad. Islamic tradition further maintains that, within a generation of the Prophet's death, the qur'ānic text was codified and, until today, the basic consonantal script of that recension is the only text in circulation.¹²

But, despite qur'ānic and later Islamic claims about the linguistic purity of the Qur'ān, the text itself has been understood as containing foreign (e.g., non-Arabic) terms.¹³ The qur'ānic text also engages, and assumes its auditors' familiarity with, a variety of topics familiar to students of Jewish, Christian and Late Antique history that extends beyond the confines of the Arabian peninsula. Among the most prominent of these passages are those relating to Jesus and his mother. Since a preponderance of the foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān is linked to Syriac,¹⁴ the following explores whether the qur'ānic allusions to Jesus and Mary might echo Syriac homilies, linguistically, stylistically and/or in terms of specific content. As the Qur'ān is a highly allusive text, discovering the literature and/or traditions it presumes its auditors to know may illuminate our understanding of the circulation of various traditions in Late Antiquity, as well as the identity of the Qur'ān's first auditors.

11 For discussion of and bibliography on these debates, see GILLIOT et LARCHER (2003, 118f.).

12 On the Qur'ān, see COOK (2000).

13 On the Qur'ān's foreign vocabulary, see JEFFERY (2007).

14 See the seminal article of MINGANA (1927).

2.1 *Syriac Readings of the Qur'ān*

Syriac, the Aramaic dialect that became the liturgical and also vernacular language of multiple Christian communities in much of Mesopotamia and beyond, has a rich literary legacy. As Syriac was the language of different Christian communities in the Fertile Crescent, Syriac literature reflects various doctrinal interpretations familiar to Christian history. Moreover, the hymns and metrical homilies attributed to Aphrahat, Ephraim, Jacob of Serugh and Narsai attest to active engagement by Syriac-speaking Christians in the Christological and other doctrinal controversies of their times.

The Qur'ān also evidences intimate familiarity with Christian theology and doctrinal controversies. Although much of the Qur'ānic rhetoric and many of its narratives about the prophets resonate with biblical accounts,¹⁵ the extent of both the stylistic and rhetorical impact of biblical texts on the Qur'ān has yet to be explored¹⁶ (although the biblical parallels to certain Qur'ānic refrains and passages, such as Q 7:40's allusion to a camel going through the eye of a needle, have been examined).¹⁷ Parallels between other aspects of pre-Islamic Judaism and Christianity and the Qur'ān have, however, been studied (e.g., the structural similarities of some sūras with monotheistic liturgies as demonstrated by Angelika Neuwirth).¹⁸ Moreover, due to the numerous Syriac loanwords found in the Qur'ān, as well as the geographic proximity of a number of Syriac Christian communities to the Arabian peninsula, traditionally identified as the birthplace of Muḥammad, Syriac Christianity has long been looked to for its possible contextualization of the Arabic Qur'ān. Islamic tradition, in fact, was well aware of the importance of Syriac in pre-Islamic times, and a number of classical exegetes drew connections between Syriac and the Qur'ānic text.¹⁹

Both philological and thematic parallels between the Qur'ān and earlier Syriac literature have been identified. In 1927, Alfonse Mingana estimated that 70 % of the foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān was Syriac. Since then, many scholars, such as the aforementioned Arthur Jeffery as well as Edmund Beck²⁰ and, more recently, the pseudonymous Luxenberg,²¹ have all followed this line of thinking to a greater or lesser degree. Scholars have also examined the

15 See the comprehensive discussion of SPEYER (1931).

16 For a concise overview of the state of the research on Qur'ānic rhetoric, see NEUWIRTH (2004, 461–476). The following synopsis is taken from Neuwirth's overview.

17 On which see RIPPIN (1980).

18 Overview of her work and bibliography in NEUWIRTH (2002, 263f.).

19 See the overview of classical exegetical approaches to Syriac in RIPPIN (2008).

20 In this context, see BECK (1946) for his classic discussion of Qur'ānic asceticism.

21 See LUXENBERG (2007) for his much-discussed Syro-Aramaic reading of the Qur'ān. NEUWIRTH (2003, 7–10) provides a useful critique of Luxenberg's methodology.

similarities between the Qurʾān and Syriac literature.²² Some of this scholarship has explored potential parallels between the Qurʾān and a Syriac version of the Bible,²³ such as Tatian's Gospel Harmony (*Diatessaron*) or the *Didascalia*; however, both of these texts are generally believed to have been replaced by the canonical Gospels before Muḥammad's lifetime. And, although modern scholarship has had a strong interest in uncovering the Syriac "influence" on the Qurʾān – philologically²⁴ or thematically²⁵ – there has been, especially with the work of Griffith,²⁶ a shift to an examination of Qurʾānic "engagement" with various themes familiar from Late Antique Syriac Christianity.

Whether scholars are searching for a Syriac "influence" on the Qurʾān or for Qurʾānic "engagement" with Syriac Christianity, the question of the nature of the Christian community (or communities) in the Qurʾānic milieu inevitably arises. For, Syriac Christianity spanned the three major groupings after Chalcedon. Were the members of that community (or those communities) Jacobite Christians who used the *Diatessaron* (in Najrān or among the Ghassanids), as the only Old Testament figures named in the Qurʾān are those whose names also appear in the *Diatessaron*?²⁷ Or, as Tor Andrae posited, does the Qurʾān reflect a Nestorian theology, with Monophysite Abyssinian beliefs represented in polemical remarks, such as the Qurʾān's reference to the Trinity consisting of God, Jesus and Mary (Q 5:116), its polemic against the presumed Christian allegation that God is the Messiah (Q 5:72) and its reflection of an interest in the apocryphal narratives of Jesus' infancy (e.g., Q 5:110)?²⁸

2.2 *Significance of Qurʾānic Allusions*

Even the casual reader will be struck by the allusive nature of many parts of the Qurʾān. "They ask you" and "They say" are common refrains. And, at times, Qurʾānic passages sound like partial transcripts of a larger conversation. For example, Q 18 alludes to confusion over how many years an indeterminate number of youths spent in a cave. Instead of reading these Qurʾānic allusions

22 ANDRAE (1926), as well as ANDRAE (1936), the English translation of his 1932 *Mohammed, sein Leben und sein Glaube*, are classic examples of this scholarship.

23 Two such examples are ZELLENTIN (2013) and EL-BADAWI (2013).

24 LÜLING (1972) set the stage for later philological comparisons, such as that of Luxenberg (see note 21).

25 See, for example, ANDRAE (1926).

26 For example, GRIFFITH (2008) explores Qurʾānic engagement with Syriac accounts of the Sleepers of Ephesus, while GRIFFITH (2007) examines Qurʾānic familiarity with Syriac Christological categories.

27 See the discussion in GRIFFITH (2008, 112).

28 Also discussed in GRIFFITH (2008, 112); on parallels between the Protoevangelium of James and the Qurʾān see HORN (2006).

as garbled renditions of Christian accounts, Sidney Griffith has explored the qur'ānic familiarity with various versions of the accounts of the Sleepers of Ephesus in Q 18's allusions to the People of the Cave.²⁹ According to Christian tradition, the Sleepers of Ephesus were a certain number of youths who had fled the persecutions of Decius. They went to a cave, where they fell asleep for some years. When they awoke, they saw that the world had been transformed: no longer persecuted, Christianity was flourishing. Their miraculous sleep and awakening were understood as types for the reality of the – bodily – resurrection. Through his study of various accounts of the Sleepers of Ephesus that circulated in Syriac in the sixth century, Griffith has convincingly demonstrated that qur'ānic allusions to the People of the Cave are less enigmatic when the reader is familiar with the sixth century Christian debates about the nature and reality of the bodily resurrection.

Griffith's study of the parallels between the Christian Sleepers of Ephesus and the qur'ānic People of the Cave gives rise to a number of questions. As the Qur'ān is familiar with the Sleepers of Ephesus, seemingly through Syriac versions, and as the only known pre-Islamic Syriac accounts of this story come from the Jacobite communities, does that mean that the Qur'ān knew Jacobite Christians (the Christian confession of the Ghassanid Arabs and the Christians of Najrān in southern Arabia)³⁰ – on the Arabian peninsula, or elsewhere? Or, since the qur'ānic version of the Sleepers does not exactly match any known Syriac version and as another Syriac-speaking ecclesiastical community, the Church of the East (Nestorians), had spread to the Arab Lakhmids and along the southern coast of Arabia, might Q 18 be an indication of a pre-Islamic Nestorian version of the story of the Sleepers? While these questions are nearly impossible to answer without presuming to know the Qur'ān's intention, examination of other qur'ānic passages and themes in the light of Late Antique literature might help us to better hear the Qur'ān as its first auditors may have.

In the following, possible parallels between qur'ānic Christological allusions and Syriac homilies that circulated in Late Antiquity are explored. As with Q 18's commentary on Christian disputes over the Sleepers (Youths) of Ephesus, this chapter explores whether qur'ānic allusions to Jesus and his mother might also reflect an awareness of Syriac Christian literature.

29 The following is based on GRIFFITH (2008).

30 For general discussion of Christianity among the pre-Islamic Arabs, see TRIMINGHAM (1979). SHAHID (1995–2002) provides a comprehensive discussion of the relations of Arabs with Byzantium in the sixth century. VAN ROMPAY (2005) furnishes a concise and thorough discussion of eastern Christians, including Arabs, in the age of Justinian. On Christianity in pre-Islamic Najrān, see TARDY (1999). For the pre-Islamic martyrdom of Christians in Najrān, see SHAHID (1971).

3 Christological Debates in Syriac – and Arabic

In the early sixth century, Christian groups in the Syriac-speaking world were engaged in heated debates over biblical interpretation and Christology.³¹ There were those who would be termed “Melkites” (literally, king’s men, as they adhered to the conciliar definition promulgated by the Emperor). A number of Syriac-speaking Christians, however, agreed with the “Monophysite” understanding of Christ. On the other hand, many Syriac-speaking Christians insisted that the divine and human natures of Christ should be understood as truly distinct. When, in 489, the Emperor dismantled the School of Edessa, it was re-established in Nisibis (under Persian rule), with a decidedly “Nestorian” predilection. As the various communities transmitted and preserved their theological positions through teaching homilies, it is to this genre that we now turn.

3.1 *Syriac Homilies*

Syriac has a rich homiletic literature.³² Its homiletic poetry can be *mêmrê* (hymnic sermons) or *madrâshê* (homiletic hymns). The latter contain stanzas and a refrain, while the former have a more discursive nature. And, like its Jewish parallel (*midrash*), the *madrâshâ* puts emphasis on the exegesis of a biblical text rather than on singing, although *madrâshê* are generally named according to the tunes to which they are sung. Probably the finest composer of *madrâshê* was Mar Ephrem (ca. 306–373), a champion of Nicene orthodoxy.

A subset of the *madrâshâ* is the poetic dialogue (*sâgithâ*), which, from Ephrem until the present day, provides entertainment and instruction, and is closely related to the *sugya*, a unit of Talmudic argument.³³ *Sâgithê* are not necessarily adversative, but can include arguments in the form of a dispute (a common genre in ancient Mesopotamian literature; Ephrem appears to have been the first Syriac author to employ the dispute) and generally have no refrain. For example, Narsai, a prominent figure associated with the Church of the East, composed a *sâgithâ* featuring Nestorius and Cyril (who is closely associated with Monophysite thinking).³⁴

31 For further discussion, see WALLACE-HADRILL (1982).

32 For an excellent overview, see MURRAY (1995). This section relies heavily on Murray’s article.

33 Discussed in MURRAY (1995, 172).

34 Discussed in MURRAY (1995, 180).

3.2 *Christological Types in Syriac Homilies*

As with other Christian traditions, Jesus (and his mother) figured prominently in Syriac Christian thought, even before the Christological controversies. Following Paul, Syriac authors, like other Christian thinkers,³⁵ would liken Christ to Adam. But Adam was not the only biblical figure to serve as a “type” for Christ. The fourth century Aphrahat, for example, likened Christ to Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Jephtha, David, Elijah, Elisha, Hezekiah, Josiah, Daniel, the Three Young Men, and Mordecai.³⁶ Such comparisons would appear in a range of Syriac literary categories. Again, Christ was not the only New Testament figure to be likened to Old Testament types. As discussed below, Mary, too, would be subject to similar comparisons.

Hundreds of *mêmrê* are attributed to Jacob of Serugh (c. 451–521), after Ephrem the second finest Syriac author. Jacob (known as the “Flute of the Spirit”) spent most of his life as a monk composing homilies on biblical and other liturgical themes.³⁷ Only a fraction of these, however, is translated and edited. His Jacobite (and non-Chalcedonian) theology is evidenced by a letter he wrote towards the end of his life, consoling his brother Christians and confessors among the Ḥimyarites of southern Arabia during their persecution.³⁸ And, like other Syriac authors, Jacob frequently mined the Old Testament for Christological (and other New Testament) typologies.³⁹

Typical of such typological comparisons is the dialogue between the Church and the Synagogue attributed to Jacob.⁴⁰ It begins:

O Hebrew, come let us sit and read the scriptures. And let us search for the Son, whether his figure is in their readings. You read Moses and in the reading you can find the Son of God who is revealed and stands like a light.⁴¹

35 See, e.g., VANMAAREN (2013).

36 This list is given in HEAL (2002, 32).

37 For an example of his homilies, see, e.g., KOLLAMPARAMPIL (1997). For the theology of Jacob, see BOU MANSOUR (1993 & 2000).

38 On this, see SCHRÖTER (1877). For another comment on Christianity among the Arabs attributed to Jacob of Serugh, see FOWDEN (1999, 25f.), where a *mêmrâ* of Jacob of Serugh is quoted in celebration of St. Sergius' role in bringing the faith to the Arabs at Rusafa. Cited by GRIFFITH (2008, 121.134 n. 42).

39 On which see KONAT (2006) and HEAL (2002).

40 See KONAT (2005), who also discusses whether this was originally composed as a distinct work.

41 Translation found in KONAT (2005, 74).

In addition to the numerous parallels it draws between aspects of Christ's life and events in the Old Testament (e.g., the color of the cow sacrificed in Numbers 19 – red – prefigures the blood of Christ on the cross; Christ killed death, as Samson killed the lion [Judges 14], etc.), the hymn also interprets a few Old Testament passages as “types” for Mary's virginal birth (of Jesus):

The staff of Aaron which sprouted leaves without watering pictured the womb which carried the fruit without marriage.⁴² ...

The virgin earth gave birth to Adam in holiness to picture openly the delivery of Mary.⁴³ ...

If the side gave birth to Eve as it is written also the virgin gave birth to the Son as it is pictured.⁴⁴

The first passage is a reference to Numbers 17:16–28[1–13], in which Moses is instructed to ask a representative from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to place dry sticks in the tabernacle. Aaron was the representative for the Levites – and his was the only one of the twelve sticks that blossomed (Num 17:23[8]), indicating God's selection of him. This understanding of Aaron's miraculously blossoming rod as a type for the virgin's miraculously pregnant womb was used in discussions of the Theotokos in fifth and sixth century Byzantium, a parallel facilitated by the Septuagint's translation of “rod” (of Aaron) and “shoot” (from the root of Jesse, Isa 11:1) with the same Greek term (ἡ ῥάβδος).⁴⁵ The second and third passages are references to Genesis 2 – the account of the creation of Adam from the earth, and then of Eve from his side. This sampling of passages, although far from being comprehensive, is sufficiently indicative of the range and nature of Syriac Christological typologies to enable the following comparison with qur'ānic passages.

3.3 *Qur'ānic Echoes of Syriac Christological Typology?*

As mentioned above, the Qur'ān names Jesus many more times than Muḥammad. Additionally, the most-named prophet in the Qur'ān is Moses, who figures prominently in Syriac hymnists' Old Testament Christological types. And one of its chapters (Q 19) is named after Mary, the mother of Jesus. Yet another of its chapters (Q 3) is named after the “family of Imran” (Mary's

⁴² Translation found in KONAT (2005, 80).

⁴³ Translation found in KONAT (2005, 85).

⁴⁴ Translation found in KONAT (2005, 85).

⁴⁵ For further discussion, see SIVERTSEV (2011, 121f.).

ancestor), and another (Q 12) is named after Joseph, who is one of the Old Testament “types” for Christ in Syriac hymns.

There is a fair amount of scholarly speculation around the relationship between qur'ānic and Jewish and/or Christian accounts of various prophets, especially when the qur'ānic and biblical accounts differ.⁴⁶ Accounts of Jesus and Mary are no exception. In keeping with the ancient Christian understanding of Islam as a Christian heresy,⁴⁷ much of this literature has focused on apocryphal gospels (such as the *Protevangelium of James* or the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*) as possibly accounting for the discrepancy between qur'ānic and biblical accounts of Mary and Jesus.⁴⁸ Additionally, contemporary scholars are sometimes unaware of theological trends that may color their own readings of a text, especially if they have been trained in “secular” academies. For example, while the relatively prominent role assigned to Mary by the Qur'ān may strike a modern “western” reader – especially one versed in Enlightenment (and Protestant) ideas – as incongruous, devotion to Mary was widespread in the early Church.⁴⁹ Taking a different approach, the present argument assumes that, instead of focusing on heterodox “influences” on the Qur'ān, the Arabic revelation may be understood as familiar with, and responding to, “mainstream” Christian groups in its milieu. If this is a valid assumption, similarities between its imagery and that of contemporaneous Christian literature might help shed light on the Christians it expects its auditors to know.

For example, two of the aforementioned parallels between the virginal birth (of Mary, to Jesus) and an Old Testament passage are also echoed in the Qur'ān, albeit with a different theological perspective.⁵⁰ First, the explicit comparison between Jesus' creation and that of Adam found in Jacob's homily is echoed in the Qur'ān:

46 See, for the classic example of speculation about qur'ānic connections to Judaism, GEIGER (1970), the English translation of *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* For examination of ties to Christianity see, e.g., BELL (1926).

47 As, e.g., in John of Damascus, presented in SAHAS (1972).

48 See, e.g., HORN (2006) for an example of the former and ROBINSON (1989) for the latter.

49 SHOEMAKER (2001) provides a detailed discussion of both the “gnostic” Mary as well as the importance of Mary in early Christianity, Syriac and otherwise. The end of his article discusses the impact of Protestant theology on Marian scholarship.

50 The comparison of Eve's creation to the virginal birth is not relevant as, in the Qur'ān, humans come from the same soul; the account of woman's creation from the rib of man is not present, although in its later literature, Islamic tradition would understand Eve as created from Adam's rib. For more on Eve in Islamic tradition, see SPELLBERG (1996).

Indeed, the example of Jesus to God is like that of Adam. He created him from dust; then He said to him, “Be” and he was.

Q 3:59

The qur’ānic use of the term “example” in Q 3:59 may indicate that its auditors were already conceptually familiar with Christological typologies such as those found in Jacob’s homily. The second possible qur’ānic parallel is less direct. In Q 19:28, after the birth of Jesus, when Mary presents him to her people, she is addressed thus:

O Sister of Aaron, your father was not a man of evil, nor was your mother unchaste.

Christian polemicists were quick to note the apparent qur’ānic “confusion” between the sister of Moses and Aaron of the Old Testament and Mary the mother of Jesus of the New Testament. Lexical, historical and genealogical explanations have been posited by both defenders and detractors of the Qur’an. Some of the explanations are similar to the efforts exerted to explain (away) New Testament allusions to the “brothers” of Jesus (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3) – an impossibility for those who maintain Mary’s perpetual virginity.⁵¹

Q 19:28 also attracted the attention of Muslim scholars – both exegetical and ḥadīth literature discuss the passage.⁵² Two collections of prophetic *ḥadīth* (Tirmīdhī, Chapters on Exegesis; Muslim, Book of General Behavior)⁵³ contain an anecdote about Christians in Najrān, contemporaries of Muḥammad, questioning this very passage. Might the Prophet’s response (that people were named after the prophets and righteous people who came before them) hint at a familiarity with the practice of finding “typologies” for Christ and other New Testament figures, common to Syriac and other Christian authors? For, in the aforementioned *mêmrâ* attributed to Jacob of Serugh, parallels were drawn between Jesus’ birth (from a virgin) and the flowering staff (of Aaron) as well as the creation of Adam (from dust). Although neither of these Old Testament typologies for Christ’s birth is exclusive to Syriac literature, when they are read in conjunction with other qur’ānic passages (like the aforementioned People of the Cave of Q 18), qur’ānic familiarity with Syriac homiletic poetry may be posited.

51 As with, e.g., MEIER (1992) and BAUCKHAM (1994).

52 See STOWASSER (1994, 156).

53 Examples are found at <https://sunnah.com/search/?q=sister+of+harun> (latest access: January 31, 2018).

4 Concluding Remarks

Scholars have posited qur'ānic similarities to, and familiarity with, Syriac literature at both conceptual and philological levels. Classical Islamic tradition also acknowledges the significance of Syriac/Aramaic in the milieu in which the Qur'ān emerged. The preceding has explored whether there are conceptual parallels between the Qur'ān and Syriac literature that go beyond the ancient Christian polemic that Islam is – merely – a Christian heresy. For, rather than understanding qur'ānic narratives as garbled and therefore erroneous versions of Christian and/or Jewish traditions (or as influenced by apocryphal literature), this chapter has read the Qur'ān as cognizant of, and conversant with, “mainstream” Christian traditions.

Such a reading, however, demands familiarity with a range of traditions present in Late Antiquity. For example, debates over the nature of the resurrection involved interpretations of the Sleepers of Ephesus as well as the dormition of Mary. Christological debates also involved discussions of Mary – was she really “Theotokos” (God-bearer) or merely “Christotokos” (Messiah-bearer)? Qur'ānic echoes of such debates may well be heard by those familiar with them. But, scholarship is defined (or limited) by the questions it asks and the literature it knows. It should therefore not restrict itself to Syriac/Aramaic, since both linguistically and conceptually, the Qur'ān echoes themes known from Ethiopia to Persia.

Finally, the tenor or tone of qur'ānic rhetoric should be heeded. If the Qur'ān is understood as containing a message of its own, rather than merely reproducing (or attempting to reproduce) the contents of other literature, sacred or otherwise, any such echoes may be interpreted in a variety of ways. Should they be understood as intending to portray exactly what a given group was saying? Or, should it be understood as commenting upon the beliefs or practices of various groups in its milieu for its own purposes? If the latter, there is the distinct possibility of intentional (mis)representation for polemical purposes – much like some of the Syriac homilies, many of which take the form of a debate wherein the opposing view is sometimes caricatured.⁵⁴ In this reading, the qur'ānic allusion to Mary (mother of Jesus) as “sister of Aaron” indicates its awareness of Christian typologies for Christ and his mother – especially when read with another qur'ānic comparison of Jesus (to Adam). As both these comparisons

54 Exploration of parallels between the use of debate and disputation as rhetorical devices in the Qur'ān and in Syriac hymns was beyond the scope of this paper, but merits further investigation. MCAULIFFE (2001) gives an overview of the qur'ānic employment of this device.

are similar to typologies found in a Syriac hymn attributed to Jacob of Serugh, a sixth-century Syriac Christian author whose works circulated widely among Jacobite Christians, it may indicate that the Qurʾān expected its auditors to be familiar with Jacobite Christian communities. This, in turn, suggests the possible benefits of reading the Qurʾān in conjunction with other Syriac hymns, from various communities, to see if other such echoes might be found.

As Griffith has demonstrated, the qurʾānic account of the “Companions of the Cave” (Q 18:9–26) anticipates its auditors’ familiarity with (Syriac accounts of) the tale of the Sleepers of Ephesus. And, as far as we know, the tale did not circulate among Nestorian communities in Syriac. The Islamic discussion of Mary as Aaron’s sister is connected to a question from the Christians of Najrān, who, like the communities among whom the accounts of the Sleepers of Ephesus circulated, were Jacobite (Monophysite). A hymn attributed to a member of this confessional group, Jacob of Serugh, parallels Jesus’ virginal birth to a number of Old Testament passages, two of which (Aaron’s rod and Adam’s creation) may be echoed by the Qurʾān. Since Jacob of Serugh is known to have communicated with the Christians of Najrān, it is not impossible that his *mêmrê* were known by the inhabitants of the peninsula.

Admittedly, these connections do not explain the qurʾānic intent in terming Mary (mother of Jesus) as “sister (rather than descendant) of Aaron”, especially when, according to the canonical Bible, Mary is a descendant of Judah, and not a Levite (the tribe to which Aaron and Moses belonged). Also, if it is picking up on Christian discussions over the ‘Theotokos’, in which the virginal birth was prefigured by the sprouting rod of Aaron, especially when the Septuagint used the same word for her lineage – the “shoot” from the root of Jesse – as for the “rod” of Aaron, the question of whether the Qurʾān considered Maryam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, as a “type” for Mary, the mother of Jesus, remains. Nevertheless, the Christological typologies with qurʾānic parallels discussed here are found in a pre-Islamic Syriac hymn attributed to an author whose works circulated amongst Jacobites, the same community that preserved the accounts of the Sleepers of Ephesus. It follows, therefore, that, Syriac, if not specifically “Jacobite”, hymns might contain additional clues as to how the Qurʾān’s first auditors might have heard its rhetoric. Rather than searching through apocryphal literature, or looking to otherwise unattested remnants of various marginalized Christian groups, qurʾānic scholars might consider the rich corpus of pre-Islamic Syriac literature for an understanding of qurʾānic allusions to Christianity.

For, although the hymn from which these examples are taken exemplifies Jewish-Christian (rather than intra-Christian) disputes, Syriac hymns were also used to teach congregations the “correct” doctrine – and to warn against

the errors of other Christian communities. The didactic (and polemical and/or apologetic) nature of many of these compositions is evidenced by their reception in various Christian communities:⁵⁵ while Jacobites would preserve and circulate the *mêmrê* of Jacob of Serug, Nestorians would instead recite those of Narsai of Edessa and Nisibis (399–503), a rival of Jacob of Serugh at the time of the break-up of the School of Edessa in the course of the controversies precipitated by the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (451).⁵⁶

While a common polemic against Muḥammad (and the Qur'ān) is that Islam is merely a Nestorian-tinged Christian heresy – especially in consideration of its insistence on the humanity of Jesus, the Qur'ān also appears familiar with images that circulated amongst other Syriac-speaking Christians, the Jacobites. And it is also well aware of the Roman empire (Q 30), which was neither Nestorian nor Jacobite. Given the complex nature of Late Antique Christianity, it is unlikely that we will be able to determine the exact identity or even nature of the Christian(s) known to the Qur'ān. But given the Qur'ān's dialectic nature, reading it as conversant with the literature of Late Antiquity may enable us the better to hear it as its first auditors did.

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55 See the discussion in GRIFFITH (2008, 121).

56 See MINGANA (1905). Reference given by GRIFFITH (2008, 134).

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