
The Disputation between a Muslim and a monk of Bēt Ḫālē in its historical and literary context

Ann Jeanette Søndbø Ekberg

Religious Roots of Europe
40 ECTS
The Theological Faculty

7 November 2019
Abstract

Key words: Apologetics – Bēt Ḥālē – Dispute texts – Christian Identity – Border Crossings – Late Antiquity – Early Islam – Syriac Writings – Iraq – Christian-Muslim Relations – Qur’anic rhetoric – Arab/Islamic Conquest Intra-Christian disputes – Eastern Christianity – Church of the East

Christians living under Muslim rule in 8th century Iraq had to articulate their faith and doctrines in relation to the religious and political challenges brought on by the dominating reality of Islam. The disputation between a Muslim and a monk of Bēt Ḥālē, a Christian apologetic text, is an example of one such articulation. This study places Disputation in its historical and literary context and conducts an analysis of some key Syriac terms which reveals a creative rhetorical response to a fictional representative of Islam. The study finds that the author of this work achieves a double purpose with their work. First and foremost, he defends Christian faith and practice from common Muslim objections, and ventures to challenge Islamic faith on key issues of doctrine. Secondly, he is concerned with limited but substantive gatekeeping towards other Christian confessions. Both these concerns foster a sense of distinctiveness in a time of apostasy. Still, while the primary concern of Disputation seems to be apologetics and the construction of borders, it is nevertheless a witness to the protagonists’ own border crossings with Islam and other Christian confessions. Further, the study of early Christian-Muslim relations around the interesting time and place of Disputation is indispensable to our pursuit of navigating many of the same issues more than a millennium later.
Acknowledgments

This master’s thesis has been due longer than the three children whose blessed entrance into our family has been the main reason for its postponement. The initial steps to my graduate studies in the Religious Roots of Europe program were taken during my year as an intern for the archbishop and Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo, Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim. Mar Yohanna invited me to reside with the community of St. Ephrem Syrian Orthodox Cathedral in Aleppo, in the hope that my scholarly interests in Syriac Christianity could be matched with an understanding of the contemporary Syrian church. I came to love the people of this church, and it is with a broken heart over the situation for the Christians in Syria, and especially the disappearance of Mar Yohanna in 2013, that I offer this humble thesis.

When I came back to the RRE program after a five-year hiatus, and back to Oslo after a decade’s restless wandering – from Syria, to Sweden, then Indiana, and Lund again – I was warmly welcomed by professor Stig Frøyshov. Without his graceful advice and critical readership as my main supervisor, this thesis would not have come to fruition. Later in the process of writing, dr. Nora Eggen offered indispensable commentary to my work as assistant supervisor. Thank you both for helping me reach the finish line!

However, a lot has happened since my days in Aleppo, and it is by no means an overstatement to claim that this thesis would never have seen the light of day without the never-ending support and advice of my theologian husband. Thank you, Sebastian. Caring for three kids four and under, in addition to a rather absent-minded wife, has not been a walk in the park – you’re a champ beyond words!

I dedicate this thesis to Mar Yohanna and malphonitho Farida Boulos.
# Table of Contents

1. **Introduction**
   - 1.1 Structure of the Thesis .................................................. 1
   - 1.2 Research Survey
     - 1.2.1 The Syriac World .................................................. 2
     - 1.2.2 Disputation ................................................................ 4
     - 1.2.3 Apologetics in Early Christianity ................................. 6
     - 1.2.4 Purpose ...................................................................... 7
   - 1.3 Method ............................................................................ 8
   - 1.4 Apologetics – A Genre? ..................................................... 10

2. **Historical Context** .................................................................. 17
   - 2.1 The Making of Islam ......................................................... 17
   - 2.2 The study of Early Islam - the Problem of the Conquest ......... 18
   - 2.3 Christians under Muslim Rule
     - 2.3.1 Clashes and Borders .................................................. 21
     - 2.3.2 The ‘Christian’ in Christian Texts ............................... 24
     - 2.3.3 New Rulers, New Challenges, New Opportunities ......... 24
   - 2.4 The Emerging Muslim Religion in Outline ......................... 26
     - 2.4.1 Muḥammad the Prophet ............................................. 26
     - 2.4.2 The Hijra .................................................................... 28
     - 2.4.3 The Umayyads in Iraq and Syria ................................. 29
   - 2.5 Christian Theology: Councils and Churches ..................... 33
   - 2.6 Disputation in its Qurʾānic Context ................................... 37
   - 2.7 Syriac Works of the Seventh through Ninth Century .......... 40

3. **The Text of Disputation** .......................................................... 45
   - 3.1 The Manuscript and Date of Compilation ........................... 45
   - 3.2 Synopsis and Basic Structure ............................................ 50
   - 3.3 What is a Dispute Text? ..................................................... 53
     - 3.3.1 Justin Martyr as Comparative Case .............................. 54
   - 3.4 The Cow, the Spider and Repentance - A Contribution to the Revisionist Debate? ........................................... 56

4. **Talking Points** ....................................................................... 61
   - 4.1 Faith of the Fathers – Fidelity to Abraham ......................... 61
     - 4.1.1 Jesus the New Sacrifice ............................................. 64
     - 4.1.2 Concluding remarks .................................................. 66
   - 4.2 “Not because of your righteousness” ................................. 67
     - 4.2.1 “Like sheep to the slaughter” ..................................... 67
     - 4.2.2 “For what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?” ........................................ 70
     - 4.2.3 Concluding Remarks .................................................. 71
   - 4.3 The Passibility of Christ .................................................... 72
   - 4.4 Knowing and Not Knowing the Trinity ............................. 74
     - 4.4.1 God is Three in One .................................................. 75
     - 4.4.2 Christ, Trinity, and the Qurʾān .................................... 76
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3. Concluding Remarks</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5. Objects of Worship and Veneration</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.1. The Discussion in General</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.2. Historical Context</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.3. Disputation on Veneration and Worship</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.4. Concluding Remarks</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6. Mohammad's Disciplina Arcani</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusion</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1. Recapitulating the Main Findings</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2. Concluding Thoughts</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3. Suggestions for Further Research</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Bibliography</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Sources</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Literature</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whoever is capable of investigating becomes the container of what he investigates; a knowledge which is capable of containing the Omniscient is greater than Him, for it has proven capable of measuring the whole of Him.

A person who investigate the Father and Son is thus greater than them! far be it, then, and something anathema, that the Father and Son should be investigated, while dust and ashes exalts itself!\(^1\)

1. Introduction

Syriac writings on Islam have for some reason not been afforded an amount of scholarship reflective of its significance for the broader study of early Islam and late ancient Christianity. Scholarship on the first encounters between Christians and Muslims focused for a long time almost exclusively on Latin and Greek texts. But, as Michael Penn has pointed out, when Muslims first encountered Christians they did not meet Greek-speaking Christians form Constantinople, nor did they meet Latin-speaking Christian from the western Mediterranean. Rather, they first encountered Christians from northern Mesopotamia who spoke the Aramaic dialect of Syriac.\(^2\)

The disputation between a Muslim and a monk of Bēt Ḥālē\(^3\) (hereafter Disputation) is – to allude to Ephrem the Syrian – a hidden pearl of the East Syriac tradition. It is a dialogue between a Muslim and a monk in which the two discuss the truth of each other’s religions and the question is in the end a very simple one; which one is the true religion?

It is often said that the past remains a closed book, but it is nonetheless true that even if past events rest in a sphere not available to us, texts are at least tangible traces, if not events themselves, which witness to this past. Thus, what we have in front of us is a record of topics

---


and concerns discussed in 8th century Iraq. *Disputation* has survived the test of time, and the mere fact that we have it in our possession is a testimony to its value and relevance.

Still, the value of *Disputation* is not merely its existence. The study of an early Syriac apologetical text is interesting in its own right, but also in relation to later apologetical writings. Because, many are the scholars who have pointed out that the early Syriac dispute texts serve as the examples that the later Christian apologists followed. The Christian ‘controversialists’ of the first ʿAbbasid century, arguably the most important apologists born out of a Muslim milieu, all followed in the footsteps of *Disputation*. Some examples are the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurra (d. after 829), the East-Syrian ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī (9th c.), and West Syrian Abū Rāʾiṭa l-Takrīti (d.835). And in the following century, the West Syrian theologian Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī (d. 976) defended the Christian faith against the “most extensive attack on Christianity yet produced” written by Abū ʿĪsā l-Warrāq.4 Further, in a time like ours, when Christian-Muslim dialogue often exhibits traits of sentimental chatter, and obsession about finding common ground, *Disputation* stands as a reminder of what another form of dialogue could look like.5 I have narrowed myself down to the particular text of *Disputation* in hope to gain a better and wider perspective on Christian-Muslim relations, dialogue and life – which, in the end, is the only way to go about such a task.

1.1 Structure of the Thesis

It is with all this in mind that we embark upon the task to make sense of *Disputation*. After a brief research survey (1.2) and an attempt at Defining Apologetics (1.4), we will begin the demanding task of situating and interpreting *Disputation* as a text, in its context. Thus, what follows is an attempt to read *Disputatio* by way of an introduction to Muslim history, because this thesis assumes broader and deeper knowledge of the history of Christianity from its readers.

There are surprisingly few sources from the early days of the Arab/Islamic conquest, and even fewer who set out to give a portrait of the emerging Muslim identity. I believe that a brief sketch of the broad historical lines of the Arab/Islamic context for *Disputation* serves a purpose for


this thesis which nevertheless concerns a Christian text: it will further our understanding of Islam at the time of Disputation. Therefore, an introduction to the study of Early Islam and some remarks about Muhammad and the new Muslim community following the death of the prophet, are all in place. Then, a brief investigation of core concepts, such as jāhiliyya, hijra, umma, will help us better understand the questions posed in Disputation, (2.4). After all, Christian sources were at the forefront, in the words of Michael Penn, of constructing the image of Islam, they gave Islam the categorical statues of a religion. In fact, Syriac writings “constitute the largest surviving corpus of early Christian writings on Islam.” It is thus only reasonable that we seek out what the Muslim tradition has to say about itself in order to understand what Disputation is saying about Muslims.

It remains, however, a simple fact that apologetics, unlike the faithful servant, can serve several masters at once. Disputation is not only a text against Muslims, there is a plethora of references that only make sense if we are aware of their intra-Christian connotations and edges. We will take a short look at who these Christians were in Councils and Churches, (2.5).

Further, context is not merely historical/sociopolitical context. I have thus chosen to look at the literary context of Disputation. In the chapters Qur’ānic Context (2.6.) and Syriac Works (2.7.), we are given tools to understand some of the rhetoric in Disputation and perhaps given some answers as to why and how Disputation stand in relation to the Qur’ān as well as the corpus of Syriac Writings of Late Antiquity.

Once these topics have been dealt with, we will move on to Disputation. We will look at the question of date of compilation (3.1), structure and genre (3.2), before dipping our feet in the text as such through an analysis of its key “talking points.” Of course, every text is a universe and I neither attempt nor pretend to present an exhaustive analysis of Disputation. Rather, in the chapter Talking Points (4), we will encounter a few topics which I have found to be the most relevant for our understanding of Christian-Muslims relations.

The research questions navigating this study, are the following:

---


7 Ibid., 175.
How does Disputation between a Muslim and a monk of Bēt Ḥālē manifest itself as an apologetic work with a dual purpose, namely that of reinforcing the community’s identity in relation primarily to 1) the external, imminent challenge brought on by a conquering Islam, but also 2) the rivaling sister confessions of various Christian communities?

1.2. Research Survey

In this thesis, I set out to read a Christian text in its historical, literary, and religious context. Disputation is an apologetic text, which is why I have focused on the secondary literature pertaining to the study of apologetical text borne out of a Muslim milieu. Yes, Disputation was written by a monk belonging to the Church of the East, but the study of the Church of the East as such is, in other words, not a main occupation of this thesis. What follows is thus a research survey focused on the study of this Syriac text and its relation to other Syriac apologetical texts, primarily in the context of Christian-Muslim relations in the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries.

1.2.1. The Syriac World

It is only with the emergence of Syriac studies in the 19th and 20th century that the north-western hemisphere accessed translations and editions of Syriac writings from a predominantly Muslim milieu. Indispensable for this “young” field of study were Syriac scholars like Jean-Baptiste Chabot and Theodor Nöldeke, who offered translations and editions earlier unknown and/or forgotten by our educational institutions. However, the effort to synthesize and understand these writings in their proper historical and literary context only emerged with the (then) groundbreaking 1977 publication by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, titled Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World⁸. While its basic hypotheses have mostly been refuted,⁹ Hagarism marks a shift in the study of Syriac writings and Christian writings on Islam, since the focus prior to Hagarism had either been earlier Syriac writings on figures such as Ephrem the Syrian and Jacob of Sarug or later ’Abbasid Baghdad intellectuals associated with the ‘House of Wisdom.’¹⁰ Hagarism provided a window into the immense corpus of Syriac writings on Islam.

---

⁹ The project in Hagarism was to reconstruct the story of Islam by way of Christian sources exclusively. Because the problems with the historicity of the Islamic tradition, its claims could not be rejected nor accepted. Thus, “the only way out of this dilemma is thus to step outside the Islamic tradition altogether and start again,” (Crone&Cook, 3). The guiding principle in Crone&Cook’s following investigation is the idea that Islam and Muslim culture is a product of the clash between the primitive Arab/Bedouin culture (or rather lack of culture) and the sophisticated Byzantine civilization. However, Hagarism has been a huge resource in its focus on Syriac sources.
¹⁰ The library in Baghdad was often referred to as Bayt al-Hikmah because of its role as the center of intellectual exercise and exchanges in the ’Abbasid caliphate.
Now, in the 21st century, several important works grew out of the initial seeds planted by *Hagarism*. In fact, many of the most prominent scholars, whose work has been indispensable for this thesis, were students of either Crone or Cook. As a consequence of *Hagarism*, the field of Syriac studies and works on early Christian-Muslim relations experienced something of a boom in scholarship the last decades.

Most notable is perhaps the work of Sidney Griffith, whose publications on these topics are virtually innumerable. Griffith has not only translated and edited several primary sources, he has also provided us with for example *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, a thorough investigation into the relationship between the two religions as well as an examination of what the arrival of Islam meant for contemporary Christians. One could argue that Griffith has brought Syriac (and Arabic) sources into the field of Early Church History, and perhaps his greatest contribution is his demonstration of how Christian apologists would rely on “vocabulary and thought patterns of the Qurʾān” in their defense of the Christian faith (particularly the Trinity and the Incarnation, the two main targets of Muslim polemics).

Further, Robert Hoyland’s *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, guides readers in the myriad of early Christian writings on Islam. Hoyland takes up where *Hagarism* left off and offers a comprehensive study of non-Muslim texts on Muslims. Hoyland lets the Non-Muslim sources be understood by Muslim sources and vice versa, arguing that it is only when (the previously) strict divide between the two is reduced that we will come closer to a real appreciation of the texts.

We should also mention Michael Penn’s sourcebook *When Christians First Met Muslims*, and the associated interpretive monograph *Envisioning Islam*. Both offer much needed surveys and introductions to the field of Christian-Muslim relations. Penn, perhaps more than anyone...

---

12 Ibid., 56.
15 Penn, *Envisioning Islam*. 
else, demonstrates how the common narrative of constant hostility between Christians and Muslims simply is not the whole story. Rather, behind this narrative of violence and resentment lies an (up until now) hidden story of compromises and coexistence.

Additionally, Andrew Palmer, Gerrit Reinink, Barbara Roggema, and David Thomas are scholars whose works on early Christian writings on Islam have sought out to understand what the arrival of Islam meant for Christians. They have all in their own ways demonstrated that the new view of Christian-Muslim relations (as discussed above) is well founded.

*The Syriac World* edited by Daniel King. The *Syriac World* is an 842 page handbook on most aspects of Syriac studies. A brief look at its index will reveal that it is little less than a complete survey of the (up until now) published scholarship on Syriac culture. It is, of course, vain to study Syriac sources without the aid of the scholarship of (*malphono*, or even *mar*) Sebastian Brock, the father of modern Syriac studies. Summarizing Brock’s achievements in a few sentences is an impossible task, but Brock has transformed the field by lifting the Syriac Churches from the realm of otherness into a place of their own, enabling us to understand them (and their doctrines, especially concerning Christology) on their own terms. He has been essential to the now established view of Christian tradition as not only being made up of two main elements, namely the Greek tradition in the East and the Latin in the West, but also consisting of what he calls the Syriac Orient. Brock’s contribution is to demonstrate how Christian tradition is made up by all of these three distinct traditions with their own particular emphasis.

1.2.2. Disputation
Research on *Disputation* situates itself in the middle of this new research wave on Syriac history. *Disputation* was only first made accessible to a wider audience through David G.K. Taylor’s translation from 2015. However, this publication has not yet spurred further research on the text, which is evident from the fact that most of the literature dealing with *Disputation* is still prior to Taylor’s translation. These studies have primarily focused on the text as a witness to the social and political challenges that Islam brought to bear on Christians at the time. Only

occasional attention is directed at *Disputation*’s theological aspects. Griffith, Roggema and Penn all have penned unique contributions on the above respects.

1.2.3. Apologetics in Early Christianity

The study of Early Christian apologetics, finds (as we will see in the thesis) its primary sources in apologetical writings articulated in relation to pagan (Hellenistic) and Jewish polemics. While I draw on some of the scholarship pertaining to these earlier time periods (Adolf von Harnack Frances Yong, Avril Cameron, Anders-Christian Jacobsen), it is mainly the hypotheses of Daniel Boyarin about border-crossings that provide an operational definition for my studies. The reason for this is that the study of apologetics has gone through many stages of development, but a fundamental shift occurred with the introduction of a more fluid understanding of identity (Boyarin, Griffith, Penn, Hoyland), paired with a shift of literary understanding of apologetics as a non-unified genre (Young, Camron, Jacobsen).

1.2.4. Purpose

In general, readings of *Disputation* in light not only of historical events and contemporary writings, but also in relation to the intra-Christian discussions, have been conspicuously absent. The focus has almost exclusively been on *Disputation* as an apologetical work vis-à-vis Islam. Such a focus is indeed valid, since *Disputation* might just be our earliest source referring to the Qurʾān, but it is the additional reading of *Disputation* as an apologetical work against Muslims and competing Christian communities, that is lacking in the literature. In the ambition, however foolish, to remedy some of this, this thesis seeks to bring in multiple perspectives on *Disputation*. This has resulted in an analysis that draws on scholarship from numerous disciplines, all occupied with Late Antiquity.

---

18 The first non-Muslim source, that is. See Roggema, Barbara Hjördis. “The Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē and an Arab Notable.” In Thomas, David, Barbara Roggema, Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala, and John Chesworth, eds. *Christian Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*. History of Christian-Muslim Relations, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009., 269f.
1.3. Method

The question of method for historical disciplines is most of all a question of how to justify the claims one makes about the past. Whatever sources a historian uses to explain historical events or texts, the very task of explanation demands something more from her than simply offering coherent, persuasive reasons, or say, the most exhaustive account. From the beginning of history as an academic discipline in Western academia, the assumption has been that history indeed must give some kind of account of “wie es eigentlich gewesen”, of how things actually were, in the words of Leopold von Ranke. This ambition has proven itself difficult to uphold in the face of the many failures to give a philosophically cogent account of how history in fact explains the past. I, and any reader, will be helped by turning to Elizabeth Clark’s survey in *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*\(^\text{19}\) of the historical guild’s struggle for self-understanding and self-justification, which demonstrates the evolution(s) of widely diverging theories about how, and increasingly, if, history as a science can refer to the past at all. What follows are some thoughts on the study of history in general, as an investigation into the condition of possibility for my thesis.

Clark’s story of the history of historiography is one of historians’ incremental discovery of the non-referentiality of language to reality, as propagated by the post-structuralist or linguistic turn of philosophy in general around the 1960s. Even if she brings up other critiques of history as a science are older than that, and even exist parallel to the poststructural movement (and which have their own respective responses in the forms of Popperian falsificationism, American pragmatism, Putnam’s internalism, or Anglophone Marxist historiography) she insists that the “turn” is radical because it disavows any correspondence between historian’s words and past reality. The main impetus for this rejection of the possibility to verify historical claims by looking at some reality unmediated by language comes from Ferdinand de Saussure’s so-called semiotic observations in linguistics. His original theory of semiotics, in brief, meant that language is not “natural” but a system of signs in which words (or “sound images”) as signifiers are arbitrarily linked to their signified concepts, which renders the meaning of words a human convention according to a set of rules. Followers of Saussure soon began to philosophize about the connection between words and the extra-mental things they signify, and drew more dramatic conclusions about the arbitrariness of language in relation to reality. Insights from this were

then carried over into the social sciences by Claude Lévi-Strauss, and further into the humanities by Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Julia Kristeva.

But if this basic point is true, is there a way to distinguish history-writing from fiction? While some historians in the survey indeed have concluded that there is not, and therefore either have rejected the basic premise of post-structuralism or found ways to celebrate history as a particular form of literature, Clark does not agree, and makes a case for this at the end of the book by enlisting a host of poststructuralist scholars who claim to study history proper.

For Clark, poststructuralism is not bad news, especially not for students of premodern texts. And because “all historiography implies some philosophy or theory of history, whether acknowledged or not,”²⁰ it is better to have an explicit theory of history in order to do responsible work in the field. For Clark, this means at least having an idea of what historical sources “do” for historians: any hierarchical ordering of texts under their context, based on the idea that the context explains a text, is a modern assumption. This assumption is, says Clark, naïve and positivist because it supposes that we have access to some “more real” past in light of which texts should be interpreted. Instead, the suggestion here is to treat every aspect of history-writing as involving simply a mass of “texts” – in the sense that when interpreting a particular historical text such as Disposition, we never have access to uninterpreted or “more real” information against which the claims of an author can be verified, but only other interpretations of other traces of the past.²¹ This does not do away with the idea of context or facts, as we will see, but levels the epistemic “priority” of these things in relation to the less prosaic and high-style nature of texts. History is thus turned into an exclusively interpretative discipline.

So how then can claims to historical knowledge be justified? How are historical works not simply a work of fiction among other works of fiction? We glean quite a few strategies from Clark, and I will enlist a few of them in the service of my thesis.

First of all, according to Michel de Certeau, historians operate under a “split structure.”²² This means that in contrast to literature, the historian employs citation to insert herself in a

---

²⁰ Clark, History, Theory, Text 119.
²¹ Ibid., 130ff.
²² De Certeau, "The historiographical operation" in The Writing of History, 95, Cited ibid., 121.
transparent community of peers, and thus places herself under their judgment about her work’s reliability. This reliability is not judged simply on proper and responsible citation, however, but also on the historian’s narration of her sources.

Second, if we grant that texts are of equal value with “harder” evidence such as “documents” or archeological findings, because any and all historical artifact is some form of text as it arrives to us, as Dominick LaCapra argues, situated “within a network of …traces,” that is, in themselves always already “textual” because established by historians, then historical writing is not a task of judging a text like *Disputation* in light of some past reality “outside the text.” This would, according to Clark, be equal to a form of implicit positivism, which requires a view of historical truth as having to correspond with a reality that is no longer accessible to us, namely the past, which amounts to a vain and self-defeating endeavor. Rather, she wants historians of antiquity to embrace a fully “textual” approach, where “contexts,” like the data of political, social and economic historians, is as much part of a linguistic universe as texts, a universe in which the practitioner of history must learn to orient herself. This leads Clark to define texts as usefully distinct from contexts, but not as subordinately explained by them, when viewed as historical informants. Such a move also leads to asking for new criteria for judging historical accounts – because the historian is no longer appealing to anything beyond a constructed system of conventions, in analogy with poststructural literary scholarship.

The question of criteria for historical judgments is twofold: first, we must decide what questions are worthwhile posing to our sources. It is not a question of limiting ourselves to the available “data”, because this data is always already formed by our own interests in the past. It is rather a question of where to look to gain any real insight into the past. Poststructuralism emphasizes the fact that everything we read comes to us as other’s interpretations, and that our own interpretation must work from a hermeneutic of suspicion against the unity, simplicity and truth of any text. If anything substantial is to come from the critique of a text, one must look for the cracks in its edifice, in the unintentional ruptures and contradictions of the author, because they reveal hidden commitments and strategies which – intentionally or not – the author has used to gloss over a reality which is always more complex than our rhetoric and even most honest attempts at truth-telling. The unintentional commitments, or logic, in a text is in fact more interesting because they can give us insight into what was, and was not, “thinkable” and

---

24 Ibid., 155.
“sayable” for the author, which opens up for new questions into the past as a reality. Therefore, we should not only ask what a text openly states, and accept its claims at face value, nor simply derive its meaning from the author’s “intention”, but try to glean what it can reveal as an “event” or artifact.\(^{25}\)

Second, we must affirm that history is necessarily a “presentist” project in its execution. This is to say that history is never written solely with the purpose of disinterestedly uncovering some part of the past, but that history is, to speak with de Certeau, the “resuscitation of a corpse”. What is meant by this is that there is an absence, or distance, between us and the past which the historian can only bridge by investing her present concerns into it, by breathing her own life and expectations into her object of study. The “corpse” will not speak by its own powers, but only in the historical discourses we create. For this reason, we ourselves are not just observers of history, but in some way must become the object of history, and try to contextualize our own enterprise. And so, if we really must bring ourselves wholly to the fore in the reconstruction of the past, then it becomes crucial to be self-reflective of one’s own place in the present: what presumptions am I bringing into interpreting a historical text like *Disputation*? What are my goals of describing it? Why do I contextualize it the way I do? Why do I ignore some things and emphasize others?

Of course, previous research sets a framework for what can be responsibly said about a topic, and any text or event always presents itself as “other”, which rubs up against my prejudices and preconceptions. But it is still I as an interpreter who must be conscious and vigilant about the deliberations and even tacit judgments that go into the interpretation below. Even when this is not done explicitly in my thesis, I affirm any critique and feedback to my project which would bring to the surface my own presuppositions.

Lastly, however, I want to reserve myself against a strong version of the above (extremely simplified) account by Elizabeth Clark and other poststructuralists, by noting two weaknesses in her presentation of historiography, first as non-referential in relation to extramental events, and second as a meta-reflection on the task of history itself. Even Clark herself appears troubled by the idea that history cannot claim to speak meaningfully of the past as a reality outside the text.\(^{26}\) So she enlists Hilary Putnam’s internal realism, which “attempts a middle ground” in the


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 157.
extremes between a naïve or even “magical” theory of correspondence between mental concepts and the external world, and the radical rejection of any access to it: “the mind neither copies nor invents a world.”\textsuperscript{27} Truth, on this account, is a question of “rational acceptability” under a set of conditions placed before us by my “belief system,” which is in turn a mental collection of represented experiences. The acceptability of any one belief is based purely on its coherence with other beliefs, which is the “internalist” aspect of Putnam’s epistemology. This internalism supposedly answers the problem of the impossibility of the “God’s eye view” which must be assumed if we are to prove that there is a link between our minds and external reality.

However, my sincere question to this construction of the problem is: how can we prove that internalism is true without a similar God’s eye view? And why, if we do not have access to a transcendent warrant of our ability to know anything of the external world, should we bother to assume a “moderate” position like Putnam’s before the two extremes he claims to navigate between? These are intractable philosophical questions that I am not able to discuss, but Clark may be concealing more than she should of her own prejudices about epistemology, when opting for a “moderate” realism over a “naïve” one, even when the reasons given for rejecting the latter seem applicable to the former as well.

Additionally, Clark’s own presentation of the development of historiography throughout the book takes a narrative, and even progressive form. Heros and villains in the methodology of history are presented along a complex but still forward-looking trajectory. This in itself reveals a methodological choice, which Clark clearly invests with an ethical aspect: today, we are in a better place to unmask power and its effects on history: the oppression and marginalization of minorities in historical texts. If history was previously written by the winners, it can be rewritten to give justice to the undeserving losers, as defined by the new historians. But this makes the new historians nothing less than winners themselves. There is therefore no epistemological difference between a contemporary historian and a past one, in terms of their work being a product of ideological, religious and perhaps even ethnic concerns. The question is whose ideology, and which religion/worldview, that gets to interpret history. Even when Clark and other poststructuralists roundly reject “relativism” as an “anything goes” attitude, they will find it hard to win over “enemies” to their own presentation of the history of historiography as long as their epistemology props up their particular ideological commitments. And I fear that there

\textsuperscript{27} Clark, \textit{History, Theory, Text}, 38.
are those who might embrace this epistemology in the service of more sinister goals, goals informed by quite different ethical or ideological commitments. Again, I am not competent to reject the philosophy behind Clark’s argument, but this point remains a problem, as I see it.
1.4. Apologetics – A Genre?

The study of apologetics within the field of history of religion has mostly concerned itself with the time period of early Christianity, and especially apologetics relating to Jewish-Christian relations. While this thesis investigates a text from the time in which Christian apologetics were by contrast articulated against the challenge brought on by Muslims, I still believe, as will be demonstrated, that the scholarship on early Christian apologetics bears significantly upon apologetics in early medieval times.

In pursuit of defining the term apologetics itself, one can note in the literature a long-standing discussion of whether one can speak of an apologetic genre. Are there texts that share literary style and form that also are bound together by common strategies and content? Can we speak at all of one apologetic genre?

Dealing with the topic of apologetics in Antiquity, the editors of *Apologetics in the Roman Empire* put forward an understanding of the genre of apologetics not so much as a “tool to classify texts.” Rather, they understand genre in a more fluid way, as “thinking about strategies of writers (and readers) in different cultural traditions and particular contemporary situations.” And apologetics, it seems, is a defense strategy: “The adherents of these religions attacked each other with great ferocity at times. In response there emerged the practice of apologetic, the defense of a religion against actual or perceived opponents.”

Taking it one step further, Frances Yong and Avril Cameron, both, albeit in different manners, reach the understanding that it makes little sense to speak of an apologetic genre at all. In the words of Cameron, “it is no longer fruitful to insist on a genre of apologetic, or a definition which refers to literary form.” Rather, *apologetic method(s) and apologetic strategy(ies)* seem to get us closer to understanding of this collection of Ancient texts, because they come in widely varying forms while sharing some fundamental traits.

---


29 Ibid.,7.


31 Cameron, *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, 18ff.
Thus, Jacobsen, in his work towards a definition of apologetics, can conclude that he does “not think that the construction of a literary genre called ‘apology’ is the best way to classify texts containing apologetic motives.” Apology or apologetics as a genre would necessitate an understanding and use of “genre” so broad that we “run the risk of being left with a notion of literary genre which is so general that is has no heuristic value.” In the end, “by constructing an apologetic genre, we will further lose the very important sense of apologetics using many different literary genres.”

Jacobsen thus emphasizes the need to look beyond the concept of genre and to the use of the apology and whether it achieves its main apologetic goals of identity-making by means of three main concepts: “attack, defense and explanation.” Thus, “defense against attacks from outsiders is directed inwards as a way to strengthen members of the attacked group as much as it is directed outwards against the critics.”

Adolf von Harnack stressed the purpose of defense as maintaining something. He argued for apologetics’ function of “maintaining Christianity by combining the Christian idea of revelation with the idea of rationality characteristic for Greek philosophy.” The defense of Christianity, it seemed, was undertaken by means of Greek philosophy with an intention of self-preservation, that is, to strengthen the community’s identity. Jacobsen shows how one can interpret Harnack’s definition of Christian apologetics as maintaining operating on two levels at ones: 1) apologetics is defense from; and 2) apologetics is a positive explanation of what the defended is.

However, behind this idea of identity-making lies the presumption that identity is a fixed entity. Jacobsen reminds us how new scholarship, suggests a more fluid idea of identity. Identity-making in apologetics not so much is about “shifting from one fixed identity to another fixed identity,” rather “identities were fluent and out of these many fluent identities the apologists constructed fixed identities which they could attack and defend.”

---

33 Ibid., 9.
34 Ibid., 7.
36 Ibid., 6f.
37 Ibid., 9.
To narrow down the discussion to Christian-Muslim apologetics in particular, I will go into conversation with the scholarship of Gabriel Said Reynolds and Daniel Boyarin. However, I will first need to provide a brief historical sketch of the *sitz im Leben* of our text.
2. Historical Context

2.1 The Making of Islam

Why is the study of Early Islam important to our investigation of Disputation? Because even if Disputation is a Christian text intended to aid a Christian audience in a Muslim milieu, a study of the particularities concerning its wider original context will shed light on it for us today: “the meaning of a text is not simply found in the mens auctoris but rather in the mens lectoris or, better, in the complex relationship between the text and its readers in their contexts.”

However, the study of Islam is haunted with numerous historiographical problems. Internal Muslim history, while rather detailed, often exhibits a large gap between event and record, and polemical inclinations often hinder their trustworthiness. It seems that historiography has been a tool in the hands of the Empire. External non-Muslim sources are on the other hand much earlier, but they lack detail, and are not as comprehensively informed about contemporaneous events in Arabia and Iraq. There are in other words not too many observations that we could label as historical sources. “What is abundant is in general unreliable; what is relatively reliable is invariably too little.”

These reservations aside, we can sketch a time of “making” for Islam – “A prophet is not created in a single day, and a holy book no less!” It is a time when a (or several) certain religious identity(ies) comes into being. One could with some confidence say that by the 780s (C.E.) there is an articulated self-definition within Islam; it had come “to exhibit a degree of confidence about its orientation.” Surely, the parting of the ways between Islam, Judaism and Christianity happened earlier, and we will touch upon this subject later, but Islam as a religious separate identity was demonstrably quite established at the time of Disputation.

---

41 Ibid.
43 Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It, 4.
44 However, there are very few sources confirming any religious essence which later traditional Muslims sources would say sparked and fueled the conquests. There are in particular very few non-Muslim sources on the subject. See the discussion in Penn, When Christians First Met Muslims, 6-9.
2.2. The study of Early Islam - the Problem of the Conquest

Why was the Arab/Islamic conquest successful? There is no doubt that it was: “Recorded history has scarcely seen a more powerful fusion of belief and action than that effected by early Muslims”\footnote{Robinson, The Rise of Islam, 175.} To this question, Muslims and non-Muslim sources alike will answer: because God willed it.\footnote{Muslim sources have it that God decreed it as “a way of rewarding the Arabs for their adherence to the true faith,” and Christians sources saw it as God’s way of “punishing people of their sins.” See Hoyland, Robert G. In God’s Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire. Ancient Warfare and Civilization. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015., 93.} God’s will, however, lies outside of the explanatory scope of history of religion. Fortunately, history as such provides us with a plethora of geographical, economic and social circumstances to investigate and draw conclusions from.\footnote{There is a large body of research on these factors’ role in bringing about the conquest. And it has been argued that the decline of the Byzantine, Persians and Chinese Empires in the sixth century predated the conquest and that “we should probably consider the Arab conquest as an outcome of this decline rather than its cause.” Ibid., 27.}

Let us look at the Muslim sources. Robison claims that the Qurʾān presents itself as a text without a context.\footnote{Robinson, The Rise of Islam, 223.} However, the Qurʾān contextualizes itself joining the ranks of Biblical prophets and stories,\footnote{Q 3:3, Q 5:46-49.} which is, after all, a context. Still, the Qurʾān (and Islamic tradition) has it that Muḥammad operated in cultural and religious insulation: there first was jāhiliyya – the time of idol-worshiping and polytheism – then there was Muḥammad, monotheism and Islam.\footnote{For a more nuanced view of jāhiliyya, see Webb, Peter “al-jāhiliyya: Uncertain Times of Uncertain Meanings”, in which he argues on the basis of the word’s semantic shift that understanding of jāhiliyya as pre-Islam only occurred after the 10th century in Arabic writings.} Further, as Griffith has pointed out, it is as if the scholarly community has accepted this Muslim apologetic claim of jāhiliyya.\footnote{However, this idea of Jāhiliyya is one that goes back to medieval Muslim writers working in the eighth and ninth century. See Griffith, Sidney. “Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bet Hale and a Muslim Emir.” Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies 3 (2000): 29–54., 29. For further discussion see Hoyland, In God’s Path, 9.}

The claim of jāhiliyya is a “problem” and must be questioned if we are to make sense of the conquest. As Robinson has pointed out, if jāhiliyya was the case, then the cultural and political traditions (or lack thereof) associated with the areas around western Arabia at the time of the conquest should strongly differ from societies in which other sophisticated religious traditions have formed: “Sophisticated religious traditions generally emerge in societies with relatively high levels of social differentiation; the rule of history called for the assimilation of conquering
pastoral and semi-pastoral tribesmen, along with their political and cultural traditions into the more developed, sedentary culture so conquered."52 Where the Arabs really that different? Put to the extreme, one could answer this in two different ways: 1) Either the conquest was not at all about Islam, or 2) Arabia was not as insular as the concept of jāhiliyya claims.53

The first hypothesis constitutes the most extreme form of revisionism.54 In this scheme, Muḥammad did not even exist, and the Qurʾān was compiled a century or so later than what the Muslim tradition claims. Although, while “of Muḥammad’s birth, childhood and early adulthood we know almost nothing that can properly be called knowledge,”55 we do know from Christian and Jewish sources that he did in fact exist. Christian sources tell of how Muḥammad made “prophetic claims, that some kind of violent political change effected by monotheist tribesmen-soldiers from Arabia did occur, and that, at least in some fragmentary form, some kind of an Islamic scripture can be dated to the seventh century.”56 And in a letter from the Syriac writer Iso Yahb (d. 659 C.E.) we see that “Syriac Christians were beginning to distinguish between their own religion and that of their conquerors.”57 Thus, revisionism at the extreme level is implausible, and obscures important facts.

The second attempt to understand jāhiliyya in the context of the conquest would be to more thoroughly place the conquest within Late Antiquity, i.e. the classical cultures of the Greco-Roman and Iranian world and monotheistic traditions.58 Further, it would be a matter of inquiring into possible direct influences. This pursuit is, perhaps ironically, made possible by the witness of the Qurʾān – the text without a context, but also the text born out of the

---

53 Ibid., 221f.
56 Ibid., 222f.
58 “Qur’a n scholars have often been unwilling to consider pre-Qur’anic Syriac religious discourse as belonging in any way within the Qur’a n’s hermeneutical circle. And Syriac scholars have seldom seen any reason to think that the Qur’an belongs within the textual or discursive framework of “Late Antique” Early Christian or Patristic thought.” Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qurʾān: The “Companions of the Cave” in Sūrat al-Kahf and in Syriac Christian Tradition ” in Reynolds, Gabriel Said, ed. The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context. Routledge Studies in the Qurʾān. London; New York: Routledge, 2008., 109.
conquest. Surely, the very concept of influence is highly problematic according to traditional Islam. Muḥammad himself could, admittedly, be subjected to external influences, but, as Islamic tradition would claim: “[t]he Qurʾān cannot be subjected to influences, since it comes directly from God and is in no way a human work.”

Still, the language of the Qurʾān is a witness to its author(s)’ embeddedness in the culture of their time: the Qurʾān contains a wide range of words which are not originally Arabic, but of Syriac and Hebrew origin. This is recognized by Western and ancient Muslim scholars alike. There is, in other words, “another history of the Qurʾān that is different from, and in some way opposed to, the official Islamic theological representation of the genesis and development of this Qurʾān.” But in the research conducted by Claude Gilliot, for example, the investigation into origins add up to a convincing hypothesis about the evolutionary nature of the Qurʾān: “the declarations delivered by Muḥammad (as coming from God) could be partly the product of a collective work at the different phases of their proclamation, before they were collected or amended to become a “recitation” and/or “lectionary” (qurʾān)” – one in constant evolution perhaps up until the time of the Umayyads.

However, the Qurʾān is not only reliant on Christian idioms and the Syriac language. Muḥammad himself seems to be reliant on – and perhaps even imitates – the figure of Abraham. Robinson makes the argument that Muhammad “was free to innovate in the long-abandoned style of a Hebrew property; legislating, leading and warring.” the endeavor of placing himself in the long tradition of prophets was possible precisely because Arabia lay outside the heartland

---

59 The standard Muslim account has it that the compilation of the Qurʾān started under the caliph Abu Bakr. See Kaysh, Alexander. *Islam In Historical Perspective*: International Student Edition. Place of publication not identified: ROUTLEDGE, 2017., 81.
62 Gilliot, Reconsidering the authorship of the Qurʾān, 94.
63 Ibid., 89.
64 “Hypothesis, because, contrary to the religious Islamic thesis on the Qurʾān, Western scholars or Orientalists have above all hypothesis on this issue, and not an religious or an ideological thesis”, ibid., 88.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 101.
67 “Qurʾānic language actually accommodates not only a wide range of non-Arabic loanwords, but also, perhaps, a Syriac Christian substrate of language and belief”, Robinson, *The Rise of Islam*, 181.
68 Ibid., 224.
of Christianity and Judaism, that is, outside the centre of monotheism, but not entirely sequestered from it. Thus, Robinson makes the point that we perhaps could talk of a beginning Hijāzī monotheism, a monotheism that had rooted itself in first areas of the Arab/Islamic conquest.

The narrative of jāhiliyya, the period of ignorance and polytheist idol-worshipping prior to the rise of Muḥammad, is not the whole story of the rise of Early Islam, but it should rather be appreciated as part of “a broader cultural re-orientation that took place during of the Umayyad and ’Abbāsid periods.” No doubt was polytheism the main form of worship before Islam, but varieties of monotheistic belief and practice – rabbinic and non-rabbinic Judaism, varieties of Christianity and Jewish Christianity – were more present than Islamic tradition acknowledges. In the end, the jāhiliyya seems to have been a “part of a much wider cultural world that embraced the lands of the Near East”

2.3. Christians under Muslim Rule

The tide has turned in the study of Christian and Muslim relations. Modern narratives about what the arrival of Islam meant for Christians under the Muslim rule have at times been both tendentious and tedious. However, this picture is changing – much owing to the study of Syriac accounts of the Arab/Islamic conquest. We will in the following see that a more fluid definition of identity helps us understand the type of religious border-crossings that we witness in Late Antiquity. We will also see that even if the arrival of new Muslim rulers meant a new form of discrimination for the Christian population, it also meant that new particular ways of co-existing created new avenues of shared intellectual work.

2.3.1. Clashes and Borders

There are roughly speaking two main tendencies in the study field of Christian–Muslim relations. One springs out of a clash-of-civilizations narrative, which paints a picture of a categorically hostile relationship between Muslims and Christians. This picture perhaps more

---


70 “The principal center of Islam, Mecca and Medina are located in the rugged, inhospitable area in the central western part of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Hijāz.” Knysh, *Islam In Historical Perspective*, 8.


reflects the relationship between the Byzantine and Islamic Empires of the Middle Ages, rather than the on-the-ground reality for Christians living under Muslim rule in Late Antiquity.73

The other camp in the field has, perhaps not surprisingly, gone in the opposite direction. Christians are said to have welcomed the conquest.74 While there may be a grain of truth to both narrative poles, they both too heavily rely on an idea of fixed and distinguished religious entities.75 Daniel Boyarin has made groundbreaking work on religious identities in Antiquity, and which has provided a general shift in the study of religious identity and relations between religions. Boyarin proposes under the banner of postcolonial theory an understanding of different religions as “clusters of ideas, people and rituals, sharing some common identity across time and place, but at the same time inevitably invested with different meanings in their different contexts.”76

Religious entities are both juridical and abstract, according to Boyarin. There was no final “parting of the ways”, rather there was a continuous crossing of an (imagined) border. And the border between

Judaism and Christianity, throughout late antiquity and even beyond, was a crossing point for people and religious practices. Religious ideas, practices, and innovations permeated that border crossing in both directions. There were people, as well, who simply didn’t recognize the legitimacy of even the existence of the border.77

Penn suggests in his *Envisioning Islam* a similar context and premise for the study of Christian-Muslim relations,78 and I believe that this reality is exemplified in *Disputation*, since the text addresses it head on. The questions asked and the answers provided reflects a reality in which Christians crossed borders with Muslims in day to day mercantile and civil life. Yes, it was a time of controversy and confrontation, but behind this “lies a less aggressive story of shared living and reciprocal borrowing of both knowledge and wisdom.”79 After all, “Syriac Christians

---

74 This narrative has mainly been backed up by a chronicle (or actually a sentence found in a no longer existing chronicle) from the 9th century. In this chronicle the Arabs are described as liberators freeing the Syriac Christians from the oppressing powers of the Byzantine Empire. Fuel for this narrative is usually found in an (over)emphasis on the anti-Chalcedonian position of the Syriac Churches. Ibid., 7ff.
75 Ibid., 9.
79 Griffith, *Christian lore and the Arabic Qurʾān*, 111.
ate with Muslims, married Muslims, bequeathed estates to Muslim heirs, taught Muslim children, and were soldiers in Muslim armies.”

It therefore appears that the separation into “camps” within the study of Christian-Muslim relations in the end constitutes a task of “eradicating the fuzziness” of the borders, rather than an honest attempt at sketching out the premises for early history of Christian-Muslim relation. The impulse of preserving sharper borders, is not altogether wrong, as we will discover in our investigation of Disputation: the greatest challenge for Christians living under a Muslim rule seems to have been to remain distinct – from Muslims, but also from other competing Christian denominations.

Disputation is not a unique witness to this latter situation. There are also the writings of Jacob (Miaphysite) bishop of Edessa from the late seventh century. Jacob of Edessa was perhaps the first Syriac writer to move towards a depiction of Islam as an independent religion. Be that as it may, his writings still testify to a time of ill-defined borders in many respects. In his texts, Jacob of Edessa addresses questions that Christians of his day undoubtedly had to grapple with. Such as the effectiveness of exorcism: “Is it right for a priest to give Hagarenes or pagans who are possessed by evil spirits some blessings from the holy ones … so that they might be healed?” And “donatist” concerns: “If a Christian should become a Hagarene or a pagan, and after a while, he should regret [this] and return from his paganism, I want to learn whether is it right for him to be baptised or if by this he has been stripped of the grace of baptism” And of sacramental discipline: “What should be done with a holy table with Arabs have eaten meat on and left soiled with fat?”

Ultimately, the border-crossing logic of Boyarin is well applicable to a Syriac text from the early days and centuries of the Arab/Islamic Conquest, and the issues addressed in Jacob’s (and others’) writings “became a form of ‘living literature’ that later generations frequently consulted, consolidated, and modified.”

---

83 Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 167f.
84 Ibid., 168.
85 Ibid., 162.
86 Ibid., 161.
2.3.2. The ‘Christian’ in Christian Texts

It is an important, but nevertheless rarely acknowledged fact that after the consolidation of the Islamic conquest and the consequent withdrawal of ‘Roman’/‘Byzantine’ forces from the Fertile Crescent in the first half of the seventh century, perhaps 50 percent of the world’s confessing Christians found themselves living under Muslim Rule.87

And Muslims themselves, for quite a while, “did not make up the absolute majority of the population … not even in Syria.”88 This would mean that Christian texts from this time and place represents a considerable part, even usually the majority, of the population as well as the cultural and religious establishment. At any rate, our Syriac sources make up the largest corpus of text on the first Muslims. They therefore naturally play a very important part in the history of Christian-Muslim relations, and witness to the experience of Christians living under Muslim rule. After all,

Syriac Christians were among the first to meet Muslims, their record of such encounters remain particularly important for the history of Christian-Muslim relations. This does not mean that Syriac texts objectively describes moments of first contact. But they have preserved some of the earliest impressions and portrayals of Muslims. They were at the forefront of Christian constructions of Islam.89

2.3.3. New Rulers, New Challenges, New Opportunities

As we saw in the previous chapter on the Arab conquest, the new rulers took several measures to regulate the lives of their subjects – Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For Christians this meant that they were granted a status as dhimmīs, i.e. protected, as long as they obeyed the rules laid out for them, “these rules crystallized into what became known as the ‘Pact of Umar’.90 However, while there was a clear discrimination against Christians in the tax policy,91 East

89 Penn, When Christians First Met Muslims, 6.
90 The Pact of Umar in its literary form is dated to the 9th and 10th century. But we know that its contents have its roots in the beginning of the Arab/Islamic conquest, the Pact can rather be understood as a norm after which local Muslim authorities acted as they saw fit. See: Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Bahirā, 113.
91 On the tax policy of ’Abd al-Malik: “The caliph is remembered to have ordered a census for the purpose of enforcing the payment of the jizyah, the poll tax which the Qurʾān demanded from people who had been granted the Scripture, but who were not practicing the true religion.” Griffith, Sidney H. “Images, Islam and Christian Icons: A Moment in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in Early Islamic Times.” La La Syrie de Byzance à Islam, VII e-VIII e Siècles, 1992, 121–138., 126.; Cf. Surā at-Tawbah “Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture - [fight] until they give the jizyah willingly while they are humbled.” (Q 9:29).
Syriac Christians could still benefit on a professional level, as there were several professions typically practiced by Christians. There is a sense of continuity, and Christians often held positions as doctors and financier, for example.92

Christians were not only maintaining a position in the upper echelons of society. Rather, perhaps the most important public service held by Christians during our time of study, one in which drew them into a close partnership with Muslims and abided well into the ʿAbbasid rule, was the work of translating Greek and Syriac text into Arabic.93 Suddenly, texts from all the known sciences became accessible to the Muslim intellectual and religious elite. The importance of this undertaking can scarcely be appreciated enough.

Still, more important for our case is the process of translating. It took place in a mutual exchange between Muslims and Christians – through a partnership with a common goal. This process David Thomas has described as a “cross fertilization”, and an example of “interfaith cooperation” at its best.94 It was a “Cross fertilization” because both Muslims and Christians had to work and cooperate in the projects and neither left the common product unmarked by the other.

A great example of this is found in the 9th century philosopher Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d. 870). al-Kindi orchestrated a group made up by both Christians and Muslims, all of which worked on translation. This discipline and shared intellectual, philosophical work was commonly known under the name falsafa.95 The falsafa-gatherings were exchanges that mostly would take place under the guardianship of a caliph.96 While the caliph (or noble) mostly would solicit the arranging of the meeting, we should not underestimate the caliphs’ personal interest in getting an inside view of Christian theology. Through his patronage, he could get immediate access to Christian intellectual life. Caliphs would show quite some interest in church matters, and since several caliphs are known for having spent time in Christian monasteries it is not beyond reason

93 Ibid., 6f.
94 Ibid., 7
96 Thomas, Introduction, 7.
to imagine that they had were aware of many things ecclesiastical. No wonder that caliphs also often took an interest in the election of church officials and whose support church men would seek out as well.\textsuperscript{97} This might have been considered part of good governance. However, the falsafa-gatherings should also be understood in terms of offering solutions to inner inta-Christians disputes, since they provided an excellent platform to accentuate the differences between the different churches.\textsuperscript{98}

These meetings were important for more reasons than this, and by no means should we reduce them to questions of (church) politics and power struggles. At these gatherings both Christians and Muslims (and the occasional Jew) would have to articulate and refine their arguments concerning matters of faith, theology and reason in sparring with opponent(s). As we will see later on in our investigation this is emulated in the case of Disputation as well; both the monk and the Muslim demonstrate close knowledge of the other’s religion, and it is precisely this knowledge of the other that makes the discussion possible.

2.4. The Emerging Muslim Religion in Outline

2.4.1. Muḥammad the Prophet

The key figure of Islam is Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allah, the Prophet who, according to Islamic tradition, at around the age of forty received the divine revelations that became the very essence of Islam. In a cave overlooking the city of Mecca, Muḥammad began his mission and answered the call to prophethood, becoming the last of the prophets.\textsuperscript{99}

Islamic tradition teaches that it was the angel Gabriel who revealed the message to Muḥammad and spoke the words \textit{iqra’} (recite/read!). Hence the name of these collections: \textit{al-Qurʾān} (the recitation/the reading).\textsuperscript{100} There is a Muslim dogma that Muḥammad was illiterate, and while that might have been true, there is no way for us credit or discredit this claim \textit{ad extra}. And that is perhaps not the point either, because the function of this dogma is what matters. Illiteracy functioned to place Muḥammad in cultural and religious isolation, contributing to the idea of jāhiliyya. It further protected Muhammad and Islam from suspicion of other monotheistic influences on the teachings of the Prophet, because, as argued in the Islamic tradition, illiteracy

\textsuperscript{97} Thomas, \textit{Introduction}, 7.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{99} The previous being the Biblical ones.
outrules the possibility of Muḥammad having any familiarity with the Torah and the Gospel. Muḥammad could of course have been familiar with other monotheistic beliefs regardless of his claimed illiteracy - there is, after all, such a thing as oral tradition. That being said, there is a couple of sources testifying to Muḥammad’s relative erudition. A 7th century monk has him being “learned and informed in the history of Moses” and John of Damascus (7th and 8th century) has Muḥammad knowing both the Old Testament and New Testament.

Nevertheless, the most important event of Muḥammad’s life, and that which marked the new beginning of the first Islamic century, was the hijra, i.e. Muḥammad’s emigration from Mecca to Medina/Yathrib in 622 C.E. Not only is it of importance in terms of Muhammad’s personal life, since Yathrib is where he became free to preach his message, but it is also where “so much of Islamic belief and law came to be anchored.” And it is through this emigration that Muḥammad took on the crucial role as both a religious and a political leader for his umma. It is where we find the seeds for the idea of the imamate, the Muslim understanding of leadership that will leave the umma in terrible conflict after the death of Muḥammad. After all, Muḥammad never left any public instructions of how to carry on without him, and so the question of succession in the leadership was uncertain in the time following his passing. In other words: The hijra is not only the beginning of Islam, it is also the end of the Muslim unity – a unity which Muslims in the decades and centuries to follow will strive to mend. Unity of the umma becomes the motivating factor in the battles to follow and a subject which will occupy much of the following theological and juridical discussion among Muslim theologians and jurists.

While there were more influential political and religious men of Early Islam besides the Prophet Muḥammad, such as Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān (r. 661-80) and ʿAbd al Malik ibn Marwān (r. 685-705), the life of Muḥammad remains an touchstone by which we can grasp the essentials of the Arab conquest and the rise of Islam. His life and example – religiously and politically –

---

101 “To the best of our present knowledge, the Bible had not been translated into Arabic by the time of Muhammad, either in its entirety or in the form of single books. It’s is generally believed that Muhammad gathered his biblical knowledge principally, if not exclusively, from oral sources.” Böwering, Gerhard. “Recent research on the construction of the Qurʾān”, in Reynolds, Gabriel Said, ed. The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context. Routledge Studies in the Qurʾān. London; New York: Routledge, 2008., 70.


103 Ibid., 173.


105 Umma designates the new Muslim idea of what makes up a Muslim community. Umma equals community. It will be discussed at length in the coming chapter.

106 It is under their lead that we witness the expansion of the conquest and what becomes the last of the great empires of Antiquity. See Robinson, The Rise of Islam, 175.
become the very standard by which the following Muslim leaders and intellectuals will be judged.

2.4.2. The Hijra

We noted above that one of the more important events in the life of Muḥammad was the *hijra*, the emigration from Mecca to Medina. The two key figures in this scene, as we know it from Islamic tradition, is Abū Bakr (first caliph) and ‘Alī (fourth caliph). This event is of such crucial importance for several reasons, but mostly because it marks the divide between the Sunnī and Shīʿe: Abu Bakr becomes the leading figure of the Sunnī community, and ‘Alī of the Shi’a.107

The tradition holds that Muḥammad took Abū Bakr with him on the *hijra* and left ‘Alī behind in his camp in Mecca. We can, with danger of simplifying the matter too much, say that the group who later became the Sunnīs take this as proof of Muḥammad’s silent choice of leader: Abū Bakr was the one he wanted with him and was thus this successor. While Shi’a, on the other hand, claim that the event rather displays the confidence and trust Muhammad had in ‘Alī, leaving the responsibility of the Meccan camp to him.108 ‘Alī was Muḥammad’s son-in-law and cousin after all, so ‘Alī was the rightful successor in terms of Shīʿte kinship way of thinking.109 too.110

A key to understanding the power vacuum left after Muhammad is the fact that Islam at this stage did not yet have a concept of heresy and heretics, nor any “councils to separate the right-believing from the wrong. This does not mean that Arabs and Muslims in early Islam had no way of separating the “orthodox” from the erroneous. They most certainly did, but there was a comparative lack of central authority in these manners.111 Without moving too far into the question, we can note that Early Islam, according to Islamic tradition, seemed to be about the establishing of an Islamic polis or state. The Islamic state’s chief concern was to proclaim Islam

---

107 That is to say, the Sunnī - Shīʿe polarization of event is of course used in an anachronistically manner.
110 After all, “we should keep in mind that after the death of the Prophet, his followers found themselves at loss as how to proceed and who should be their rightful leader in religious and sociopolitical actions … the boundaries of what was religiously correct or incorrect, as well as the notions of Islamic legitimacy (for instance, of the Muslim ruler) at that time, were still in flux and shifted with the perspective of the individual viewer. Knysh, *Islam in Historical Perspective*, 53.
111 Ibid.
as the religion of all Arabs (with the exception of some Bedouin tribes). This project went hand in hand with the overreaching idea of a Muslim *umma* (community),\(^\text{112}\) which was to hold the Muslim unity together. Since Islam as a religion seemed inseparable from the establishing of an Islamic State, the question of who was to lead the project after the Prophet’s death soon became the most important one.

Further, this event also becomes important in the later mainstream medieval Sunnī religious and political thought concerning the discussions of the caliphate and imamate. Because, in Sunni terms, the imamate is the discussion of leadership on an epistemological level (as articulated by Muslim jurists and theologians.)\(^\text{113}\) However, a proper discussion of the imamate is for another thesis. We should remember that the question of leadership in Early Islam is tightly bound up with Muḥammad, because just as Muḥammad was both a political figure and a religious leader, so too would the successors make claim to both worldly and spiritual aspects of leadership over the *umma*.

### 2.4.3. The Umayyads in Iraq and Syria

Now, at the time of *Disputation*, the Arab/Islamic Conquest had been led by the Umayyads and their dynasty, under the rule of ʿabd al-Malik (685-705 C.E.), son of the caliph Marwān in Syria, and al-Malik’s son, al-Walīd (705-715 C.E.).\(^\text{114}\) The time leading up to the consolidation of Umayyad power under ʿabd al-Malik and his successors was a particularly bloody one.\(^\text{115}\) With the exception of perhaps ʿabd al-ʿAzīz (known as ʿUmar II,\(^\text{116}\) short rule between 717-720 C.E.), the century following the death of the Prophet was one of rebellions and seizing of power and land at the hands of the caliphs and the Umayyads.\(^\text{117}\) The Arab/Islamic conquest overthrew

---

\(^\text{112}\) The central concept of *umma* denotes both a religious community and a social political project, and perhaps more of the latter. Because the *umma* opened up to membership from both Jews and Christians, as long as they partook in the greater Muslim project of a Muslim/Arab state of governance, these groups were free to practice their own religion along with paying the tax *zakát* to the community’s treasury.

\(^\text{113}\) Yücesoy, *Justification of Political Authority in Medieval Sunni Thought*, 10.

\(^\text{114}\) Knysh, *Islam In Historical Perspective*, 69.

\(^\text{115}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^\text{116}\) This is ʿUmar of which The Pact of Umar has its name. The pact of Umar claims to be a response to a letter sent from Christians in Syria to Caliph ʿUmar. The document provides a long list of rules for social conduct for Christians. However, both authenticity and importance of the document are highly debated and so it cannot really tell us anything of the conditions of discrimination of non-Muslims at the time nor the discussion of said conditions. It is even argued that the list rather reflects the intended “benefit of Muslims rather than for the detriment of non-Muslims.” See Hoyland, *Introduction*, xxx.

\(^\text{117}\) The opposing parties following the death of the prophet Muhammad was between (what we late know as) Sunnī and Shiʿite, ʿUthmān and ʿAlī. The conflict between the two resulted in the second *fitna* (meaning Arab civil war) which ended the assassination of ʿAlī in 661 C.E. at the hands of the khārijites and (eventually) the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty. Knysh, *Islam In Historical Perspective*, 63. Important, however, is that these power...
centuries of consolidated powers from the East to the West Arabia/Middle East.\textsuperscript{118} These were areas formerly characterized by a variety of religions, cultures, languages and ethnicities.\textsuperscript{119} Nowhere was this more the case than Iraq. Iraq had a ruling class of Zoroastrians (of the Persian-speaking elite), but was home to a majority group of (East Syriac) Christians, and several other minor religious sects and semi-nomadic Arabs.\textsuperscript{120}

However, Iraq had during the 7\textsuperscript{th} century become a foothold for anti-Umayyad movements, and in particular one led by 'Abdallah b. al-Zubayr (a Qurayshi nobleman). Al-Zubayr had secured the provinces of Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Arabia during his rule, but his hold of Iraq was challenged, not only by Mukhtār and his pro-`Ali followers – in particular those who saw Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya (d. 700) as `Ali’s rightful heir – but also by the Kharijites. The Kharijites had been ravaging Iraq for some time, which left al-Zubayr rather weak and easily defeated once the son of the caliph Marwān in Syria, 'Abd al-Malik (a branch of the Umayyad family), led his Syrian army to Iraq and defeated the forces there. Thus, what we are facing in \textit{Disputation} is an Iraq that had been the battleground between branches of Islam.\textsuperscript{121}

The governor of Iraq, al-Hajjāj (active 694-714) “a statesman of genius”,\textsuperscript{122} is of importance here, because he served under both Umayyad caliphs (al-Malik and his son al-Walid) and was the active hand in numerous reforms important to our study. Among others, the adoption of Arabic as the official language of the bureaucracy and administration, and the change of coinage. Further, it is through al-Hajjāj that al-Malik had the new coinage marked with the Islamic creed.\textsuperscript{123} However, al-Hajjāj was not just responsible for administrative reforms, he also secured the power of the Umayyads by placing Syrian troops in the distant provinces of the Muslim Empire and as such managed to suppress any major rebellion on the horizon.\textsuperscript{124}

Now, the centralization of power that took place under the Umayyads was a restoration of the \textit{umma} after the devastating years that followed the death of the Prophet. The Umayyads unified

\begin{footnotes}
\item[118] Knysh, \textit{Islam In Historical Perspective}, 46.
\item[119] Ibid.
\item[120] Ibid.
\item[121] Knysh, \textit{Islam In Historical Perspective}, 68f.
\item[122] Ibid., 69.
\item[123] Ibid., 70.
\item[124] Ibid., 69.
\end{footnotes}
the Muslim community albeit by force and one could say that the caliphate was turned into a “dynastic absolutist state.”

But the rule of the Umayyads is not only remembered for its unification of the umma or administrative reforms. It was also a time in which Islam was publicly proclaimed as a religion distinct from the other monotheistic religions in particular ways. A shift in focus towards Jerusalem took place, which suggested that the Umayyads were making religious as well as territorial claims. For example, in 692 C.E., al-Malik initiated the construction of the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and later al-Walid initiated the construction of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Although sacred places for the Muslim, it is difficult to not take notice of the imposing nature of these buildings: they were to serve as a “graphic statement of the identity and superiority of the Arab faith.” One can barely imagine a louder proclamation of the Islamic šahādah. We can see these reforms reflected in Syriac writings. It is now, after the consolidation of power under the Umayyads and the following Islamization of its territories that Syriac Christians more consistently starts to distinguish between themselves and their rulers along religious lines.

Another important religious enterprise developed by the Umayyads was the concept of the qadi. The Umayyads might have had the military force and infrastructure under decent control, but in a pursuit to micromanage, or regulate at least, their subjects’ lives in a more efficient and concrete way, they established local religious judges, qadis, who were “responsible for administering justice in accordance with the percepts of the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet.”

Ruling with an iron fist, however, turned out to be the fall of the Umayyads. The oppositions from different camps grew and, in the end, made the way for the 'Abbasid empire. Although the opposition can be explained in merely socioeconomic terms, one should be aware of the

---

125 Knysh, Islam In Historical Perspective, 72.
126 Penn, Envisioning Islam, 64.
128 Griffith, Disputing with Islam in Syriac, 32.
129 Penn, Envisioning Islam, 59.
fact that it was all “couched in a religious idiom.”  

The question was always that of God’s will and intention. Nevertheless, the socioeconomic conditions were in general that the previously independent nomads and minor and major religious fractions (therein Christians) were severely discriminated against in general, and in particular by the new Umayyad leader ʿUthman. The Islamic State had by now extended far beyond the Arabian boarders which resulted in rapid changes in the lives of the subject. And perhaps the most important objection to ʿUthman from other Muslims was his policy of only distributing agriculture lands to his relatives and prohibiting it to other Muslims.

This section has provided historical context for the coming analysis of Disputation, and it is important for our understanding of Disputation’s opponent(s) as well as its audience. Disputation is born out of this particular Muslim milieu: Christians rather suddenly found themselves subjected to a new Muslim rule which was only beginning to figure out how to go about governing the newly conquered territories.

---

131 Knysh, Islam In Historical Perspective, 105.
2.5. Christian Theology: Councils and Churches

The Christianity(ies) that developed in the Middle East – Eastern Christianity133 – were all quite distinct in both theology and practice, and the 8th century was by no means a stable time, rather, it was a time of ardent debate and discussion between rivalling communities. The divisions amongst the Christians did not go unnoticed by Muslims, since the former were mocked by the latter as failures in comparison to their own “clear statements of faith,” as in the example of the anti-Christian writings of al-Ǧāḥīz134 (777-869 C.E.):

Even if one were to exert all his zeal, and summon all his intellectual resources with a view to learn the Christian teachings about Jesus, he would still fail to comprehend the nature of Christianity, especially its doctrine concerning the Divinity. How in the world can one succeed in grasping this doctrine, for were you to question concerning two Nestorians, individually, sons of the same father and mother, the answer of one brother would be the reverse of that of the other. This holds true of all Melchites and Jacobites. As a result, we cannot comprehend the essence of Christianity to the extent that we know the other faiths.135

Muslims thus took advantage of the infighting between separated Christian communities. But since this time was one of much instability, the fluid identities of religious believers under quickly shifting political regimes lent themselves to border-crossings between Christian denominations as well. It seems indeed that the lines between ecclesial communities, and thus between ‘orthodox’ and ‘heretics’, were less fixed among people at the grassroots level than among prelates participating in Church Synods and Councils. There are also incidents of church officials getting reprimanded for being too tolerant of other Christians, for example, if they had accepted a marriage between a Melkite and a Jacobite.136

133 Operating with a strong division between Western and Eastern Christianity in this time period is of course a simplification. “Yet lines must be drawn” if we going to “shed light on a relative neglected area of study.” I thus follow in the footsteps of Hoyland, and (general consensus) and refer to Eastern Christianity as the “forms of Christianity that evolved in the Middle East in the period 300-1500. See Cameron and Hoyland, Introduction, ix.
136 Kolbaba, Tia M. “Byzantine Perceptions of Latin Religious ‘Errors’” in Cameron, Averil, and Robert G. Hoyland, eds. Doctrine and Debate in the East Christian World, 300-1500. The Worlds of Eastern Christianity, 300-1500, v. 12. Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2011., 300. Kolbaba further discusses how, from the Melkite perspective at least, there was a tendency of understanding heresy in more geographical and ethnic terms than dogmatic, ibid.: “For these men, the definition of Orthodox Romans included not only a Chalcedonian dyophysite creed, but also a set of rituals and customs that were, in fact, the rituals and customs of only part of the empire. Latins, Armenians, Syrians, and many others who might consider themselves both orthodox ad Romans were excluded.” Because: “The synod is alarmed, and we sense that there is a complete divorce between the orthodox, centralizing ideas of Constantinople, and the political, social, and economic life of a region that is perhaps also ‘Byzantine’ but in a way different from the capital.” Dragon, Minorités ethniques et religieuses dans l’orient byzantine à la fin du Xe et au Xle siècle: L’immigration syrienne,” TM 6 (1976), 204. Cited in Kolbaba, Byzantine Perceptions of Latin Religious ‘Errors’, 300.
Nevertheless, a brief look at this time of discussion and debate makes sense for us because it is an environment that partly makes up the context in which Muhammad was active and Islam emerged. Christians “were still in the process of defining their positions and disentangling their organizational structures when the Muslims arrived on the scene.” This time of unstable identities in terms of theology and church practice is on the one hand spurred by challenges brought by Islam as a religious and political force, and on the other by those from competing Christian communities. Divisions, in the end, were not only about orthodoxy, but just as much a matter of right practice, orthopraxy; “correct practice was a primary issue in many sets of questions and answers produced for the faithful, especially in the seventh century.”

Hoyland has, however, articulated four basic qualities shared by the rather diverse group(s) we call Christians in the East. And by Christians in the East we now mean East of Byzantium. He gives four major traits, or presuppositions, that in general set Eastern Christianity apart from Western Christianity: 1) they are heirs to the Hellenistic culture; 2) The link between religion and imperial power was even more defining in this region than in the West. This could partly be explained by the conversion of Constantine and the fact that the major cities of the Roman Empire were all in the East. 3) the East has been unique for its number of communities with “subtly distinguished doctrinal positions.” Hoyland sees these positions as serving to reinforce preexistent differences, because, the East is a region made up by a number of ancient civilizations, who in turn are defined by a number of linguistic, ethnic and religious traditions. The distinctiveness of particular communities was thus safeguarded by keeping a distance to imperial power. Finally, 4) Islam. The rise of Islam is perhaps the one event which more than anything defines Eastern Christianity. Christians went from being the ruling majority to the ruled minority. With this they faced a new particular challenge from a new and successful form of monotheism. It is, in other words, “in the context of a Muslim-ruled Middle East that the Eastern Christians evolved into fully-fledged independent socio-religious communities.”

---

137 Hoyland, Introduction, xxii.
138 Ibid., xxviii.
139 Ibid., xix.
140 Cf. Sebastian Brock’s threefold understanding of the Church in which the Syriac Orient constitutes its own major theological tradition(s). I understand Hoyland’s use of Eastern Christianity to fall closer to what we would call the Syriac Orient.
141 Ibid., ix.
142 Ibid., xxviii.
The major Christian denominations in the Islamic world were Melkites, Syrian Orthodox and East Syrians. Melkites (meaning royalist or imperialists from the Syriac word for king, malkā) came to be the name by which opponents would label the Christians who maintained a Chalcedonian position, but because they lived as a minority in Muslim-ruled land, became isolated from their former Byzantine imperial patronage. Melkites also, little by little, adopted Arabic as their chief language and as such developed into a distinct Christian community apart from Chalcedonian Christians who remained under Byzantine rule. However, the isolation, or better distinctiveness, of the Melkites, only happened a century or so after Disputation, which of course renders the term somewhat anachronistic when used here.

Pope Leo, in his Tome (449 C.E.), declared that Christ’s two natures (human and divine) were united in one person and one hypostasis. This stirred up quite some dispute, and in 451 C.E. the Council of Chalcedon or the Fourth Ecumenical Council, was called together by Empress Pulcheria and Emperor Marcian. The Council had been called in the hope to settle on the doctrinal statements, and in particular about Christological issues with Nestorius, archbishop of Constantinople. Nestorius himself was not an active figure at this point, but his theological ideas were the target. If the intention was reconciliation, one could argue that the Council accomplished the opposite instead. The Council of Chalcedon ended up becoming a driving force in the growing resentment by the Christians in the East towards the West. With the risk of reducing the matter beyond the defensible, we could say that archbishop Nestorius earlier had prompted the Council of Ephesus in 431 by refusing to call the Virgin Mary “Mother of God,” Theotokos (bearer-of-God), and instead proposed Christotokos (bearer-of-Christ). The Council of Chalcedon then, became the very foundation for Western Christianity but the tensions around and from the Council peaked under Justinian the First (r. 527-565) and resulted in the formal split and birth of parallel and competing patriarchates both in Antioch and Alexandria, which formerly were called “monophysite”.

---

143 Hoyland, Introduction, xxix.
144 Leo, Epistola XXVIII. Ad Flavianum Episcopum Constantinopolitanum Contra Eutychis Perfidiam Et Haeresim.
145 Ibid., xvif.
146 Hainthaler, Theological Doctrines and Debated Within Syriac Christianity, 380.
147 Hoyland, Introduction, xvif.
148 Unable to accept the doctrine of two natures that was formulated by the Constantinopolitan council in 451, the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites, after Jacob Baradaeus) have come to be referred to as miaphysites. They believed that Christ had one nature – “composed of a divine and a human nature – and one composite hypostasis.” Vital for this way of formulating the doctrine on Christ was the understanding and use of substance (physis) as being the same as hypostasis. See Wannous, Ramy. “Abdallah ibn al-Faḍī’s Exposition of the Orthodox Faith” in Cameron,
The Church of the East or the Assyrian Church of the East came from an extreme dyophysite (two nature) party, which was “the dominant Christian sect in east Syria and the Persian Empire, and extending to Arabia and the Far East; there were East Syriac Christians in China by the seventh century and in south India by the ninth.”\footnote{Hoyland, \textit{Introduction}, xvi.} Unique for the East Syriac Christians was that they had rooted themselves in areas that never had been under a Christian rule. And so the rise of Islam and the arrival of the Muslim state did not initially make that much of a difference to them – they knew what it meant to live under a non-Christian rule from the very beginning.\footnote{Ibid., xxix.} At any rate, the Church of the East was accused for putting forward a Christological doctrine of \textit{two persons}, but this is quite misleading, and a doctrine not even Nestorius himself would have accepted. Rather, their Christological doctrine as of the mid-7th century is: “Christ is one person (Syr: \textit{paršopa}) with two hypostases (\textit{qnome}) and two natures (\textit{kyane}).”\footnote{Hainthaler, \textit{Theological Doctrines and Debates within Syriac Christianity}, 337.} Theodore of Mopsuestia (d.428) is certainly a more important figure in terms of theological influence, than Nestorius, because, the Church of the East developed a very strong Antiochian Christology with its base at the School of Edessa, which in turn was under the strong influence of Theodore of Mopsuestia. However, the school was closed down by the emperor after the Christological debates following the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon and a new center of theological thought and influence was established with the school of Nisibis just across the Persian border. The School of Nisibis is later affiliated with the intellectual movements of the ‘Abbasid court in Baghdad, “one of the most spectacular and momentous movements in the history of thought.”\footnote{Winkler, Dietmar W. “The Syriac Church denominations” in Cameron, Averil, and Robert G. Hoyland, eds. \textit{Doctrine and Debate in the East Christian World, 300-1500}. The Worlds of Eastern Christianity, 300-1500, v. 12. Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2011., 121.}

This very shallow sketch of the major Christian denominations that made (makes) up Eastern Christianity does of course not do them justice. And while there is much more that we could say about them, it remains a fact that the discussion of texts dealing with intra-Christian doctrinal debate by Christians living under Muslim rule to a large degree still stands as a largely unstudied field. They are “even less studied than later medieval Christian-Muslim ones.”\footnote{Hoyland, \textit{Introduction}, xxxiii.} It seems they have fallen through the cracks.\footnote{This is due to a rather complex picture, but Hoyland points out how; 1) those trained in Christian doctrine to a large degree only read Greek and Latin which makes these texts in Syriac and Arabic inaccessible; 2) there is a}

\footnote{Ibid., xxix.}
\footnote{Hainthaler, \textit{Theological Doctrines and Debates within Syriac Christianity}, 337.}
\footnote{Hoyland, \textit{Introduction}, xxxiii.}
2.6. *Disputation* in its Qur’ānic Context

Islam presumes Christianity – not only in a chronological sense, since the Qurʾān takes for granted a particular familiarity the biblical narratives of Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and also with Christian faith, practices and doctrines. The Qurʾān enters into dialogue by criticizing the core beliefs or *loci theologici* of the Christian faith: the Trinity and the Incarnation.155 The Qurʾān ironizes and satirizes Christian practice and belief,156 because in a certain sense, critique of another’s faith is the defense of one’s own.157

*Disputation* is arguably a conscious, reflexive answer to Qurʾānic jargon about Christians. In fact, *Disputation* is the earliest known Syriac source to refer to the Qurʾān.158 As we will see later on, *Disputation* is a rather straightforward example of Christian apologetics. However, there is more to it than *defense* in the exclusive meaning of the word. Since the Qurʾān on its end makes up the core of the Muslim faith,159 the Qurʾān itself reflects a jargon prevalent among Muslims even at the time of *Disputation*. Further, *Disputation* is a witness to what a conversation could have looked like, or at least it reflects questions and prejudices that Christians were confronted with. Thus, the story might be fictional, but it arguably reflects real exchanges.

---

155 Griffith, Sidney H. “Answers for Shayk: A ‘Melkite’ Arabic Text from Sinai and the Doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in ‘Arab Orthodox’ Apologetics”, in Grypeou, Emmanouela, Mark Swanson, and David Thomas, eds. *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam: The History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 277. Not to mention surā al-Ikhlāṣ which could be understood as the very summary of the Muslim critique of Christian faith: “Say, ‘He is Allah, the One. Allah is the All-embracing. He neither begat, nor was begotten, nor has He any equal.” (Q 112).


157 Geffcken, in his investigation of the apologetic trend represented by Philo, shows how defense (here of Judaism) is combined with an attack on the critics and adversaries, making defense the important characterization of Apologetics. However, Jacobsen relying on A. von Harnack, has it that, «the act of maintaining also includes an act of defence against threats which will disturb one’s position as well as an active explanation of this position.» See Jacobsen, *Apologetics and Apologies*, 6.


159 On the view of the Qurʾān as the core, the *loci theologici*, of the Muslim faith, see Kermani, Navid. *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*. Malden, MA: Polity, 2015.
Consequently, it makes sense to read *Disputation* with the Qurʾān. I have decided to conduct such a reading through looking at the scholarship of Gabriel Said Reynolds, because he argues for a heightened appreciation of the creative rhetoric – the use of exaggerations, satire and rhetoric – in the Qurʾān.\(^{160}\) His work is by and large a response to the scholarly hegemony of understanding the Qurʾān’s references to Christian belief and practice as descriptions of Christian heresies. That is to say, there was a tendency in previous western scholarship to look at the references to Christian belief and practice in the Qurʾān in order to match them up with particular Christian heresies.\(^{161}\) Since only heresies could make the Qurʾānic references to Christianity intelligible, it is argued that they are too inaccurate to reflect any of the orthodox Christian\(^{162}\) churches of its day. It also seems that many scholars who subscribe to this interpretation\(^{163}\) rest their argument on a saying falsely attributed to Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. 458 or 466). In this popular quote Theodoret lets Arabia denote the “haeresium ferax”, that is the bearer or mother of heresies.\(^{164}\) A logical conclusion of viewing “Arabia” as “the mother of all heresies” has been that Muhammad, had he only met with orthodox Christians, would not have been so confused about Christian theology, and might perhaps even have become a Christian himself, considering the high esteem in which he kept the “people of the book.” As in Sura Al-Maʾidah: “you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, ‘We are Christians.’ That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant.”\(^{165}\)

Now, Reynolds argues that the problem with matching up the Qurʾān with heretical movements is not so much that they might be wrong. Rather, what is at stake is “that it keeps us from recognizing the rhetorical creativity of the Qurʾān.”\(^{166}\) Reynolds arguments is that instead of speculating about which heretical groups that could have informed the Prophet Muḥammad and shaped his ideas of Christianity, one should recognize an intention in the Qurʾān to ridicule Christians rather than giving an accurate portrait of the community’s theology and practices.\(^{167}\)

\(^{160}\) See Reynolds, *On the Presentation of Christianity*.

\(^{161}\) Reynolds, *On the presentation of Christianity*, 42 For further discussion of the use of heretical see footnote 2 in Ibid., 44.

\(^{162}\) Both West and East Syrian Christian as well as Chalcedonian Christians do not resonate with the Qurʾānic portrait of Christians.

\(^{163}\) For example, S. Zwemer, who has argued that «[n]ot only was religious life at a low level in all parts of Christendom, but heresies were continually springing up to disturb the peace or introduce gigantic errors. Arabia was one time called ‘the mother of all heresies.’” See Reynolds, *On the presentation of Christianity*, 43.

\(^{164}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{165}\) Q 5:82.

\(^{166}\) Reynolds, *On the presentation of Christianity*, 46.

In other words, the Qurʾān seeks to criticize Christian belief and practice and make it “appear less reasonable”, or in Griffith’s words; “the Qurʾān rhetorically does not simply report or repeat what Christians say; it reproves what they say, corrects it, or caricatures it.” Failure to recognize this has confounded previous scholars, because the dependence of the Qurʾān on Syriac literature and belief is not merely of a linguistic or philological nature, but there are tropes, themes, and modes of expression that “might find their most likely significance” when the two are read together. A great example of this, which puts Disputation in the same creative universe as the Qurʾān, is the Qurʾān’s repeated use of the term “son of Mary” when referring to Jesus Christ, as in sura Al-Maʾidah:

\begin{quote}
And beware the Day when 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)
\end{quote}

So when in §28 Disputation the monk asks “tell me, you son of Ishmael, whose son do you make him, he who is called by you ʿĪsā son of Mariam, and by us Jesus Christ?” the text directly addresses the Qurʾānic caricaturing and mocking of Christian belief. The Author of Disputation corrects and helps its audience to recognize this rhetoric: “You say, but we say!” One could at the first instance believe that this simply was a mistake, within the margin of error on behalf of the Qurʾān, but as we have seen, the Qurʾān quite consistently refers to Jesus as Son of Mary. Was the case then, according to the so-called “logic of heresy”, that Muḥammad had been in contact with Christians who referred to Christ as the son of this mother, rather than the Father, or God? Or does it even reflect a Christianity in which the “Trinity” is understood in terms of Tritheism, as distinct, individual family members, i.e. father - mother - son? Speculating along these lines lead us astray. In the words of Griffith:

\begin{quote}
The Qurʾān’s seeming misstatements, rhetorically speaking, should not be thought to be a mistake, but rather a polemically inspired caricature, the purpose of which is to highlight in Islamic terms the absurdity, and therefore the wrongness, of the Christian belief, from an Islamic perspective.
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
168 Reynolds, On the presentation of Christianity, 48.
170 Griffith, Christian Lore and Arabic Qurʾān, 110.
171 «Jesus is described as ‘son of Mary’ twenty-three times in the Qurʾān» see Taylor, Disputation, footnote 143, 27.
172 Griffith, Al-Naṣārā in the Qurʾān, 311.
\end{flushleft}
Thus, it makes much more sense to understand the reference to Jesus and the son of Mary as an intentional ridicule of Christians, because this is of course not a term Christians themselves would use.\footnote{There is, of course, the one reference to Jesus «the son of Mary» in Mark 6:3, but that is still only once and not a common reference to Jesus. This applies to early Christian writings as well, where it is hardly found at all. If it is, it for the most part in Syriac and Arabic sources and it is found in their infancy gospels, which has led scholars to conclude on a stronger influence of these particular Christians traditions on early Islam. See Reynolds, \textit{On the presentation of Christianity}, footnote 15, 48.} The Christian reference to Christ is always as Son of God. And of this is the Qurʾān very much aware:

\begin{quote}

The Jews say, "Ezra is the son of Allah "; and the Christians say, "The Messiah is the son of Allah." That is their statement from their mouths; they imitate the saying of those who disbelieved [before them]. May Allah destroy them; how are they deluded? They have taken their scholars and monks as lords besides Allah, and [also] the Messiah, the son of Mary. And they were not commanded except to worship one God; there is no deity except Him. Exalted is He above whatever they associate with Him. They want to extinguish the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah refuses except to perfect His light, although the disbelievers dislike it. It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth to manifest it over all religion, although they who associate others with Allah dislike it. (Q 9:30-32)
\end{quote}

Thus, \textit{Disputation} clearly works from within the Qurʾānic paradigm of critique, and it is thus reasonable to believe that the above manner records one of the ways Muslims could try to ridicule Christians as well. We will in the following chapters see this pattern unfold in \textit{Disputation} even more clearly as we address the particular theological points of contention between the monk and the Muslim.

\section*{2.7. Syriac Works of the Seventh through Ninth Century}

The collection of Christian Syriac texts from the 7th through 9th century C.E. are as multifaceted, varied, and creative as the scholarly theories about them. In primary sources, portraits of the Sons of Ishmael abound, and they offer different reasons and motivations for the successful arrival of Arab/Muslim rule. The corpus consists of “apocalypses, caliph lists, conciliar decisions, chronicles, colophons, disaster lists, disputations, encyclical letters, epistles, flyleaf scribblings, hagiographies, inscriptions, legal opinions and scriptural exegesis.”\footnote{Penn, \textit{When Christians First Met Muslims}, 6.} What makes these texts exceptionally interesting and valuable is that they constitute the first portrayals of Muslims “from the outside”. Syriac Christians were the first to meet Muslims and “they were in the forefront of Christian constructions of Islam”\footnote{Penn, \textit{When Christians First Met Muslims}, 6.} There is a wide range of expectations
about the future of the Christian community(ies) in these texts, in which the Muslim “other” can feature as everything from an efficient bureaucrat to a blood-drinking villain.

The first references to Muslims in the Syriac body of texts appear in the mid 7th century. Muslims are here, as in many later texts, referred to (in Syriac) as ṭayyāyē, which at the time only seems to have meant “Arabs,” and did not carry a religious meaning. Ṭayyāyē only received the overtly religious valence of “Muslim” in the decades to follow. Additionally, the first references to ṭayyāyē are rather indifferent to their literal presence. Perhaps not surprising, considering that Syriac Christians, at the dawn of the Arab/Muslim conquest, had been subject to four instances of government change in the past thirty years. Initially, they may not have expected the ṭayyāyē to last that much longer than any of their forerunners, as previously mentioned. Thus, in the descriptions of ṭayyāyē in the first accounts of the Arab/Islamic conquest are in mere political, economical and social terms. Texts from this time is concern with how efficient the ṭayyāyē were in terms of political expediency, among other things. In other words, in the beginning of the conquest, Syriac writers did not seem think that there was anything explicitly Muslim about what we later have come to call the (Arab) Islamic Conquest.

At any rate, the disparate portraits of Muslims often compare like night and day, and it is almost impossible to see how they depict the same object(s). The main reason for this is their time of composition. Syriac Christians underwent a tumultuous time during this century and a half. For this reason, as Griffith has argued, in contrast to apologetic texts in Arabic, the Syriac texts “necessarily served only the internal purposes of the Christian communities in the caliphate, being largely unintelligible to anyone else.” Another aspect when comparing Syriac and Arabic texts (and particularly interesting for our upcoming investigation of disputation) is a comparison of intention. While apologetic works in Arabic and Syriac both might come in the form of interconfessional dialogue – like Disputation –, one cannot presume that this means that the Syriac texts carries any intention to encourage such dialogue. It rather seems that their most important function is “to draw the lines of disagreement more clearly.”

---

176 Penn, When Christians First Met Muslims, 10.
177 Ibid., 11.
178 Ibid.
180 The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic, 272.
demarcation, a more visible Christian community can take shape. Thus, Griffith’s survey confirms that texts in Syriac had an exclusively Christian audience in mind.

Griffith argues for a heightened appreciation of the difference in the tone of a text.\(^{181}\) While Griffith’s scheme is applied on a comparison between (later, ’Abbasid) apologetics in Syriac and Arabic, I nevertheless believe that we could profit from a briefer look at the collection of Syriac text through this prism of tone.

Take for example the seventh century text *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* depictions of Muslims:

> They devastated, captured, and enslaved all the nation’s kingdoms. The entire Promised Land came under their control. The land was filled with them and their camps. They went about like locusts. They were naked, ate flesh in vessels of flesh, and drank animals’ blood.\(^{182}\)

While *Disputation* also states that Christians had previously been conquered and led away by Muslims like sheep to the slaughter,\(^ {183}\) it gives a more balanced portrait of quite settled, cordial relations, as to a relatively peaceful “neighbor”. There is an obvious difference in the language. As it turns out, this is representative for the development in Syriac texts, from the beginning of the Arab/Islamic conquest (*Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*) toward texts from later stages of the Islamization of Syria and Iraq (*Disputation*).\(^ {184}\) That is to say, the shifting depiction of Muslims in Syriac texts correlates with the changing circumstances for the Syriac Christians.\(^ {185}\) Thus, Syriac Christians, as time passes, begin to see that the Muslims have come to stay. From this growing realization about the abiding presence of Islam, there is a shift in the depiction of Muslims that corresponds with a change of genre: Muslims go from barely receiving mention in early *chronicles* to becoming the driving factor in bringing about the end in eschatological writings of the 7\(^{th}\) and early 8\(^{th}\) century.

---

\(^{181}\) That is to say, Griffith points out how apologetical texts from various linguistic traditions (Greek, Latin, Syriac and Arabic) and time periods, applies a different level of ridicule and rhetoric in their descriptions of Muslims, which he understands to reflect the immediate circumstance of the authors. For example, Greek texts, in particular, seems to set out to discredit Islam and ridicule it when possible, while later Syriac texts are rather polite and demonstrate an informed view of Muslims and Islam. Ibid., 272ff. The ‘tone’ then, amounts to the descriptions and language in the portrait of Muslims.


\(^{183}\) §55 *Disputation*.

\(^{184}\) When we speak of Syriac text from the of the time of Early Islam, we in general deal with text written in areas that today make up Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Iran and by authors who were Miaphysite, Maronite and East Syrian Christians. See Penn, *When Christians First met Muslims*, 6.

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 9.
If we then look at the last decades of the 7th century, a gradual shift can be noted in the Syriac Christian depictions of Muslims and Islam. This is the time right after the assassination of 'Uthmān – a time of great turmoil for both the ruling and the ruled classes. This is reflected in the Syriac accounts from the time as well. For example, there is the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem, most probably composed sometime before the mid-680s:

They will take a wife from her husband
and slaughter her like a lamb
They will cast an infant from his mother
and drive the mother into captivity
The child will cry out from the earth
his mother will hear, but what can she do?
For he will be trapped by the feet
of hoses, camels and infantry.186

The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem is a rather long poem in the Syriac tradition of memrā, which is the verse homily structure associated with the great and probably most famous Syriac writer, Ephrem the Syrian (d. 363).187 The poem is probably one of the most important sources when we speak of early depictions of Muslims. However, even if the depiction is rather negative, to say the least, Muslims still remain on the sideline as eschatological figures. The presence of Muslims qua Muslims is still not established, it seems.

As we move toward the eight century, Muslims will take on a much more dominant role in the Syriac apocalypses.188 It is only then, post fitna, that Syriac accounts move towards a depiction of Islam as an independent religious tradition.189 Perhaps not surprising if we keep the reforms of al-Malik in mind – this is the time of public religious proclamations in the name of Islam.

The Apocalypse of John the Little is one such text, with its date of composition (most likely) around the early eight century.190 While previous Syriac writings emphasized the “transitory nature of their conquerors’ rule,”191 The Apocalypse of John the Little designates the Islamic conquest as the fourth kingdom in the schema of the book of Daniel.192 The Muslims are here

186 Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem, Cited in Penn, When Christians First Met Muslims, 43.
187 Ibid., 37.
188 Ibid., 38.
189 Ibid., 12.
190 Penn, When Christians First Met Muslims, 146.
191 Ibid., 147.
192 Ibid., 146.
to stay, it now seems, and they are here as a part of God’s will: in the words of *John the Little* “their kingdom and their authority are from God.”\(^{193}\) In terms of tone, the *Apocalypse of John the Little* depicts Muslims as “hideous in appearance, whose appearance and conduct are like those of women,” and “hypocrites who do not know God or respect anyone except for the profligate, and fornicators, the evil and the wrathful.”\(^{194}\)

The *Chronicle of Disasters* is another text in which “Sons of Ishmael” are depicted as instruments in God’s chastisement for Christian sin,\(^{195}\) i.e. they rule by the will of God:

\[
\text{[This occurred] so that they would repent for their sins and become terrified of what has been written: Christ, the word of God and the Father, also spoke to the stubborn and hardhearted people of the Jews. "Do you think," he said, ‘that those upon you whom the tower in Siloam collapsed were more sinful than you? Truly I say to you, unless you repent, you will perish like them”} \text{\(^{196}\)}
\]

\(^{193}\) *Apocalypse of John the Little*, Cited in Ibid., 154.

\(^{194}\) Ibid.

\(^{195}\) Ibid., 192.

\(^{196}\) *Chronicle of Disasters*, Cited in Ibid., 195.
3. The Text of *Disputation*

3.1 The Manuscript and Date of Compilation

The where and when of *Disputation* remains a contested issue. We are left with qualified guesses in the absence of solid evidence. *Disputation* itself claims to be a written record of an exchange between a notable Muslim and a Christian monk that would have taken place at the monastery of Bēṭ Ḥālē in the time of an emir by the name of Maslama, whom the Muslim protagonist served under.\(^{197}\) There is no reason to doubt that such a dialogue took place, but to situate it in time and place proves difficult.

Looking at the extant manuscripts of *Disputation* will unfortunately not bring us any closer to a convincing date of compilation for it. The text is found in four known manuscripts from the 15th, 16th, 19th and 20th century respectively. These dates are obviously late, but our text shares the fate of many writings from the Eastern Christianity – hostility, occupations and war has left their mark on history in so many ways.\(^{198}\) The translation I have been reliant on, from Taylor, is in its entity based on *Diyarbakir Chaldean Archbishopric ms. 95 (olim)*, now preserved in the Chaldean cathedral of Mardin, Turkey. It is also accessible through the Hill Museum and Monastic Library online.\(^{199}\)

*Disputation* states that the Monk belongs to a monastery called Bēṭ Ḥālē. There are two monasteries that go by this name in the 7th, 8th and 9th century, and both belong to the Church of the East. The first, and less the likely alternative, is a rather unknown one, located on the bank of Tigris in northern Iraq, close to Mosul. This monastery, which also goes by its Arabic name of Dair aṭ Ṭīn, clashed with the church hierarchy and there are no records of it after 780.\(^{200}\) The second and perhaps more likely option is a much more famous monastery in the north-west deserts of Ḥīra and Kūfā. This monastery was founded in the mid-7th century and lasted till at least the 11th century.\(^{201}\)

---

\(^{197}\) Reinink argues in his paper that one “should not doubt the historicity of the visit of the emir Maslama’s notable to the monastery.” See Reinink, *Bible and Qur’an in early Syriac Christian-Islamic disputation*, 57.

\(^{198}\) Taylor, *Disputation*, 10.

\(^{199}\) See www.vhmml.org/readingRoom and the reference number CCM 00398.

\(^{200}\) Taylor, *Disputation*, 3.

\(^{201}\) The second monastery is also referred to as the monastery of Mar Ṭabdā (after Mar Ṭabdā the elder, disciple of Mar Babai the Scribe who had a vision about the monastery some 70 years before it was founded). It is also known as the monastery of Ma arrē (meaning the caves) after the stories of how the founder of the monastery, Mar Ḥūḏāhwī, buried the remains of Mar Ṭabdā and Mar Babai in the caves on which the monastery was built. Taylor, *Disputation*, 3.
That the Muslim protagonist is said to serve under Maslama makes the second option for monastery even more likely. Given that *Disputation* is a work of fiction, grounded more or less in reality, one could question the very name of Maslama to begin with. This is because Maslama could be, as Taylor has pointed out, a name chosen to simply refer to the Arab ruling elite, just as one could use King Henry or King Louis to refer to the English and French ruling elites respectively. However, there *was* a famous emir by the name of Maslama, who is widely accepted by the scholarly community as a good candidate. That would be Maslama the son of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (r.685-705). This Maslama died 738 C.E., is often referred to in Syriac chronicles, and owes his fame, for the most part, to the siege of Constantinople in 717-718 C.E. What makes this Maslama a good fit is that he was an important general in the Umayyad dynasty, and in particular because he for a brief time presided as governor of Iraq in the 720s. This would leave us with an early 8th century date of compilation of *Disputation*.

The choice of Maslama is not entirely unqualified, in other words. Further, if this Maslama would turn out to be an impossible candidate for the character in *Disputation*, the mere reference to an Umayyad is of importance. An Umayyad figure as historical marker would be a surprising choice of reference after 750 C.E. and the Abbasid revolution. Moreover, even if Maslama was an important general and two time governor, he was not prominent enough to have been an obvious choice by a later author. As Penn argues, a later author “would have alluded to a much more historically prominent individual than Maslama, a figure whom Christians were unlikely to have commonly remembered decades, not to say centuries, after his death.”

What further supports a pre-Abbasid dating is the Monk’s level of knowledge of Islam and the way in which the debate is said to be carried out. There are two major concerns here. First of all, *Disputation* is much less detailed on Islam than Syriac texts composed under the Abbasids. Second of all, the mere reference to the late Umayyad period also seems strange if one were to suspect a later author because of its insignificance. That is to say, if a later

---

202 Taylor, *Disputation*, see footnote 19, 4.
204 Taylor, *Disputation*, see footnote 21, 4
205 Ibid., 4.
206 Ibid.
208 Ibid.
209 Insignificance, because the memory of the Umayyads were not one that earned any further praise in the later courts of the Abbasids.
author would have wanted to lend authority to a text, he would perhaps more likely have done like the author of Disputation of John and the Emir, who sets the scene in the 7th century and the earliest time of Christian-Muslim encounters.\footnote{Penn, When Christians First Met Muslims, 215. Further, The Disputation of John and the Emir claims to be a conversation between a Miaphysite patriarch of Antioch and a Muslim leader in the early 7th century. However, scholarly consensus is that it is more likely a 8th century text. See Penn When Christians First Met Muslims, 201.}

Third, Disputation does not reveal any further impression of the Muslim way of doing theology and apologetics. This is significant, because when one compares Disputation to works from the mid-9th century and later, it becomes clear that the later has gone through a kind of Muslim metamorphosis. For example, Nonnus of Nisibis (d. ca. 870 C.E.) was a bilingual writer, credited for composing works in both Arabic and Syriac. His texts in Syriac, and thus texts “for Christian eyes alone,”\footnote{Ibid.} are very much Christian works in a Muslim way; “he expresses his thinking very much in the idiom of the Muslim mutakallimun\footnote{Ibid.} of his day.”\footnote{Griffith, Disputing with Islam in Syriac, 53} Nonnus of Nisibis shows how Christian theology by the mid-9th century “had become thoroughly acculturated to the intellectual milieu of the Muslims.”\footnote{Griffith, In the Shadow of the Mosque, 85. See also: Griffith, The Beginning of Christian Theology in Arabic, 162.} The style of Disputation, on the other hand, does not carry any of these features, while mid-9th century texts on the whole mark “a step beyond the apologetic style of the monk of Bêt Ḥālē.”\footnote{Ibid.} All of which supports an earlier date of composition for Disputation.

A further point in support of an early dating of Disputation are the references to the Qurʾān in the text. In §48 we find the monk referring to the Qurʾān and the sūra of the Cow, and sūra of the Spider, and the sūra of Repentance. Disputation seems to assume that these three sūras do not belong to the canon of the Qurʾān. This is a point on which I will comment on in more detail below, but we should for now note that this puts Disputation in the middle of the compilation and canonization process of the Qurʾān, which would necessarily make Disputation an early 8th century text.\footnote{Griffith, The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic, 115-138.}
In sum, the above reasons have led many scholars to conclude on a pre-Abbasid dating for *Disputation*, i.e. after 710, but before 750.\(^{216}\)

There are, however, some lacunae in this early dating of *Disputation*. When ʿAbdisho of Nisibis (d.1318) referred to *Disputation* in his catalogue of Syriac literature, he referred to the monk as one “Abraham of Bēt Ḥālē.”\(^{217}\) While there are several other Abrahams referred to in the context of a monastery in 8\(^{th}\) century Iraq, Taylor, amongst others, makes the argument that Abraham is a very unlikely name for a monk in the Church of the East in the 8\(^{th}\) century.\(^{218}\)

Further, Sergius Baḥira is mentioned in the context of being the tutor of Muḥammad in §34 of *Disputation*: “…Muḥammad, because he saw your childishness and your lack of knowledge, he first caused you to know the one true God, – teaching which he received from Sergius Baḥira.” Of course, in both Christian and Muslim tradition, Sergius Baḥira is the monk who recognizes Muḥammad’s prophetic status as according to the 9\(^{th}\) century *The Legend of Sergius Bahira*.\(^{219}\) Many have taken this to mean that *Disputation* necessarily postdates the current scriptural evidence of the Legend, and leaves *Disputation* to a date of compilation at the early 10\(^{th}\) century.\(^{220}\) However, if *Disputation* really is an 8\(^{th}\) century text, it is by far the earliest reference to Sergius Baḥira and would mean that the Legend circulated as a story long before it was written down.\(^{221}\)

Another aspect that problematizes an early date for *Disputation* is the Monk’s implication that there are non-Muslim kings in the South. This is said in a context where the question of whether God is on one’s side or not is of the utmost importance. The Muslim argues that the Arab/Islamic conquest is a “sign that God loves us, and is pleased with our religion, that he has given us authority over all faiths and all people,” (§9 *Disputation*). The monk is quick to explain that kingship and ruling the lands of the earth is not at all a measure of whether one is chosen by God or not, and that in fact, Muslims are not ruling the South.\(^{222}\) However, “the South,” which would from the perspective of Bēt Ḥālē have meant middle and southern Iran, as well as the

---

\(^{216}\) Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 215.

\(^{217}\) Taylor, *Disputation*, 3. See footnote 12 for further readings on Abdisho of Nisibis.

\(^{218}\) Ibid., 3f.

\(^{219}\) See Roggema *The Legend of Sergius Bahira*.

\(^{220}\) The first scriptural evidence for *The Legend* is from Thomas Artūrsuni and Masʿūdī, both writing in the 10th century. See Hoyland, *Islam as Others Saw It*, 472.

\(^{221}\) For further discussion see Taylor *Disputation*, 9.

\(^{222}\) See §10 and §56 *Disputation*. 

---

48
Iranian banks of the Caspian Sea, had all fallen under Muslim control already from the mid 650s/early 700s. Taylor points to how these areas additionally were episcopal sees of the Church of the East and that there was a continued Christian presence even after the Arab/Islamic conquest. There were even several new monasteries established in the areas in the early 8th century. One could of course question the level of communication between monasteries and church authorities at the time, but it is highly unlikely that an 8th century monk would have been oblivious to the fact that these areas were under Muslim rule. Taylor thus puts forward the argument that it is much more likely that the author writes Disputation centuries after the time of Maslama, and is simply oblivious about the political history of the south, because otherwise he would not be conjecturing wrongly that these areas were free from Islamic rule at the time.

There is, however, one last argument for a relatively early dating of Disputation, one Taylor suggests in the introduction to his translation. His theory has to be further investigated, but, if accepted, it would place Disputation somewhere at the end of the 8th century. Taylor, as several other scholars, is perplexed over Disputation’s mention of the Romans having four kings (“in the territory of the Romans four kings reign” §10). Taylor has looked to numismatics for answers. First, the Byzantine emperor Leo IV (r. 775-780) had gold coins, solidi, made with the portrait of himself side by side with his son Constantine VI. Later, after a Byzantine victory over the Arabs, Leo IV had a new solidus minted with the portrait of himself and his son, but this time on a double throne. Both the solidi had two busts on each side of the solidus. Taylor suggests that these coins found their way east partly through the usual travel of coins through trade and plunder - gold is gold is gold. But there is also a specific occasion that would make it reasonable to assume that our 8th century monk had seen these solidi in his monastery at Bēt Ḥālē. Al-Ṭabari notes in his writings from the early Abbasid period, that Byzantine Empress regnant Iren (d.803), widow of Leo IV, paid copious tribute to the Arabs after a serious defeat (782) at the hands of the Syrian armies, led by Hārūn (r. 786-806) the son of al-Mahdi (r. 775-785). “So it is certain that vast quantities of Byzantine currency, presumably including numbers of coins minted during the reign of the recently deceased Leo IV, were travelling east at this period.”

223 Taylor, Disputation, 8f.
225 Ibid., 9.
of four different kings. It is a theory that could prove difficult to confirm, but it is not entirely
unbelievable and would strengthen an 8th century dating of Disputation.

Dating this text, then is not an easy matter, and I have given the main arguments for and against
an early dating. My thesis does not directly hinge upon an early dating, but I find the evidence
for at least a pre-Abbasid origin, that is, before 750, and even 710-720s, as quite compelling.

3.2. Synopsis and Basic Structure

An outline of the basic structure of Disputation will help our understanding of the text. The
paragraph numbering comes from Taylor’s translation.

§1: Preface
§2: Intro
§3-9: Muslim states his curiosity with the Christian faith
§10: On the fact of Muslim rule
§13-19: On the fidelity of Abraham and the meaning of the commandments
§20-26: On Christ
§27-28: On the Trinity
§29-34: On the statutes and teachings of Muḥammad
§35-50: On the meaning and use of the cross, icons and relics
§51-52: On Christians praying toward the East
§53-59: On the superiority of the Christian faith and the nature of the conquest
§60: Epilogue and doxology

Disputation (drāšā)226 stages, as mentioned, an account of a dialogue (or erotapokriseis)227
between a monk and a Muslim. The monk makes it clear in the preface to the dialogue that he
has written it all down as a courtesy to a certain “father Jacob,” who had requested an account
of the debate, since this would be “profitable” and “useful,”(§1 Disputation). The shared
premise of the text – a dialogue between a monk and a Muslim – in and of itself lends little
evidence for the historical credibility of the plot: “the figure of a monk as the literary protagonist
for the Christian side in the Christian-Muslim controversies of the early Islamic period was a

226 Drāšā is the genre of disputation. For its particular use in the East Syrian Church see the discussion in Walker,
Joel Thomas. The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq. The
227 Erotapokriseis is the East Syrian genre of answer and question format and was used in connection with teaching
in schools. The combination of Erotapokriseis and drāšā in relation to Christian-Muslim controversy was made
famous with Theodore bar Kōnī and his Scholion. See Griffith, Sidney H. “Chapter Ten of the Scholion: Theodore
commonplace.”  However, as noted earlier, it still represents questions and prejudices that Christians faced from Muslims, and is thus of historical value.

The dialogue is organized in a question and answer format. The Muslim asks rather short and simple questions to the monk, and the monk answers with lengthier explanations defending Christian faith, its doctrines and practices. At times, the monk will pass the questions back to the Muslim, but I mainly read this as an attempt to uphold the impression of a dialogue. After all, how credible is it that a true dialogue partner would accept any argument without either objections or follow-up questions the way the Muslim in *Disputation* does? Thus, the whole conversation ends with the Muslim’s capitulation, through his proclaiming; “I testify that if it were not for fear of the government, and public shame, many would become Christians. But as for you, may you be blessed by God, for you have given me great ease through your speech with me,” (§59 *Disputation*). The dialogue and discussion as such (initial incredulity is immediately stilled by the monk’s answers) calls the dialogue between Sergius Bahīrā and Muḥammad to mind.

Griffith points out how the very list of themes dealt with in *Disputation* reveals something significant about the state of theology at the time. There is an “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.” Equally important is the fact, according to Griffith, that in *Disputation*, as well as other early dispute texts in Syriac, we note the seeds for the later and enormously influential genre of apologetic works in Arabic:

> 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.

---

231 Griffith, *Disputing with Islam in Syriac*, 39. This observation could also witness to the Eastern Christian insistence on theology as always rooted in praxis, more exactly in Christian prayer.
232 Ibid., 42.
Nevertheless, the setting of the text is, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a monastery to which the Muslim has come in order to rest. One wonders if the scene, or its backdrop, plays a role in giving the story some credibility to a potential Muslim audience. Muhammad kept the Christian monastery in high esteem,\textsuperscript{233} and this might indicate that the text was also groomed for a Muslim audience.

In an extended part of the preface, the monk explains that the Muslim requested the meeting after being highly impressed by the persistence in the monks prayer and worship: “you surpass us in prayer,” (§3 Disputation). This marks a not altogether insignificant comment; we are to know from the very beginning that Christian prayer is superior.\textsuperscript{234} However, when the Muslim insists that “your religion will not allow your prayer to be received (by God),” (§4 Disputation), the monk requests them to continue their speech without a middleman, the translator, who had previously been with them. There is a tangible asymmetry of power between them, but in the search for truth they will speak as equals, and the monk invites the Muslim to “speak out about anything whose truth you doubt” and he will “provide an answer ... from the Scriptures, or from rational argument,” (§6 Disputation).

Now, the first topic concerns the Muslim’s claim that God has given Islam “authority over all faiths and all peoples,” (§9 Disputation), and the question of divinely mandated governance is discussed at length. But what concerns us here is how one perhaps can understand this first objection as a prism through which we can understand the whole text: the Muslim makes the claim that this fact is the prime sign that God loves them. At the same time, the monk refutes his argument and shows how the Muslim’s claim to world rule just is not possibly true: “you sons of Ishmael, you control a small part of the earth, and it is not the case that the whole of creation is subjected to your authority,” (§10 Disputation). And by this we are given the agenda: the sons of Ishmael make exaggerated and rash judgments, which the monk will set straight.

\textsuperscript{233} As in Sūra Al-Maʾidah: «you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, ‘We are Christians.’ That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant.» (Q 5:82).

\textsuperscript{234} That a superior Muslim acknowledges and praises a Christian is a common theme in Christian texts from this time. It seems to be a pattern that Christian apologists made the point that the integrity of their communities was intact even if they were clearly discriminated against. For example: “Muslim rulers are always presented as granting protection to the Christians as a token of approval and admiration.” And should perhaps be understood as an argument that “grew in direct response to calls for conversion.” Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Bahirā, 116.
The previous chapter *On Syriac Works* made it clear that there are several works in Syriac which predate *Disputation*, and that some of them even deal indirectly or directly with the encounter with Muslims. Uniquely, however, *Disputation* more than any previous writing uses explicit religious and theological terminology when dealing with Muslims.\(^{235}\) In the text the Muslim uses religious concepts such as faith (*haymanuta*), confession (*tawdita*) and doctrine (*re’yana*) when he comments and discusses Christian faith and practice. The monk, on the other side, never uses these particular words, which carry such religious connotations, when he discusses the Muslim’s faith and practice. This means that “although aware that Muslims professed to have a distinctive religion, the author took care never to legitimate these claims”\(^{236}\) In the words of Penn: “*Disputation* represents a pivotal moment of Syriac conceptualization of their conquerors in which Syriac authors more fully depicted their conquerors as having a religious system that challenged Christianity.”\(^{237}\) In *Disputation*, Islam is made a “direct theological threat to Christianity.”\(^{238}\) In the following chapters, I will unfold this developmental milepost through an analysis of the text.

### 3.3. What is a Dispute Text?

It has at this point been established that *Disputation* is a Christian text for a Christian audience. Both the language in which it is written and the way in which it is written imply this. What is it then that makes *Disputation* an apology? And what is a dispute text?

Dispute is made up by the two Latin words *dis* meaning “apart” and *putō* “I reckon.”\(^{239}\) A dispute text as genre is thus necessarily a text in which two sides’ arguments are met.\(^{240}\) The tradition of dispute texts in the Christian tradition is a long one.\(^{241}\) At the time of the rise of Islam, Christians had already engaged in Jewish-Christian dispute texts for over a half a millennium.\(^{242}\) Not to mention the pedagogy of question and answer which we find used by

---

\(^{235}\) Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 73.

\(^{236}\) Ibid.

\(^{237}\) Ibid., 69.

\(^{238}\) Ibid., 70.


\(^{240}\) In the Syriac tradition known as the genre of *drāšā* (in disputation, *ʿqb*), which is defined, in words of Bar Bahlül, as “investigation and debate concerning something of which there is controversy, which take place with the aim of improvement. It is conducted by question and answer and in a didactic manner, or again in sophistic structure, questions (responded to) by question.” In Duval, R. “1888–1901. Lexicon Syriacum Auctore Hassano Bar Bahlule, 1–3.” Paris: Reipublicæ Typographæo, n.d., 595-596.

\(^{241}\) *Drāšā* as investigation and debate. See Taylor, *Disputation*, footnote 74,13.

Aristotle’s predecessors, the Sophists and the Rhetors. Still, there is one very important difference between the Jewish-Christian and the Christian-Muslim dispute texts, which concerns the question of its roots in real life situations. We have already covered the difficulty between historical texts and their correspondence to reality in our chapter on method. However, we do need to understand that while Jewish-Christian dispute texts almost always were one-sided, Christian-Muslim dispute texts and apologetical writings “seem to derive from real debate.” This is best exemplified when the argument of one author (one side) is refuted by another author (other side), but as the later discussion of Disputation will reveal, even one-sided Christian apologetic dispute texts seem to intend a representation of the other sides’ argument, albeit in a simplified manner.

Apologetics argue for and about identity. This much we have covered previously. There is, however, an extra layer of identity-making to Christian Apologetics, besides the most obvious one. While Disputation clearly is Christian apologetics in the face of the Muslim challenge, it might be just as much about a Christian construction of Islam. Because, if the challenge for the Church was apostasy – which seems to have been rather great in the 8th century: “Syriac-speaking writers of the oriental churches from the eighth through the thirteenth centuries … 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” – then the important task becomes to discern and correctly describe what Islam is and is not.

3.3.1. Justin Martyr as Comparative Case
Daniel Boyarin has given us some tools to think about apologetics with, in his study of the early apologist Justin Martyr and his dialogue with the Jewish philosopher Trypho. Boyarin is to the study of the relationship between Jewish and Christian culture what Griffith is for the concomitant study of Syriac and Arabic cultural relations, in that they both stress the importance of interaction between the two “opposites” in order to gain a more sound understanding of the nature of how they relate to each other, if they do this at all. In order to shed light on these relationships, one needs to “think of much more complex ways” in which interaction has taken

244 Hoyland, Introduction, xxxi.
245 Examples of this are given in Ibid., xxxi.
246 Griffith, Disputing in Syriac, 30.
place during crucial times of development within a given religious tradition, because, “[m]any of the new elements can be shown to be shared by both religious groups, and the direction of ‘influence’ is not only one-way.” Boyarin’s hypothesis for the study of Jewish-Christian relations, is that

“[t]here was much more going on … in the interaction between nascent Jewish Christian orthodoxies than argument, dialogue, and debate between intellectuals, indeed much more than confrontation. I hypothesize that we should rather think of complex dialectical processes of negotiations of difference and sameness, sameness masked as difference and sometimes difference that appear as sameness.”

Boyarin supplies us with an example of such a complex dialectical process in his reading of Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho. Of course, the Dialogue is of an entirely different time, and Boyarin’s thesis only goes so far when applied to a Christian-Muslim context, but there is something to be said about the two-fronted mission of Justin that Boyarin sees that echoes in Disputation. This is not that surprising, after all, since Christian-Muslim literature “clearly grew out of the anti-Jewish literature.”

One could on the whole say that Justin’s literary product offers a Christian self-definition. Justin secures a religious identity. He does this by “establishing a binary opposition between the Christian and the Jew over the question of the Logos” and in this he “accomplished two purposes at once.” Namely, by rooting Christian identity in matters of theology – the Logos as a second divine person – he accomplished a double construction of Jew and heretic: the ones who do not believe in the (divine, incarnate) Logos are not Christians but heretics. Jews cannot believe in this Logos, and therefore a Jew is at fault not only for belonging to Judaism, but also for being a heretic. As Boyarin argues: “If Christian identity is theological, then orthodoxy must be at the very center of its articulation, and for Justin belief in the Logos as a second divine person is the touchstone of that cater, the very core of his religion.”

---

248 Ibid., 577.
249 Ibid., 581.
250 «According to tradition, the text, written in Rome in the 160s, presents itself as the record of a conversation that Justin held with a Jew in Ephesus, Trypho by the name, some time in the late 130s.» Ibid., 581.
251 Hoyland, Introduction, xxxi.
252 Boyarin, Border Lines, 38.
253 Ibid., 39.
254 Logos theology as such is native to Judaism. For further discussion see Ibid., 89-127.
255 Ibid., 39.
256 Boyarin, Border Lines, 39.
The discussion of heresy in late antiquity surely deserves to be treated with the utmost precision and care, which I cannot achieve here. Boyarin’s reading is interesting, however, since the observation that the Christian apologist Justin might just have executed two projects at once and that “these two projects overlapped and were imbricated on each other – like tiles on a Mediterranean roof – so as finally to be, if not indistinguishable, impossible without each other.”

I would like to suggest a similar reading of Disputation: the monk writing is about Christian identity and his mission is two-folded. On the one hand he seeks to protect the faith from Muslim influences and in extension of he defines what Islam is. On the other hand, he distinguishes his own group from other Christian communities. It is precisely because of this double pursuit that we find that Syriac sources such as Disputation can be quite accommodating towards Islam on some points. In the end it is a project of distinction, aiming at stabilizing one’s own identity from external threats be they Muslim or Christian.

3.4. The Cow, the Spider and Repentance - A Contribution to the Revisionist Debate?

Disputation contains an interpretative puzzle that bears particularly on the question of the Qurʾān’s compilation. There is, as mentioned earlier, a fair amount of doubt as to how one should interpret the monk’s following reference to the Qurʾān and the sūra of the Cow and gwāga and tawba:

The Monk says: I believe that in your case also, Muhammad did not teach you all your laws and your commandments in the Qurʾān, but there are some of them which you learned from the Qurʾān, and some of them are in the Sūra of the Cow, and in (that of) the Spider [gwāgay] and in (that of) Repentance [tawba]. So also in our case, some of the commandments our Lord taught us, and some of them the Holy Spirit spoke though the mouth of the Apostles his servants, and some of them he set up thought the teachers (of the church), and he showed us the way of life and path of light. (§48 Disputation).

The pressing question here – beside the reference to the sūra of the Cow as independent from the compiled Qurʾān – concerns how one should to read gwāgay and tawba. The monk seems to think of all three as independent texts from the Qurʾān and it raises the question whether

257 Boyarin, Border Lines, 40.
258 See, Penn Envisioning Islam, 185.
parts of the Qur’an circulated in Christian communities at the time. However, an investigation of this would demand a comprehensive look at all references to (independent) sūras in writings of Christian authors, something that falls outside the scope of this thesis. Now, concerning gwāgay and tawba: One could follow Taylor’s interpretation and understand them as references to two further (still at that time) independent circulating sūras: The Spider (sūra al-ʿAnkabut) and Repentance (sūra at-Tawba). Or one could adopt the more generally recognized hypothesis to consider them references to two additional works, namely the Gospel and Torah.

Taylor discusses in his edition of Disputation an unpublished text by Han Drijvers259 in which Drijvers suggests that G-Y-G-Y is a reference to the Gospel and T-W-R-H the Torah. The text in Syriac has G-Y-G-Y (including vowels: gwāgay) and T-W-R-H (including vowels: tawba).260 G-Y-G-Y is, according to Drijvers hypothesis, a Syriac transcription of Arabic word for gospel; injīl. However, injīl has been corrupted over time which has produced the Syriac G-Y-G-Y. This might initially seem like an explanatory leap, but the scenario is not difficult to imagine, since a lot happens to a text as it is passed by from one hand to another. T-W-R-H on the other hand resembles the Syriac word for Torah more closely (tawba) and this half of the theory does not in itself present any difficulties.

Taylor voices three major objections to this theory and responds to them: 1) Why would the monk use an Arabic term for gospel when he uses the Syriac term for Gospel elsewhere in the text (§18, §30, §58)?; and 2) The Qur’ānic order when referring to these two text is Torah and Gospel, as in sūra al Maʿidah: “Say, O People of the Scripture, you are standing on nothing until you uphold the law of the Torah, the Gospel, and what has been revealed to you from your Lord." (Q 5:68, italics mine). Taylor thus argues that it cannot simply be a question of echoing a common reference to sacred scripture; 3) The verb that Taylor translates to “some which you learned from” is ʿaleptôn “you taught” which he corrects to ʿileptôn “you learned” because “[i]t is possible to read the monk’s reply as implying that Muḥammad was responsible not only for the Qur’ān, but for these other texts too.”261 Reading G-Y-G-Y and T-W-R-H as Gospel and Torah would of course not make sense if “you taught” is the intended meaning and use of ʿaleptôn, which leaves Taylor to read you learned and thus sūra al-ʿAnkabut and sūra at-Tawba.

---

259 Taylor, Disputation, 5. The discussion is based on an Oxford Patristic Conference paper in 1991, in which Drijvers discusses the meaning, interpretation and translation of the two words.
260 Syriac is originally written in a non-consonantal text, i.e. the vowels are omitted.
261 Taylor, Disputation, 5f.
On the other hand, Drijvers and Griffith\(^{262}\) argue that one should prefer the translation that offers the least philological difficulty,\(^{263}\) which would leave us with “Gospel” and “Torah.” However, Griffith affirms that one needs the fuller context – described through thematic, methodological and hermeneutical approaches – to shed light on the conundra of ancient texts.\(^{264}\) Only an investigation of her tacit presuppositions can save the scholar from operating in a vacuum:

For the ingenuity of the philologist can all too readily manipulate the linguistic materials into possible grammatical and lexical formulations solely on the basis of philological or orthographic considerations which leave out of account that degree of historical or cultural probability which is requisite for plausibility.\(^{265}\)

That is to say, “purely grammatical or etymological readings of words and phrases … must be supported by reference to a thematic context which would make them not only possible and plausible, but in all likelihood the carriers of the authentic, originally intended meaning.”\(^{266}\)

One such context for the reading of G-Y-G-Y and T-W-R-H is found in the 8\(^{th}\) century theologian John of Damascus, and *The Legend of Sergius Bahira*.

Taylor thinks, as mentioned earlier, that the reference to “the Cow” must be reliant on the legend of Sergius Bahira.\(^{267}\) However, *The Legend of Sergius Bahira* is not the only one referring to *al-baqara* as a separate independent work and source of revelation. John of Damascus (d. 754) too refers to a certain “heifer” in his text *De haeresibus* (chapter 101, book III in the extensive theological work *Pēgē Gnōseōs*, Fount of Knowledge). He writes: “This Muḥammad … composed many frivolous tales, to each of which he assigned a name … he mentions the text of the Cow and several other foolish and ludicrous things which, because of their number, I think I should pass over.”\(^{268}\)

The reference to Islam in *De haeresibus* has perplexed scholars for a long time, partly for its (mildly put) irreverent descriptions of Muslims, but also because “if genuinely by John of Damascus, \(^{262}\) Griffith, *Disputing with Islam in Syriac*, 47.
\(^{263}\) See Griffith’s discussion on the topic in Ibid., 47f.
\(^{264}\) Griffith articulates his argument in the context of a discussion of the underlying Syriac in the Qur‘ān, but it extends logically to our discussion.
\(^{266}\) Ibid.
\(^{267}\) Taylor, *Disputation*, 9.
Damascus, it represents the earliest Greek polemical writing against Islam.” Many have considered Damascus’ placing of Islam in a list of heresies to mean that he understood Islam to be a Christian heresy. But the list contains several non-Christian heresies, or more accurately pre-Christian heresies, such as Barbarism, Hellenism and Judaism. “Evidently, then, the term [heresy] simply signifies an erroneous belief or a false doctrine,” and not necessarily a Christian heresy.

It has been argued that John of Damascus’ reference to independent sūras – aside from sūra al-baqara, he refers to al-Nisā’ (Q:4) and al-Ma’idah (Q:5) – reflects John of Damascus missing knowledge of the Qurʾān; “John knew only the sūras he paraphrased.” However, Daniel Janosik makes the case in the article John of Damascus on the Qurʾān: Evidence for an 8th century Canonization, that since John spent an extensive time in the midst of the Umayyads serving the Muslim caliph at court, one can only presume that he was well informed on most things Islamic and that the selection in De haeresibus simply reflects an authorial deliberation.

Further, interpreting G-Y-G-Y and T-W-R-H as references to the two sūras The Spider and Repentance has also been rejected on the grounds that it would imply that the canonization process of the Qurʾān still was a work in progress at the time of Disputation. And if Disputation is a mid-8th century text, it would prove the officially held date of Qurʾānic canonization untenable. Islamic tradition claims that the Qurʾān was codified some twenty years after Muḥammad’s death through a “Uthmānic recension” by Muḥammad’s (hand-picked) companions in Medina and that the entirety of its content held “canonical status from the moment of revelation.” Western scholars have on the whole supported, or at least not fundamentally challenged, the traditional Muslim narrative, at least until the arrival of the Revisionists in the mid-20th century. Leading figures in the Revisionist school are John

269 And arguments for a later date is no longer tenable as we have a 9th century reference it to. However, authorship might still be a discussion. See Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It, 458.
270 Ibid.
272 Nevo, Crossroads to Islam, 14.
273 Böwering, Reconstructing the Quran, 74.
275 Wansbrough, John E., and Andrew Rippin. Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation. Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 2004; Cron &Cook, Hagarism; Rippin, Andrew. “Literary Analysis of Qurʾan,
Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook and Andrew Rippin, and they hold on the basis of meticulous analysis of the Qurʾān that it must be the product of a long work of compilation, at least decades perhaps even a century, after the claimed Uthmānic recension.276

The Revisionists’ findings are in no way undisputed. The same year Wansbrough published his famous work *Qurʾānic Studies*, John Burton’s *The Collection of the Qurʾān* was also published. The latter is a work that on the whole reaches the opposite conclusion of Wansbrough.277 Burton claims about the Qurʾān that “what we have today in our hands is the *muṣḥaf* of Muḥammad,” a text that “was already written down more or less as we now have it upon Muḥammad’s death, that is, some decades before the supposed Uthmānic recension.”278 The contrast to Wansbrough’s conclusion that the Qurʾān only emerged slowly over the course of not only decades but even centuries could not be stronger.

*Disputation*, then, offers, if not an answer to all questions, a contribution to the discussion about the compilation and canonization of the Qurʾān. It is at least clear that the objection to reading *Disputation* as referring to independent sūras is not altogether well-founded. *Disputation* could, on the basis on a philological analysis, provide an example of a mid-8th century text that refers to a not yet canonized Qurʾān. There is simply too much uncertainty in the field of Qurʾānic studies to conclude that that *Disputation* must be referring to the Gospel and Torah. *Disputation* could therefore, in the company of other Christian texts, be a credible witness to the world of Early Islam.

---

276 Donner, *The Qurʾān in Recent Scholarship*, 42.
277 Ibid.
278 Ibid.
4. Talking Points

4.1. Faith of the Fathers – Fidelity to Abraham

*Disputation* opens up with the explanation that our Monk has met with a ‘son of Ishmael’, (§1 *Disputation*). and this name is not altogether insignificant. Early Christian writers used the term ‘Ishmaelites’ for the Arab Bedouins from very early on, after the story of their origins in Genesis: “Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael,” (Gen 16:15). However, ‘Ishmaelites’ and ‘sons of Ishmael’ soon took on a derogatory meaning.\(^{279}\) Thus, when *Disputation* opens up with the reference to the Muslim as ‘son of Ishmael’, I believe that we are witnessing a rhetorical condescension: the monk defines the Muslim in terms of an unfavorable lineage. This could not have gone unnoticed by its intended audience. At any rate, the ensuing conversation shows how *Disputation* as an apologetic work, among other things, serves the two ends I have described above.

The topic discussion begins with the Muslim’s statement: “is our religion not better than all the (other) religions on earth?” (§7 *Disputation*). When asked by the monk to specify why this is the case, he declares that it is because “we are vigilant concerning the commandments of Muhammad and the sacrifices of Abraham,” (§9 *Disputation*). The question of fidelity to Abraham’s sacrifices is given ample space in the following debate and it reaches its climax with the words “why do you not believe in Abraham and in his commandments, even though he is the father of the prophets,” (§13 *Disputation*). ‘Father of Prophets’ was and is a very common title for Abraham in Islam.\(^{280}\) The Muslim then wonders, in particular, about the lack, as he sees it, of the Christian upholding of “circumcision and sacrifice,” (§15 *Disputation*).

What I find confounding here is the Syriac word used for *sacrifice*. We are right away made aware that by sacrifice the Muslim refers to the sacrifice/binding of Isaac (Gen 22), that is, the *Aqedah* in Jewish and Christian tradition. The Peshitta uses ‘*lḥ* (meaning burnt offering, sacrifice) in Gen 22:2: “offer him there as a burnt offering.” ‘*lḥ* would have been the natural choice of word if the association and reference was the *Aqedah* alone – ‘*lḥ* is even used both in the Peshitta and in the Torah.\(^{281}\)

---


\(^{280}\) Ibid., footnote 106, 19.

\(^{281}\) Burnt offering/ sacrifice in Hebrew is ‘*lḥ*, as used in the Torah, e.g. Gen 22:3: “he split wood for the sacrifice”, Targum Neofiti (http://cal.huc.edu/).
Another word for sacrifice also not used, but which would have been perhaps the obvious choice for the Muslim, is the Syriac qurbānā, and in Arabic, qurbanī. For the story of the Aqedah is also found in the Qurʾān in surā Aṣ-Ṣaffāt, and the word used for sacrifice there is qurbanī:

And when he reached with him [the age of] exertion, he said, "O my son, indeed I have seen in a dream that I [must] sacrifice you, so see what you think." He said, "O my father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, of the steadfast." And when they had both submitted and he put him down upon his forehead, We called to him, "O Abraham, You have fulfilled the vision." Indeed, We thus reward the doers of good. Indeed, this was the clear trial. And We ransomed him with a great sacrifice, And We left for him [favorable mention] among later generations: "Peace upon Abraham." (Q 37:102-109)

Further, in Islam, the feast commemorating this event is ʿīd al-ʾAḍḥā, to which the Muslim must be referring, (§15 Disputation). But qurbānā / qurbanī is not only known from the Muslim tradition. Qurbānā is used throughout the Peshitta, as in Matt 5:23-24:

If it should happen therefore that while you are presenting your offering upon the altar, and right there you remember that your brother has any grievance against you, leave your offering there upon the altar, and first go and make peace with your brother, and then come back and present your offering.”

And qurbānā is used for the Eucharist, the Liturgy as such. It could thus not have been the case that the author simply was not familiar with the correct word for sacrifice in Islam; his own church, his own scriptures, the Muslim’s scriptures and one of the most important feasts in Islam univocally refer to qurbānā. The author seems to deliberately have avoided to use the most fitting term for sacrifice – because instead we find that Abraham’s sacrifice in Disputation is spelled debḥāʾ, (d-b-h-’). This is noteworthy for several reasons.

282 It is not altogether unlikely that the Muslim is wondering why Christians are not taking part of the public and private celebrations of ʿĪd al-ʾAdḥā, perhaps it even caused some social tension. There are some Muslim sources on the importance of this feast and how the sacrifice of animals and public prayer played out in the public sphere. For example; in Abbasid times, “the sacrificed animals was sent to friends and relatives and especially to the poor people,” and the festival was celebrated “with great pomp; new clothes were put on, people bestowed presents on one another, and two rak‘as of congregational prayer were offered in the same manner as in the ʿĪd al-Fitr.” Manazir, Ahsan Muhammad. Social Life under the Abbasids. Londres, Longman, 1979., 342.

283 Qurbānā is the main word used for the Eucharist in Easter Christianity. Qurbānā, the Liturgy; Holy Communion, Payne Smith, 517., Qurbānā as in to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice, Costaz, Louis. Syriac-English Dictionary. Imprimerie Catholique, Beyrouth, 1963, 329.

284 There are several instances in Disputation where the popper term is avoided in order to avoid giving credit to Islamic faith. The use of tawdītā (confession) is another such example. The monk take care to not use this noun in connection to the Muslim faith and confession whereas he uses it in connection to Abraham and the Christian faith (§2, §52) Which leaves us with the impression that the author simply does not want to acknowledge the Islamic faith as tawdītā, which of course should be understood as an apologetical move. For further discussion of tawdītā see Reinink, Bible and Qurʾan in early Syriac Christian-Islamic disputation, 57-72.
In the Syriac tradition, *debḥāʾ* is preliminary used about the sacrifice of the Holy Eucharist as in “the holy, the reasonable and spiritual sacrifice.” But *debḥāʾ* is also used for “our Lord” which is “the sacrifice for all.” Interpreting the *Aqedah* as a type for the Passion has a long tradition in the Christian tradition, and we will look more closely at this below. First, however, why has the author avoided the two more reasonable words for sacrifice, and opted for a third version, *debḥāʾ*, which only could have carried Christian connotations? I believe we are given a hint in the Monk’s answer, in his subsequent exegesis of the sacrifice:

> But like a shadow in the place of a body, and speech in relation to a deed, so also is the guidance of our father Abraham in relation to the new things which Christ preformed for the salvation of our lives. (§16 Disputation)

By using *debḥāʾ* the monk doubles the binding of Isaac with the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, and by *debḥāʾ* he effectively draws a line against Islam (and Judaism too). By denoting Abraham’s sacrifice as *debḥāʾ*, he points it to Jesus Christ, which he explicates in the subsequent typological exegesis, where Abraham is made a type for Christ. “This typological exegesis of the Old Testament (and creation), in which types or symbols find their fulfilment in Christ, is standard in Syriac exegesis and theology.” This typology is not novel, but was made normative for Syriac exegesis by the 4th century poet theologian Ephrem the Syrian:

> wherever you turn your eyes, there is God’s symbol
> whatever you read, there you will find His types (Virginity 20:12).

Ephrem is important for our understanding of *Disputation* because the use of typology and symbols springing out from Ephrem’s universe constitutes the grammar of the Monk’s theological language, as in §18:

> (So) also, the eating of the sacrifice of Abraham bore the symbol of the sacrifice of Christ. Just as (the command of) circumcision was given to him, which is the sign of those who accept the Law, so also our Lord gave to us (baptism), the type of his death and of his burial and of his resurrection. And just as in that time anyone who was not circumcised was not called a son of Abraham, so also today anyone who is not baptised is not called a Christian. (§18 Disputation)

---

286 Ibid.
287 Taylor, *Disputation*, Footnote 107, 19.
288 Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 42.
The Muslim protagonist accepts that baptism is the new circumcision for Christians (a typology used by Christians from the very beginning and in the Syriac tradition in particular, by Aphrahat and Ephrem), but he asks for more on the typology of sacrifice which leads us into an important and typically dyophysite exegesis in §20, namely:

The Monk says: Abraham was commanded to offer up his son as a sacrifice, so that he might be a type of our Lord who was going to suffer for us. And the fact that he took two lads along with him is a type of the two thieves who were crucified along with Christ. And the sticks upon the shoulder of Isaac are a type of the cross of our Lord which was upon His shoulder. And the fact that Isaac was bound upon the altar is a symbol that (Christ's) divinity was accomplishing it. And that (passage): "Remove your hand from the boy, and do nothing to him, ... and behold a lamb hanging on the tree it is a symbol of the body which He received from us, which suffered on the cross, whilst His divinity was unharmed. (§20 Disputation)

That Isaac and the Aqedah finds its type in the sacrifice of Jesus is a typological exegesis found in most Christian traditions. What makes this a dyophysite exegesis is that the Isaac is made a type for Christ’s divinity and the lamb for Christ’s humanity. This exegesis would not have gone unnoticed by his fellow miaphysites (Jacobites). This is indeed an interesting instance of when the East Syriac Church’s teaching on Christ’s two natures plays a key role in both its self-understanding and defense of the faith. We here find an example of what I have argued previously, that apologetic literature tends to serve a dual purpose.

4.1.1. Jesus the New Sacrifice

After a longer discussion on the nature and passibility of Christ (see chapter below) the Muslim calls the monk back to the discussion of sacrifice, and inquires about the link between Abraham and Jesus, and subsequently in what way Jesus is a sacrifice. The monk answers that Jesus is

---

289 See Taylor, Disputation, footnote 111, 20.
290 Setting aside the historical intricacies of Christological controversy and development, my use of dyophysite here and below simply refers to the words from the synod of Mar ’Aqaq in 486: “But our faith in the dispensation of Christ should also be in a confession of two natures of Godhead and manhood, none of us venturing to introduce mixture, commingling, or confusion into the distinctions of those two natures. Instead, while Godhead remains and is preserved in that which belongs to it, and manhood in that which belongs to it, we combine the copies of their natures in one Lordship and one worship because of the perfect and inseparable conjunction which the Godhead had with the manhood. If anyone thinks or teaches others that suffering and change belong to the Godhead of our Lord, not preserving—in regard to the union of the parsiopea of our Savior—the confession of perfect God and perfect man, the same shall be anathema.” Translated by M.J. Birnie, from Synodicon Orientale, (ed.), J. B. Chabot, Paris, 1902, 55.
291 Taylor points out how the Peshitta, which has ‘ram’, has been “heavily modified for theological purposes” and here replaced with ‘lamb’ to more forcefully call the connection ‘lamb of God’. Taylor, Disputation, footnote 119, 21.
292 Ibid., footnote 117, 21.
293 Taylor makes the point that there are even theologians of the Church of the East who would have objected to this typology, for example, Theodore bar Koni. See, Ibid., footnote 117, 21
294 Islamic tradition does not have Jesus dying on the cross. See Ibid., footnote 124, 23.
the new sacrifice in which “we take delight every day,” (§24 Disputation). Because, “the eating of the sacrifice of Abraham bore the symbol of the sacrifice of Christ” (§18 Disputation). After this, the Muslim wonders how this can be, and the monk goes on to offer an account of the Last Supper. What one immediate takes notice of in this account is that while it does not repeat any one New Testament text, it still has the words of institution:

‘This is my body which is broken for your sakes. Take and eat of it, all of you. And let it be for you the remission of debts’. And likewise He also gave thanks over the cup, and said: ‘this is my blood which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Take and drink of it, all of you. So do in commemoration of me. Whenever, therefore, you eat of this bread, and drink of this cup, you shall recall my death until my (second) coming,’ (§26 Disputation).

In fact, these are the words of at least one East Syriac eucharistic liturgy. In the 6th century the patriarch of the Church of the East, Išo’yahb III (580-659) conducted a comprehensive liturgical reform in which he “re-arranged the liturgical cycles and the season and fixed their length, and assigned anaphoras to each festival” and most importantly, he reduced the number of liturgies to the three (and still presently used) liturgies of: Addai and Mari, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius.

The anaphora of Addai and Mari became the ordinary anaphora for the East Syrians, and is the only one of the three which is believed to have been composed in Syriac. However, this cannot be the anaphora quoted in Disputation, because the anaphora of Addai and Mari does not include the words of institution. Rather, its structure is “Thanksgiving – Sanctus – Prayer of Intercession – Epiclesis – Doxology.” The structure, but also the wording of the anaphora, echoes of the Jewish prayer for the table, which fr. Baby Varghese suggests that the anaphora of Addai and Mari is “purely Semitic in character and uninfluenced by Greek tradition.” This is just a hypothesis, however, which calls for closer attention and study.

The anaphora of Theodore of Mopsuestia is believed to have been translated (together with the anaphora of Nestorius) from Greek to Syriac by Mar Aba (540-522), but it is all together too different to be the anaphora cited in Disputation, this despite the fact that they both share the

297 Ibid.
298 Ibid.
same distinctive East Syrian structure of: Dialogue – Opening Praise of the Trinity – Sanctus and Benedictus – Christological section – Institution narrative – Anamnesis – Intercession – Epiclesis – Doxology. This leaves us, and as Taylor has suggested, to the conclusion that the anaphora quoted in *Disputatio* must be that of Nestorius, which “has a form of Christ’s words which matches very closely with those recorded here.” Here are the familiar words from the anaphora of the liturgy of Nestorius.

And after he had eaten on the Passover of the Law of Moses, he took bread into his *HOLY, UNEBLEDISHED* and un undefiled hands, and blessed, broke, and ate and he gave it to his disciples and said, “Take, eat of it, all of you. This is my body which is broken for you for the forgiveness of sins.” And likewise *HE MIXED* the cup with *WINE AND WATER* and blessed gave thanks and drank and gave it to his disciples and said: “Take, drink of it all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. And this do for my memorial until I come. For whenever you eat of this bread and drink of this cup you commemorate my death until my coming.”

The first scriptural evidence for this anaphora (and the two others too) is found in the 10th/11th century text of Mar Esa’ya from the church carrying the same name, in Mosul, Iraq. But it has, as mentioned, its origins in the 6th century. However, if scholars were to conclude that the anaphora referred to in *Disputation* in fact is that of Nestorius, then it would be, to my knowledge, the earliest scriptural evidence of the anaphora of Nestorius.

### 4.1.2. Concluding remarks

In this brief study of Abraham in *Disputation* we have found that the monk makes use of Christian liturgical and exegetical terminology to score points against his opponent. At the same time, the discourse that he effects reinforces a certain intra-Christian identity. This accords with my general observation about apologetic literature and its dual ends. Moreover, I hypothesize about the possibility that *Disputation* provides an early textual witness to a minor East Syriac anaphora.

---

302 It has been argued that the Greek anaphora of St. John is derived from the anaphora of Nestorius. However, the opposite argument has also been made. The scholarly community seems only to agree on the fact that there are many parallels and echoes between the two. See Spinks, *Mar Nestorius and Mar Theodore, the Interpreter*, 9f.
304 Ibid., 6f.
4.2. “Not because of your righteousness”

We know at this point that Muhammad, the Arab/Islamic conquest, and the establishment of a Muslim empire presented several challenges to the Christian communities. We also know that it was not very obvious to the Christians whether the Muslims had come to stay or not. We will now see that one of the chief concerns in *Disputation*’s apologetical mission is one of providing *consolation*. Yes, apologetics are about educating, elucidating, and revealing the flaws in the opponent’s argument, and providing its audience with rhetorical ammunition for conflicts in their everyday lives. But, the frame which renders all these attempts meaningful is for the Christian found in the sacrificial life of Jesus.

We will in the following see that 1) *Disputation* makes the hostility experienced by its Christian audience purposeful by reading it into the story of the Israelites, and that 2) this identification is made possible by the story of Jesus as found in *The Letter to the Hebrews*.

4.2.1. “Like sheep to the slaughter”

It is only from the mid-8th century and the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty that Syriac writings describing Muslims take on a religious character and valence. Muslims begin to play the role as “the harbinger of the end of times,” and the pressing question – one which will stay with the Christians, even as the portrait of Muslims will modify over the centuries – is: *why*. Why did God let the conquest happen? The cries of Christians are spoken out through the voice of the Muslim in *Disputation*:

> For what reason did God deliver you into our hands? And (why) are you led away by us like sheep to the slaughter, and (why) are your bishops and priests being killed, and the rest (of you) are being subjugated and belaboured by night and day by the impositions of the king which are more bitter than death? (§55 *Disputation*).

“God delivered you into our hands” was certainly a trump card readily available to Muslim apologists. After all, “how is it possible that a group of poor uncivilized barefooted carrion-eaters were capable of vanquishing the mighty Persian and Byzantines in battle?” It is not only the Christians who would look to God to make sense of the conquest, the Muslims undoubtedly

---

305 Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 12.
306 This was a common way of describing the success of the conquerors by Muslim apologetics. See Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahirā*, footnote 34, 21.
did too and credited God for their success. We see this in the letter to the Byzantine Emperor by ʿUmar II and (later ʿAbbasid Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd), in which the success of the Arab/Islamic conquest is taken as proof of God’s support.307

One of the chief Muslim critiques of Christianity was “its lack of trustworthy tradition and scripture.”308 With this in mind it is interesting, however not surprising, to note that the monk in Disputation consistently backs up his arguments (throughout the whole text of Disputation) not so much by quoting the New Testament, but relies on Old Testament309 types, allusions and signs from nature, or other Christian theological traditions (such as Ephrem the Syrian and Sergius Bahīrā). There is in particular not a single reference to St Paul or any of his (attributable) letters. After all, typological exegesis of the OT was very common in the Antiochian (theological) tradition, to which the East Syrians belonged.

Nevertheless, texts acquire meaning in relation to other texts. This is why the passage quoted above from Disputation calls for closer look at what an echo in a text actually achieves. “Why are you led away by us like sheep to the slaughter?” alludes to the audience’s liturgical memory, because when attending to texts in Antiquity we need to keep in mind what Carol Harrison has called the “literate listener.”310 Texts were mainly read out loud for an audience,311 and the process “of listening was commonly understood as the creation of a mental image, inscribed upon memory.”312 The author of Disputation is playing on the imagination of his audience, wishing to impress on it associations to a biblical universe. We need to be attentive to allusions and echoes in a text such as Disputation, because through these echoes, our text is made intelligible. “Why are you led away by us like sheep to the slaughter?” would inevitably place Disputation’s audience in the middle of the Psalms.

Yet you have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies. You made us turn back from the foe, and our enemies have gotten spoil. You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations.

307 Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā, 22.
308 Ibid., 23.
309 Apologetics soley based on the Old Testament are called testimonis and makes up a major part of the apologetical work of the Melkite work Kitāb al-burhān attributed to Eutychius of Alexandria but believed to be a work of Peter of Bayt Ra. See Ibid., footnote 38, 23.
311 Not to mention that “works were ‘published’ primarily through public performance”, ibid., 62.
312 Ibid.
You have sold your people for a trifle, 
demanding no high price for them. 
You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, 
the derision and scorn of those around us. 
You have made us a byword among the nations, 
a laughingstock among the peoples. 
All day long my disgrace is before me, 
and shame has covered my face 
at the words of the taunters and revilers, 
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger. 
All this has come upon us, 
yet we have not forgotten you, 
or been false to your covenant. 
Our heart has not turned back, 
nor have our steps departed from your way, 
yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals, 
and covered us with deep darkness. 
If we had forgotten the name of our God, 
or spread out our hands to a strange god, 
would not God discover this? 
For he knows the secrets of the heart. 
Because of you we are being killed all day long, 
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter. 
Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? 
Awake, do not cast us off forever! 
Why do you hide your face? 
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? 
For we sink down to the dust; 
our bodies cling to the ground. 
Rise up, come to our help. 
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. (Psalm 44:9-26).³¹³

Associations, once established, are mutually reinforcing. The Psalms give meaning to Disputation, but Disputation also gives new meaning to the Psalms, since the echoes of the psalms transplants the audience of Disputation into the Psalms. Once this connection is made, Syriac Christians could make the words of the psalmist their own: “Why do you hide your face?” (Psalm 44:24). The Psalms come alive through the difficult experience of Disputation’s audience. The echoes of the Psalms in Disputation place its audience in the middle of the story of God’s redemption of the world and a sense of purpose is achieved through this. There is a pedagogy of hope at work.

Beyond this attempt of making sense of the conquest, Disputation provides its audience, in a clear apologetical manner, with an answer to the Muslim’s second claim concerning the

³¹³ All Bible references are from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV).
“[God] has given us authority over all faiths and all peoples,” (§10 Disputation). To this the monk immediately responds, “you may very well say that you are kings and (that) the whole world has been subjected to you,” (§10 Disputation). And the monk subsequently follows up with evidence showing that this simply is not the case. It was frequent among Christian apologists not to simply point out the number of peoples and nations that were still not subjected to Muslim rule, but they would also draw attention to the many Caliphs that had gotten murdered, redirecting the question back to the Muslims’ about whether God in fact supported their rule.315

One surprising element here, however, is that the evidence brought forward by Disputation, which is an account of rulers and kings throughout time and pace, follows a dating which seems to rely on the Septuagint instead of the Peshitta. The Peshitta’s chronology would make more sense for our East Syrian monk. Where our author gets this from can only be answered speculatively,316 but the aberration is, if nothing else, perhaps an interesting witness to the flexibility of intra-Christian border-crossing in Late Antiquity.

4.2.2. “For what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?”

Disputation appears to be reliant on the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius in many respects. However, the dependence is no more obvious than in Disputation’s mode of biblical exegesis to explain the success of the Arab/Muslim conquest. Pseudo-Methodius provides Deut. 9:4-6,317 as the framework in which Muslim claims to ‘why’ are made nonsensical:

For through Moses, [God] said to the Sons of Israel, “It is not because the Lord your God loved you that he brings you into the land of the gentiles to inherit it, rather on account of the iniquity of its inhabitants”. So too [concerning] these Sons of Ishmael, it was not because God loves them that he allowed them to enter and take control of the Christians’ kingdom,

314 The first being “God delivered you into our hands,” §55 Disputation.
315 Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā, 22. Similar arguments are found in the Apology of al Kīndī and Abraham of Tiberias, who even added «your rule is less than two hundred years old and you have already killed seven Caliphs, not one of whom was an enemy or opponent of Islam.” See footnote 37, Ibid.
316 Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, perhaps the most read early Christian text about Islam and one on which Disputation relies, does not use the Septuagint dating. See Taylor, Disputation, footnote 89, 17.
317 When the Lord your God thrusts them out before you, do not say to yourself, “It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to occupy this land”; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the Lord made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know, then, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people.”
rather on the account of the iniquity and sin done by Christians, the like of which was not done by any previous generation.\textsuperscript{318}

Compare this with \textit{Disputation}:

Sons of Ishmael, God did not give you power over us because of your (own) righteousness, but because of our sins, and because the Lord loves us and does not wish to deprive us of his (heavenly) kingdom. For it is said: ‘He whom God loves He chastises’, and ‘if you (remain) without chastisement you will be strangers and not sons’. (§56).

\textit{Disputation} writes itself right into the Christian tradition of interpreting the Arab/Muslim conquest, as well as other political turmoil, in terms of God’s way of disciplining his people. This is of course a reinterpretation and identification with the story of Israel’s many trials. However, the reference to Deuteronomy 9 is made theologically possible by \textit{Letters to the Hebrews}, in which we find the source of the language of discipline and chastisement in the imagery of filial relations:

Consider him [Jesus] who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children— “My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.” Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. (Heb 12: 3-6).

In fact, the monk says, Christians “will be strangers and not sons” without the Arab/Islamic conquest. Disputation has successfully clothed the trial put on by Muslims in the garbs of Christian hope in and through trial.

\textbf{4.2.3. Concluding Remarks}

The Arab/Islamic conquest was certainly a challenge on many levels for affected Christian communities, and it would seem that \textit{Disputation} in the end offers a kind of theodicy. As such, \textit{Disputation} is a witness to the fact that apologetics must be understood by way of a two folded mission: to 1) console, and strengthen the identity of the community and 2) refute the opponents’ arguments. By answering the challenge brought on by Islam, Syriac Christians developed a distinct sense of apologetics in which both these aspects come together.

\textsuperscript{318} “Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius” Cited in Penn, \textit{When Christians First Met Muslims}, 118f.
4.3. The Passibility of Christ

We have seen that apologetic works can, and often do, serve several objectives at once. Religious identities in the fertile crescent in 8th century were by no means fixed, and so the boundaries set up by *Disputation* were partly for Muslims and partly for other Christians. The question of the passibility of Christ, and how it relates to theopaschism, was one issue which competing Christian communities quarreled over, but about which there reigned a tacit consensus with respect to Muslims, who would not accept a suffering God at any cost. We will in the following look at the specifics of the monk’s discussion of this topic, again, from the dual perspective of intra-Christian and counter-Islamic positioning.

Theopaschism names the idea that the eternal God can suffer. This is not an abstract question for philosophers, but a literally crucial consequence of the Christian confession that the incarnate Son of God suffered and died on the cross. *Disputation* offers an analysis of this thorny issue along the lines of the established Christological concepts of the time: what “aspect” of Christ as God suffered during the Passion? His human nature? His person or hypostasis? This is of course intimately connected to the overall Christological debate about the union (and distinction) of the two natures – and it is a discussion that was a constant point of theological contention between the competing Christian communities of the Arab world even in the 7th century.319

In *Disputation*, the monk ends his explanation of how the sacrifice of Abraham is a symbol of the sacrifice of Christ by pointing out that like the body of Isaac, the divinity of Christ was ‘unharmed’ (on the cross), (§20 *Disputation*). Which leads the Muslim to ask:

How is it possible, as you have said, that the divinity, which was with Him on the cross and in the tomb, did not suffer and was not harmed?

The Monk says: Truly it was with Him, but not through mingling and mixture and confusion, as the heretics say, but through will. And (as for) how it was unharmed and did not suffer, hear two proofs which are most trustworthy for those who love God. Just as (when) the sun rests upon a wall, and you take a pickax and you demolish the wall, the sun rests upon the wall, the sun is not stunned and neither does it suffer, so also the body (which Christ took) from us died, and was buried, and arose, whilst the divinity did not suffer. (§21-22 *Disputation*).

319 Hoyland, *Introduction*, xxiiif. The question of theopaschism is also connected to the discussion of icons and visual art, to the reality of the intervention of saints and the ‘sleep of the soul’ as well as the discussion of the life hereafter – “the fate of the souls after death.” Ibid.
Jesus did not die on the cross according to Islam, and it also rejects the divinity of Christ. Thus, that a Muslim would have the above-mentioned concern is not altogether unlikely. Yet it is probable that this part of *Disputation* deals with intra-Christian borders more than hedging against Muslim ideas of God. The “heretics” referred to here are probably, as suggested by Taylor too, the Syrian Orthodox miaphysites. The miaphysites “did make some use of ‘mixing’ terminology in their Christological writings” and at any rate refused to distinguish between divine and human nature in the incarnate Son of God. Further, the miaphysites were, by both East Syrians and Chalcedonian theologians alike, accused exactly of theopaschism. In *Disputation* the accusation of theopaschism from the Muslim is immediately refuted by reference to the East Syrian understanding of the ‘voluntary union’ of natures in Christ by God’s will.

Indeed, mingling, mixture and confusion is in Syriac *hulṭāna*, *muzzāgā* and *bulbālā* respectively. That the monk uses these terms is not a coincidence; it is the anti-theopaschite wording which follows the confession of faith of the East Syrian Synod of 486. Thus, *Disputation* actualizes a longstanding discussion of anti-theopaschite polemics. Reinink argues on the basis of these findings that the examples that follows the monk’s refutation of the accusation of theopaschism, most probably belong to a long tradition of such anti-theopaschite polemics; “with the purpose of instruction his East Syrian coreligionists in the rightness of their ‘apostolic faith’ as opposed to the Christian (Monophysite) heretics.”

It is very interesting that the Muslim is asks questions that to a large degree were part of intra-Christian debate. In one sense it reflects the mocking attitude of Muslims toward Christian disunity. But it also confirms a pattern of Christian apologetics that goes back to the very beginning. In the early days of Christian apologetics we often find apologists using the figure of a Jew to draw confessional lines against other Christians, as Boyarin exemplifies.

---

320 Taylor, *Disputation*, footnote 120, 22.
321 Ibid.
322 Ibid.
323 Reinink, *Bible and Qur’an in early Syriac Christian-Islamic disputation*, footnote 59, 71.
324 Ibid., 71.
325 *Adversus Judaeos* literature etc.
However, even if theopaschism mainly was a Christian family dispute, the (implicit) objection from the Muslim that a God who suffers cannot really be God, echoes early pagan philosophical ridiculing of Christian faith. From the satiric graffito of a supposed Alexamenos worshipping a donkey, to various Jewish and Platonist critiques of the incarnation as absurd and/or self-aggravating, confessing the Incarnation and its logical association of God with “base” realities such as birth, suffering, and death proved a stumbling block to non-Christian monotheists who maintained a dualist picture of God and creation. In fact, the distinction and union of natures in Christ formulated in councils and synods are in some ways a response to this outer challenge, even if the dogmatic formulations operate from a presumption that the incarnation is a fact which cannot be explained away. Any Christian explanation of the reality that God became human and suffered/died must begin with the insight that faith requires belief in this brute, revealed fact, and only after this try to demonstrate that it is not absurd. This strategy is exactly the monk’s, even if it is not very refined, which again is why I think it primarily is directed as polemics against miaphysites.

4.4. Knowing and Not Knowing the Trinity

Now, tell me again, given that God is high and exalted, and is incomprehensible and invisible and inexplicable, and is in every place but is not limited by any place, why do you thrust Him down into baseness and proclaim that He has a Son? And given that He is one, (why) do you say ‘Father and Son, and the Holy Spirit’? (§27 Disputation)

We have begun to see how Christian apologetics, in its overarching identity-making purpose, can demarcate borders – explicitly or implicitly – against competing Christian communities, while simultaneously defending against Muslim anti-Christian rhetoric and policy. However, as we move into the very heart of the Christian faith and see how Disputation expositus it, the strategy changes from vigilant polemics to inclusive persuasion. When it comes to the Trinity, the author of Disputation rather seeks to bring home to the Muslim that his own faith is not antithetical to this doctrine, but rather harmonious with it, and that he even confesses it, albeit in his own particular way. Further, there is little room for intra-Christian disagreement on the topic of Trinitarian theology. The monk applies a creative rhetoric based on Qur’anic terminology – made possible by biblical exegesis. We will also witness that the author of Disputation writes himself into a long tradition of apophatic language in discussing divine being, and to guard the mysterious nature of Trinitarian belief.
4.4.1. God is Three in One

One will immediately note that in *Disputation*, when the monk speaks of Christ as the Son of God, he is primarily referred to as born of the ‘The Blessed Mary,’ ūbānītā Maryam (§30). This is one of the main titles for Jesus’ mother in the Church of the East, and can be read as nothing more than a refusal of yāldat ʾalāhā, the *theotokós*. The Church of the East[326] would not accept God-bearer as a term for Jesus’ mother, because of their stricter distinction between the two natures of Christ. Thus, the avoidance of *theotokós* and use of The Blessed Mary (even if the latter merely is native language to the Eastern Church and not necessarily used in a demonstrative way) would surely not have gone unnoticed by a miaphysite audience.

Apart from this peculiarity, there is, however, surprisingly little distancing from other Christian communities in this part of *Disputation*. In terms of Christology, one would have expected, among other things, the particular East Syrian expression of ‘God in a human being’ and clothing metaphors (‘the Word clothing himself in flesh’ and ‘veiling’ as a reference to the incarnation, for example).[328]

Instead, what we first find in *Disputation* is doctrinal exegesis that would have passed with most Christians of the time. This is likely due to the influence from the earliest apologetics,[329] and the relatively non-controversial theology laid out. There are, for example, classic references to Genesis (§28) in which the traditional Christian reading of: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen 1:26) is read as a hint at God’s unity-in-plurality. Also, “the seraphim crying Holy, holy, holy! … Bears the symbol of the Holy Trinity,” a reference to Isa. 6:3, is found in the same paragraph. Further, there are echoes of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed: “Father, Son and Holy Spirit … Creator, and Lord, and Maker of all created things,” (§28).

The monk moves on after this basic exegesis to circumscribe any excessive speculation about the Doctrine of the Trinity, pointing to its ultimate origin in mystery, by way of an analogy to the sun:

[329] Ibid., 25.
Just as the sun is a single sphere, and from it proceed illumination and warmth, (and) a human also is one, but is composed of bones and flesh and hair, so also God is one, and is known in three persons and they are distinguished by their particular properties, (§28).

And just as the sun, if one were to “extend his hand into it and investigate its nature he will be burnt by it.” (§28) Because, in the end, just as the potter’s vessels can’t know anything which pertains to its origins, so too “the nature of the Maker is not known by those who are made.” (§28). It is not altogether unlikely that this echoes the 5th century West Syrian monk Pseudo-Dionysius The Areopagite. Pseudo-Dionysius’ apophatic theology – dangerously simplified – could be described as a theology of sense-informed analogies in the service of a non-cognitive knowledge of God. In the Eastern tradition at large, apophaticism springs from an emphasis on true theology as consisting more of spiritual practice such as prayer, rather than discursive propositions. In Muslim-Christian apologetics, speaking of God’s ungraspable nature serves as an affirmation of the problem of epistemic access to a revealed doctrine such as the Trinity. While the monk never relativizes the three person’s subsistence in God, he stretches out a hand to non-believers, who may find difficulty understanding the Trinitarian confession.

4.4.2. Christ, Trinity, and the Qurʾān

Once the transcendent nature of God is established, then, the monk moves on to the question which will lead us into the use of Qurʾānic jargon: “whose son do you make him, he who is called by you ʿĪsā son of Mariam, and by us Jesus Christ?” (§28). We saw in the previous chapter Disputation in its Qurʾānic context that this was a way of addressing the Qurʾān’s ridicule of Christian faith. However, our concern here is how the monk’s answer not only counters the Qurʾān’s rhetoric, but how the monk in fact employs the Qurʾān itself to prove Christian doctrine to be true.

The monk asks the Muslim: who is Jesus Christ? To which the Muslim answers “According to Muḥammad our (prophet), – we also bear witness to what he said, – [He is]: ‘The Word of God and His Spirit,’” (§29). This is, as observed by Roggema, “nothing but the language of the Qurʾān,”330 as in surā an-Nisā’:

---

O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say 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 [spirit, rūḥ] created at a command from Him, (Q 4:171).331

The monk affirms this language about Jesus but proceeds to paraphrase Luke 1:35: “The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.’” Then the monk says: “Muḥammad received this saying from the Gospel of Luke.” (§30 Disputation). Thus, he “considered the Annunciation in Luke to be the basis of the Qurʾānic descriptions of Christ.”332

It has been suggested that this link between Luke and surā an-Nisāʾ is made because of Luke’s reference to the Word as ‘the Most High.’ Christian theologians understood the Most High to be a reference to the second divine person of the Trinity, the Son of God. We find this use already with Ephrem the Syrian. The goal, it seems, was to make it appear as if the Qurʾān is paraphrasing something a Christian could have said: Jesus the Most High, Word and Spirit!333 Thus, the monk is not confused about how Jesus Christ is understood in Islam, but rather, this is deliberately a play on the similarities between Islam and Christianity for apologetical purposes.334

That the Qurʾān identifies Christ with the conceptual pair ‘Word and Spirit’ is not a unique observation by Disputation. In fact, it is rather common to point out this Qurʾānic understanding of Christ. It is found in the (later) Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā, but also in the writings of Jacob of Edessa.335 In Letter on the Genealogy of the Virgin (early 8th century), Jacob of Edessa refers to Muslims in the following way:

They say at all times that Jesus son of Mary is in truth the Messiah and they call him the Word of God, as do the Holy Scriptures. They also add, in their ignorance, that he is the Spirit of God, for they are not able to distinguish between the Word and the Spirit, just as they do not assent to call the Messiah God or Son of God.336

331 Or as in the somewhat more archaic translation: “O People of the Book! Do not exceed the bounds in your religion, and do not attribute anything to Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only an apostle of Allah, and His Word that He cast toward Mary and a spirit from Him.” Qarāʾī, ‘Alī Qūlī, ed. The Qurʾān: With a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation. London: ICAS Press, 2004.
332 Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā, 111.
333 Ibid.
334 Ibid.
335 See the discussion of The Legend’s use of ‘Word and Spirit’ in Ibid., 104-113.
Thus, we find in *Disputation*, as in the examples Jacob of Edessa, a Christian use of the Qurʾān to prove that the Qurʾān itself endorses the doctrine of the Trinity, simply by fact of affirming Christ as “Logos” and Spirit. The Christians could then go on to argue that ‘you cannot have it both ways!’ And this is why we find the monk presenting an ultimatum at the end:

Now, consider your saying, and understand what you have heard from Muhammad, because you bear witness that he proclaimed Him to be ‘the Word of God and His Spirit’. Now, I require one of two things from you; either you alienate the Word of God and His Spirit from Him, or you correctly proclaim Him to be the Son of God, (§30 *Disputation*).

There is no confusion in the Qurʾān as to whether Jesus Christ was divine or not. But the concepts of Word and Spirit clearly open up for a discussion with Christians to discourse further about Christ’s divinity and the Holy Spirit’s activity.

### 4.4.3. Concluding Remarks

We have seen that the author of *Disputation* relies on the longstanding tradition of apophatic reasoning in its discussion of the divine being’s Triune nature, to “defuse” or disarm any suspicion about polytheism on the Muslim side. Further, *Disputation*, like many of its contemporaries, would use the Qurʾān’s own words about Jesus as ‘Word and Spirit’ to positively argue the case of the Trinity. These points are argued for more irenically, and with sensitivity about the epistemological status of Trinitarian confession, which are interesting aberrations from *Disputation*’s otherwise more confrontational mode of presentation.

### 4.5. Objects of Worship and Veneration

The question whether Christians worship icons, the cross, and relics occupies a longer part of *Disputation*. Almost every Christian apologetic text responding to the rise of Islam deals with these questions. *Disputation*, in accordance with the available strategies of its time, offers arguments from Scripture, Christian tradition, and logic in its answers to the challenges brought on by Muslim interlocutors. I will in the following section analyze the most important arguments, and we will see how the discussion of worship reflects pressing issues in the relationship between Christians and their neighboring Muslims. *Disputation* must be read in

---


light of Muslim attitudes and confrontations. We will see that the debate about images in the Fertile Crescent is distinct from that in Byzantium, because it does not primarily deal with intra-ecclesial iconoclasm as in the Byzantine case, but is articulated in a direct relationship to Islam.

4.5.1. The Discussion in General
The Christian history of controversies around images (and idolatry) is not a new one. It finds its origins in the Bible and the *Adversus Judaeos* literature.\(^{338}\) It has long been argued that the debate about images in Eastern Christianity was intimately linked to the iconoclasm brought on by the Byzantine Emperor. The Umayyad caliph Yazid II’s edict has been linked up to emperor Leo III’s (717-741 C.E.) policies, as if the debate in the conquered Muslim territories spawned the conflict in Byzantium (and vice versa). However, as Griffith argues in a paper: “Muslims and Byzantine iconoclasts shared the conviction that the veneration of icons is tantamount to the idolatry forbidden in the Bible. There the similarity of their positions began and ended.”\(^{339}\) The idea that Islam had anything to do with Byzantine iconoclasm has blurred the view of this particular confrontation between Muslims and Christians, and caused a disproportionate attention to images,\(^{340}\) when in fact, “the attack of Islam on the cult of the cross was much more intense and widespread than the attack on images.”\(^{341}\) Why Muslim rulers targeted the cross in a stronger way is attributable to a lot of factors, some of which we will look at below. However, it is worth keeping in mind that icons were less of a target because Syriac churches were already rather aniconic.\(^ {342}\)

4.5.2. Historical Context
The Umayyad dynasty, and in particular during the reign of 'Abd al-Malik and al-Walīd, was a time in which Islam claimed the public space through what we can call the Umayyad building- and public policy program. There is no doubt that the newly conquered territories underwent a ‘Muslim makeover’ and that the symbols of hitherto Christian dominion were to be intentionally abolished.\(^ {343}\) “The cross was the Christian symbol par excellence.”\(^ {344}\) Not only

\(^{338}\) “Umayyad times, and certainly by the first half of the eighth century, the Christian practice of venerating the cross, in addition to the practice of displaying it, became a topic of specifically religious controversy between Muslims and Christians, as it had already been a point of contention between Jews and Christians … As an object of Christian veneration, the cross then was classed with the icons as a target for the charge of idolatry.” Ibid., 127.

\(^{339}\) Ibid., 136.

\(^{340}\) Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, 98f.

\(^{341}\) Ibid.

\(^{342}\) Ibid., 99.


did it serve as a “public repudiation of the God who sent down the Qurʾān,”345 “it was ubiquitous in the Christian landscape, prominently visible on buildings and coins, during processions, on clothes, as tattoos etc.”346 In sum, the cross stood as a sign of “Christianity’s triumph over its enemies.”347 However, ”from the time of the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik, signposts in Arabic began to appear on the roads, with inscriptions of the Islamic shahādah348 in the place of a cross or other customary form of embellishment.”349 It is from now on that we find a standing policy in the conquered territories for “knocking down or effacing publicly displayed crosses in the caliphate.”350 As witnessed by a possible contemporary of Disputation, Michael the Syrian:

Yazid, the king of the Ṭayyāyē, gave orders to tear down and break up the paintings and statues of everything which lives and moves, from temples and buildings, from walls, from beams and stones; even the images found in books were torn out.351

The charge of idolatry – worship of created things – was indeed at the heart of the accusations from the Muslims, as witnessed from an (possible) excerpt from the correspondence between ʿUmar II and Leo III, in which ʿUmar writes:

You extol the cross and the image. You kiss them, and you prostrate yourselves to them, even though they are what people have made with their own hands. They neither hear, nor see, nor do harm, nor bring any advantage. The most estimable of them among you are made of gold and silver. Such is what Abraham's people did with their images and idols.352

However, there are not only reports of public crosses being destroyed on purely ideological grounds. Equally important are the accounts of particular anti-Christian hostility, Islamic antipathy, demonstrated in the everyday life of Christians-Muslim relations.353 This could help

---

347 Ibid.
348 The Islamic creed: lā ʾilāha ʾillā llāh muḥammadun rasūlu llāh / There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God. (as in Q 37:35 and Q 48:29). See Donner, Muhammad and The Believers, 112.
350 Ibid., 126.
352 The quote is found in an Islamic polemical writing from the 9th century. However, recent scholarship has suggested that it is parts of the letter sent from ʿUmar II to Leo III. The matter remains unresolved. See Griffith, Images, Islam and Christian Icons, 133.
353 Such as the story of the Muslim men upon arrival in Gabala, Syria, went into the local church: “One of the Muslims, seeing a mosaic icon in the wall, asked one of the Christians present, “What benefit is this icon?” The Christian answered him, “it benefits those who pay it honor; it harms those who show dishonor.” The Muslim said, “I am going to dig out its eye, and I will see what harm it does me.” Having said this, he extended his pike and dug out the icon's right eye. Straightaway, his own right eye leaped out onto the ground and he was consumed with
explain some peculiar damage done to floor mosaics in Jordan: Images of living things, people and animals, have had their faces carefully garbled. The general hostility ‘on the ground’ and public policies adds up to the hypothesis that it was Christians themselves, “in response to Islamic polemic,” who damaged the mosaics in order to save them\textsuperscript{354} – a self-imposed iconoclasm, as it were.

There is, besides the ban on images in Exodus and Deuteronomy,\textsuperscript{355} a ‘theology of images’ in Islam – as commented on by Abū Qurrah and later found in the Muslim prophetic tradition – according to which “God will require the makers of images of living things to blow the spirit of life into the images they have made.”\textsuperscript{356} The doctrinal development within Islam thus should be read against its Christian context,\textsuperscript{357} that is to say that Islamic thought and theology needed to meet the “the need to find a religious response to objectional Christian behavior.”\textsuperscript{358}

Despite sometime dramatic clashes, the Christian-Muslim controversy concerning icons, the cross and relics “was only a small part of the confrontation between Muslims and Christians in the early Islamic period,”\textsuperscript{359} and a topic restricted to the apologetical texts of the early 8\textsuperscript{th} and 9\textsuperscript{th} century. In fact, the discussions of idolatry in this respect almost ceased to exist as we move into the second century of the Abbasid rule, and rather gave way to discussions about the Incarnation and the Trinity. This leads us to conclude that: 1) discussion about the honor due to particular material items was limited to a time in which Christians and Muslims ‘competed’ for the public space;\textsuperscript{360} and, 2) Disputation’s preoccupation with these topics confirms our theory of an early date of compilation of 8\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textbf{4.5.3. Disputation on Veneration and Worship}

The question of the Christian-Muslim controversy concerning icons, the cross and relics brings us to Disputation and its discussion of these themes. The Muslim’s charge of idolatry concerns \textit{worship} specifically. The Syriac language distinguishes between honor on the one hand, and

---

\textsuperscript{356} There is no concrete ban on images in the Qurʾān, however, there is the general idea of idolatry and worship of created things would amount to idolatry. See the discussion in Griffith, \textit{Images, Islam and Christian Icons}, 121.
\textsuperscript{357} Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{359} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{360} Ibid., 134.

81
worship on the other. Segdlā from sgd, means to prostrate, offer worship, being a worshipper.\footnote{361} What has not been noticed before, is that Segdlā in Disputation is only used in a context when it is made clear that God is the object, which is why it can be translated as worship proper.\footnote{362} And then there is yaqarnān from yqr, which translates to honor, to pay esteem, dedication,\footnote{363} which can be shown kings and martyrs alike.\footnote{364} This seems to mirror the Greek distinction between latria (λατρεία, worship due a divinity) and veneration, dulia (δούλεια, or proskynesis which is offered to created matter, like icons and the saints).\footnote{365} And it is not altogether insignificant that masgdā (Mosque),\footnote{366} is derived from segdlā; worship equals prostration. After all, prostration is at the very center of Islam, as in surā al-Nahl: “And to Allah prostrates whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth of creatures, and the angels [as well], and they are not arrogant,” (Q 16:49). The mosque is ‘simply’ the place of prostration.

Now, the monk’s main concern seems partly to be to show that the accusation of idolatry is a case of the Muslim mistaking Christian practice with the prohibition in Exodus:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, (Exod. 20:4-5).

The Muslim accuses the Christian for segdlā in relation to images. In responding, the monk makes it clear that it (based in the story of the image of Jesus that was sent to king Abgar of Edessa), is rather a question of yaqarnān, because “we honor the image of the king because of the king.” (§46).

In light of what we now know about the priority of the cross over the image, it perhaps does not come as a surprise that the Muslim in Disputation accepts the argument about images.

\footnote{361} Costaz, Syriac-English Dictionary, 220\footnote{362} Used in §32, §34, §37, §42, §43, §46, §47, §48, §49, §50.\footnote{363} Costaz, Syriac-English Dictionary, 144.\footnote{364} Used in §46, §47, §50.\footnote{365} That Disputation distinguishes between the two forms of worship, in likeness with the Greek tradition, could have consequences both for our dating of the text (it could probably more systematically confirm an 8th century hypothesis) and, it could probably place Disputation and the East Syriac tradition more thoroughly into a broader iconoclastic debate. Even if the Syriac Iconoclasm was articulated in relation to the Muslim challenge, sgd and yqr could prove to be a case of intra-Christian borrowings and fluid borders, where intellectuals relied on each other’s theological concepts even if they were separated on (other) doctrinal terms. However, to really dig into this matter one would need to more closely read Disputation with John of Damascus and other contemporaries in the East. This unfortunately falls outside the scope of this thesis and would have to be part of a larger philological and theological investigation of Syriac and Greek writings of the 7th and 8th century.\footnote{366} Costaz, Syriac-English Dictionary, 220.
without any objections, and that it is rather the cross and relics that calls for further debate and defense: For what reason do you worship the cross, since He does not command you (to do so) in his Gospel? (§47 Disputation).

Here the Muslim’s accusation is one of segdtā. It raises the question of revelation: “where did you get this from?” This is where the monk clarifies that Muslims and Christians alike have several sources for revelation in addition to their holy scriptures.367

So also in our case, some of the commandments our Lord taught us, and some of them the Holy Spirit spoke through the mouth of the Apostles his servants, and some of them he set up through the teachers (of the church), and he showed us the way of life and path of light. (§48 Disputation).

Moving on the core matter, the monk’s defense of worshipping the cross is one of the longest passages of Disputation. The language is soaked in expressions from Ephrem the Syrian, biblical allusions, references to wonders and thoroughly theological idioms.368 And It is mainly a lesson in symbolism.

One could initially think that the monk subscribes to the Muslim’s idea that Christians segdtā the cross as a created reality, because the monk uses segdtā himself at several occasion (we worship). However, as we move on in Disputation the monk makes clear that it is not idolatry but worship in fact, because:

when we worship the cross, it is not as though we are worshipping the wood, or iron or bronze, or gold, or silver,369 but we are worshipping our Lord, God the word, who dwelt in the temple (received) from us, and (dwells) in this sign of victory. (§48).

One immediately takes notice of the very important “this sign of victory.” The story of Constantine’s vision of the cross turns up in many Syriac writings and was in general very well

367 C.f. chapter above 4.4.4. The Cow, The Spider and Repentance.
368 E.g. §48 in Disputation: “Demons are put to flight by it, and all the sick are healed by it and lepers are purified by it and though we walk on water, and though its power we may enter fire, and we drive away wicked beast though its sign, and the unclean are cleansed by it, and brides are blessed by it, and greater than all of these things, baptism is effected through it, and the mysteries of the body and blood of Christ are consecrated through its sign, and we receive priesthood through its power, and, in absolute summary, through it we are at ease and are guarded against all injuries of the body and soul.”
369 The list of material in Disputation echoes of the list of proper material for a cross as it is listed in the introduction to The Legend of Sergius Bahirā, “Here it is said that the monk also rejected crosses made of materials other than wood, saying: ‘it is not proper for us to worship a cross of stone, silver, gold, copper or of any other material except wood, lest the matter would resemble to us the idols which the pagan peoples, the idolaters, make.’” Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Bahirā, 103.

83
And it is as if the monk even sets out to rehabilitate the cross in the minds of its audience. In light of the measures taken by the Umayyads during the 8th century to eradicate the cross from the public space, it would perhaps not be a surprise if there was a need to reclaim its status as it was torn down and knocked over by their Muslim neighbors. After all, in the words of Theodore Abu Qurrah (d. ca. 830):

> Many Christians are abandoning prostration to the icon of Christ our God … Anti-Christians, especially those claiming to have in hand a scripture sent down from God, are reprimanding them for their prostration to these icons, and because of it they are imputing to them the worship of idols, and the transgression of what God commanded in the Torah and the Prophets, and they sneer at them.”\(^{371}\)

The defense of the veneration of relics takes a somewhat more peculiar turn. The Muslim, in his inquiry about relics, asks why, because “there is no aid through them once the soul departs from the body.” To this the monk clarifies that it is not the martyrs that act through the relics, rather, it is God, “He who dwells in them and works miracles and signs though their bones.” This refers to a particular belief of the Church of the East called ‘the sleep of the soul.’ According to this the soul ‘sleeps’ from the moment of a person’s death till the day of resurrection and last judgement. Which is why it is not the martyr who responds to prayer, but “God who performed healings and miracles through the relics in response to Christian devotion.”\(^{372}\)

Taylor notes that there can often be a tension between official theology on the one side and popular belief on the other, which is how Taylor interprets the subsequent paragraph in *Disputation*, in which the monk seems to plainly contradict his earlier statement and holds that indeed the deceased saints *can* act as intercessors with God on one’s behalf: “They petition the counsellors of the Heavenly King, who are the prophets and the apostles and the blessed martyrs.” (§50).

While Taylor’s argument is valid indeed, one could also take the above as a hint of the monk’s reaching out, as it were, of making his text accessible to a wider audience. That Christian texts

---

370 Taylor, *Disputation*, footnote 180, 34.
372 Taylor, *Disputation*, footnote 185, 36.
in Late Antiquity circulated in different confessional milieux we know from The Legend of Sergius Bahîrā. That this could be true of Disputation as well is thus not altogether unlikely.

The defense of the veneration of the relics of martyrs (“we honor [yaqarnân] the martyrs” §50 Disputation), is conjoined to a collective defense of images and the cross:

All our worship, whether (directed) towards the icon or towards the cross, or the refuge in the martyrs to which we hold fast, it is Christ their Lord whom we hold fast, it is Christ their Lord whom we worship, and through petition to the member of his household we make our offering. (§50)

4.5.4. Concluding Remarks
We have seen that Christians at the time of Disputation experience an immense pressure concerning their veneration of icons, worshiping the cross and turning to the relics of martyrs for intercession. This pressure seems to come mostly from the outside, even if there are tensions regarding the status of the saints. Naturally, Disputation addresses these topics in accordance with its overreaching apologetical mission. However, we have also seen that iconoclasm, resistance to icons or images as such, was not a main concern, but that Disputation responds to particular hostility towards the veneration of cross and relics. To meet this challenge, the monk seeks to demonstrate that Christian practice is not within the biblical category of idolatry and the accusation of segdtâ of created things, and thoroughly places it into the realm of yaqarnân, because, only God is the object of worship. Thus, Disputation throws light on a fraught intellectual dispute between Muslims and Christians in the 8th century and exhibits some original argumentation in defense of Christian practices.

4.6. Mohammad’s Disciplina Arcani
Muḥammad’s role in Islam is a given. But from where did he receive his teachings? We saw in our chapter Muḥammad the Prophet that the Islamic tradition traces the source of his teachings back to the angel Gabriels’s iqra’. However, there is more to the story, and on this fact Muslims and Christians alike agreed: Muḥammad met and was taught by a Christian monk named Sergius Bahîrā. Even if Muslims and Christians had different ideas as to what happened and was said during this meeting, “they all agreed that it was hugely significant for a correct understanding of where Islam came from.”

---

373 Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Bahîrā, 5; 105.
374 Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Bahîrā, 1.
We will in the following see how *Disputation* is a witness to the popularity of *The Legend of Sergius Bahîrā* and how the Legend’s key claims are supported in *Disputation*. It seems that a popular apologetical method was to point out the ‘Christianness’ of the Muslim faith and thereby reducing Islam to little more than a movement of a heretical, charismatic leader leading Bedouins astray.

The Qurʾān makes the very important claim that it presents a continuation of what has been revealed already, but that it also is the late-come judge of what was, is, and continues to be true: “that which We have revealed to you, of the Book is the truth, confirming what was before it.” (Q 35:51). That the Muslim in *Disputation* (or any Muslim of the 8th century for that matter) wonders why Muḥammad did not teach them about the Christian faith (and in particular about the ‘mystery of the Trinity’) is in other words quite reasonable, (§33 *Disputation*), given the Qurʾān’s claim. The monk replies sardonically:

> You should know, O man, that a child when he is born, because he does not possess fully-formed senses (capable) of receiving whole food, they feed him with milk for two years, and (only) then do they give him food (consisting) of bread. So also Muḥammad, because he saw your childishness and your lack of knowledge, he first caused you to know the one true God, – teaching which he received from Sergius Bahîra. Because you were childlike in knowledge he did not teach you about the mystery of the Trinity, so that you should not go astray after multiple gods. (§34 *Disputation*).

Accordingly, on *Disputation*’s account, Muslims were not yet ready to understand the Trinity. This is of course an echo of traditional anti-Jewish polemics, but the monk ascribes this particular statement to one Sergius Bahîrā.

*The Legend of Sergius Bahîrā* was an immensely popular story that circulated in both West and East Syrian as well as Melkite and Coptic communities. According to the *The Legend*, Sergius Bahîrā taught Muḥammad what became the basics of Islam; the belief in the one God, the practice of prayer and fasting, and so on. In the dialogue between the two, Muḥammad’s response over and over again is that he cannot teach his Arab Bedouins the teachings which Sergius is putting before him, because “my companions are rough Bedouin Arabs” They are simply not capable of understanding Christian doctrine. Sergius has to dumb it down, so to

---

377 Ibid., 471.
Sergius consequently sneaks essentials of the Christian faith into the Qurʾān by way of symbols and practices, in his training of Muḥammad:

I designed all the matters of the prayer in a threefold manner and told him how to pray. I made its beginning threefold: when one gets up to pray one flattens the hand and puts it at both ears, as a confirmation of the Trinity and the main principle of the faith … And I also confirmed the Unified Trinity at the end of his prayer, turning one’s face to the right, and saying “Peach upon you, and God’s mercy”, then turning one’s face to the left, saying the same, and then to the front as well. I demonstrated this in the saying “O God, You are peace, and from You is peace and to you is peace”, which means: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, his Word and His Spirit from Him and to Him, the Son born from Him and returning to Him, and the Holy Spirit emanating from Him and uniform with Him.379

After a thorough introduction in Christian faith and practice, The Legend ends with Sergius’ reflection on Muḥammad’s person:

His mind could not grasp [the coming of Messiah, his Divinity and his humanity, the oneness of his name, the mysteries which the Lord has revealed] and the confession of the cursed Arius became firmly rooted in his mind, the unbelieving heretic who said ‘I believe that Christ the Word of God and the Son of God, but he is created, because he is a limited body’. And the message of the truthful prophecies, the clear proofs, the manifest testimonies and the evident miracles escaped him.380

Thus, when Disputation remarks on the “childlike” position of the Muslim faith, it does so in accordance with a tradition that has sought to explain away Muḥammad’s claim to prophethood by way of his teacher’s condescension. Not to mention that this acknowledges and encourages Christians to find hints of Christians doctrine in the Muslim faith in their own apologetical mission.

378 Roggema, The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā, 471.
379 Ibid., 473.
380 Ibid., 481.
Although learning is older than teachers and students, it becomes companion of the youth, So that it also may become all for all. It is teacher with the master and student with the disciples, that is, it teaches and learns, for it is striving on both sides.

5. Conclusion

We have in this thesis seen that *The disputation between a Muslim and a monk of Bēt Ḥālē* manifests itself as an apologetic work with a double purpose. The author of *Disputation* employs different strategies in an overarching goal of strengthening the identity of East Syrian Christians, by attacking and defending the faith from both Muslims and, occasionally, competing Christian communities. In the end, *Disputation* aims to foster a sense of distinctiveness – distinction from Muslims, and, in a more limited sense, from other Christian confessions. We have seen that this in fact is not unique for *Disputation*, but is demonstrated in other Syriac writings too such as that of Jacob of Edessa’s *Letters*. (2.3)

5.1. Recapitulating the Main Findings

In the pursuit to better understand the text, we looked at the essentials of apologetic study and found that one cannot really talk of apologetics as a genre, but should rather understand apologetical writings in terms of methods and strategies. Identity, it seems, is a fluid concept, but in order to defend one’s position against an opponent, early Christian apologists constructed fixed identities they could attack. (1.4)

Through Boyarin’s study of Justin Martyr we found an example of apologetics as a two-fold mission, and saw that a similar reading made sense for our study. On the one hand, *Disputation* protects the faith from Islam and in extension, gives its own definition of what Islam is. On the other hand, the monk of *Disputation* distinguishes his own faith from that of other Christian communities. Boyarin provided us with this double pursuit. (3.3.)

---

However, to be better equipped to recognize the strategies at work in *Disputation*, we briefly looked at the historical circumstances in which it was born. Muḥammad reinvented the Biblical figure of a prophet that made claims about both the religious and the political aspects of the life of his *umma*. However ironically, it is precisely the fight over the question of who the rightful leader of *umma* was, that divided it. Thus, 8th century Iraq was marked by the aftermath of the Arab/Islamic Conquest, as well as the interior battles within the *umma*. But with the rise of the Umayyad caliphate and the reforms of al-Malik and al-Walīd Islam became an ever more present factor in the lives of Christians and the themes found in *Disputation* needs to be read against the direct challenges brought on by the conquering Muslim religion. (2.4.) This is particularly true for the hypothesis of a self-imposed iconoclasm and the dissuasions of the cult of the cross, which we understood in the light of the Islamic reforms pertaining to public space. (4.5)

Still, it was not only Muslims that presented a challenge for our dyophysite monk and his community. Other Christians, and in particular miaphysites, also did. Thus, we looked at the very basics of the theological differences in the three major confessions of the Christians in the East. (2.5.) In *Disputation* we witness how the dyophysite and miaphysite communities were in a verbal conflict, arguing about particular theological understandings of certain terms (e.g. *hypostasis*) in relation to each other. However, it remains a fact that the study of Syriac texts through the perspective of intra-Christian doctrinal debate has proved to be a rather unstudied field, (2.5.). Still, we find it very likely that Christian texts such as *Disputation* could have circulated in different confessional milieux (4.5. and 4.4.). In *Disputation* this manifested itself in the occasional appearance of anti-miaphysite rhetoric on the one hand, mixed with an attitude of acceptance on the other. At any rate, anti-miaphysite concerns were secondary to the anti-Muslim. One of the most striking attacks on Islam in *Disputation* is its use of the Qurʾān to argue the case for Christian doctrine, as in the case with the Monk’s use of the Qurʾān’s ‘Word and Spirit’ (5.4). Indeed, it has been demonstrated through my analysis of *Disputation* that the relationship between the Qurʾān and *Disputation* (and Syriac writings) not merely is one of linguistic and philological nature, but of an intimate relationship of content, in which themes and expressions only find their right meaning when they are read together. (2.6.)

The study of the historical and literary context of *Disputation* has enabled some potentially original findings in this 8th century text, such as the demonstration of *Disputation*’s distinction between *segditā* and *yaqarnān*, which equals the Greek *latria* and *dulia*, (4.5). Further, we have
seen that the author of *Disputation* in several ways takes great care to not lend any further credibility or legitimacy to Islam, and I have argued for one such case in the monk’s use of sacrifice. While the monk certainly would have been familiar with the proper word for sacrifice in Islam (being that it is the main for word the Liturgy in Syriac, *qurbānā*), he goes out of his way to employ a word that only could have carried Christian connotations (*debḥāʾ*). The monk employed this creative rhetoric and as such tied the sacrifice of Abraham to Jesus in which the story found its fulfillment (typological exegesis). This could be understood as something of a testimony to the importance of Ephrem the Syrian, but the creative techniques in *Disputation* also echoes the Qurʾān’s rhetorical jargon about Christians, (2.6.).

My investigation of the arguments for and against an early date of compilation runs throughout the thesis (3.1. & 4.5.) and lands in the end at a confirmation of an early 8th century date of compilation. It is consequently very likely that *Disputation* it’s the earliest scriptural evidence for the anaphora of Nestorius (4.1.), the Qurʾān (2.6.), and *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā* (3.1.)

We have at numerous occasions noted how secondary scholarship have pointed out the reliance of *Disputation* on other texts, and through a close reading we have noted *Disputation*’s reliance on *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* (4.2.) and *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā* (3.4. and 4.4. and 4.6). This was made particularly apparent with the idea of the “childlike” position of the Muslim faith (4.6.).

5.2. Concluding Thoughts

In the end, *Disputation* stands as a witness to a time of conflict: between Christians and Muslims, and between Christians and (other) Christians. It is perhaps straightforward to state that *Disputation* is about apologetics as strengthening one’s identity in the face of the other, but the image that appears show that the identities of East Syriac Christians and Muslims were not all that fixed around the 8th century. There was a lot more sharing going than what is usually assumed, and arguments are clearly articulated in response to the rapid changing of the public space. Still, how come *Disputation* can critique its opponent in the one case and harshly stress points of difference, and in the other tone down obvious differences and rather set out to find common ground? I have found this tendency not only with respect to Christian-Muslim relations, where the uneven power dynamic can explain much, but also the theological disagreements between the miaphysites and the dyophysites. I find this tension most interesting.
and quite intriguing, and it does not really fit into the general idea of what apologetics are. The relation between the opponents seems in the latter case to be one of rivaling siblings, where a family peace ultimately must prevail, especially in the shadow of the mosque.

5.3. Suggestions for Further Research

The work on this thesis has acquainted me with the field of Christian-Muslim relations and the Syriac World of Late Antiquity. Through *Disputation*, I have gotten a sense of some of the topics that were of concern for Christians who needed to make sense of their new political situation. While I have the privilege to study some of the particularities in this texts, there are several leads I simply could not follow up on (given the time frame of less than an academic semester’s work), but that I believe deserve an investigation in the future, and I will give a brief introduction to these here.

1) *Disputation*, like many other texts, brings up the importance of prayer facing the East (§51-52). Taylor notes how the garden of Eden (Gen 2:8) in the Septuagint translation is said to be planted ‘in the East’ and that Jesus in Matthew 24:27 says that “the second coming of the Son of Man will be like the lightning that comes from the East.” But in stressing the importance of prayer to the East, he states that “Christ our Lord also prayed to the East”(§52). Still, there is no obvious scriptural evidence for Christ being a “model” in this respect. In fact, praying to the East is usually proposed as a way of facing towards Christ, not emulating him. John of Damascus makes no mention of Christ himself praying toward the east, nor does *The Legend of Sergius Bahîrâ*. This appears to be an invention by *Disputation*’s author, which it would be interesting to learn the possible significance of.

2): *Disputation*’s references to the Qurʾān call for further investigation. I have in this thesis commented upon a couple of them, but they need to be read in the fuller Qurʾānic context. It is clear that the author of *Disputation* exhibits intimate knowledge of the Qurʾān, and I believe that a closer reading of the two would open up and lend meaning to not only *Disputation*, but the Qurʾān as well. Once we have established that Christians and Muslims in fact had a lot of contact we can ask the subsequent question of influence. Not only scriptural (i.e. Qurʾān) but also in the evolving theological traditions. For example, what do we make of particular Muslim

---

383 Ibid., footnote 187.
traditions and their occasional parallels with Christians traditions? As in the Shīʿte idea of Ali: how can it be read as a parallel to Jesus? Speaking of theological loci of a faith: what can we say about the different loci in the contemporaneous thought-world of Christianity and Islam respectively? Are there parallels to be drawn between the Eucharist and the Qurʾān? And how do the traditions on Ali (al-Ṭabarī, among others) relate to Syriac writings?

3): Disputation draws on Christian sources alien to the Church of the East. That is to say, there are, as we have seen in this thesis, a bit of borrowing from the miaphysite tradition. Was there more sharing going on? If so, how should we understand the theological disagreements of the time? What did the arrival of Islam mean for the divided Christians communities in this geographical area? There is a lot of uncovered ground here.

It seems to me that some borders in fact have been too fixed, which are those between scholarly disciplines. Future scholarship needs to draw not only on cross-philological studies, but also include the disciplinary diversity of Late Antiquity, Islamic studies, and Early Christianity in order to better understand any given text from this time and place.
6. Bibliography

Primary Sources


Chabot, Jean Baptiste, ed. Synodicon Orientale, 1902.

Leo. Epistola XXVIII. Ad Flavianum Episcopum Constantinopolitanum Contra Eutychis Perfidiam Et Haeresin.


Secondary Literature


