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THE QUR'ĀN: KALĀM ALLĀH OR WORDS OF MAN? A CASE OF *TAFSĪR* TRANSCENDING MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN COMMUNAL BORDERS*

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For the three monotheistic religions, the concept of "scripture" – both the contents thereof and its definition – frequently serves as a line of demarcation. Jews do not accept the "New Testament"; Christians and Jews do not accept the Qur'ān as from God; and Muslims accept neither the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament[1] as comparable with the Qur'ān as "Word of God." In the light of such "borders", the fact of inter-confessional examination of the scripture of the "other" – and the common claim that what the "other" considers "scripture" is in fact the result of mere human efforts - is particularly intriguing. As the Qur'ān itself speaks of the "Torah" and the "Gospel", Muslims were prompted to examine the scriptures of the Christians and the Jews from an early period[2]. And, while there is more or less extensive documentation of medieval (and modern) European examination of

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1) Whereas the Qur'ān does acknowledge Jews and Christians as "Peoples of the Book", later Muslim tradition explained that the original "[revealed] books" given to the Jews and the Christians were corrupted by them: in the Islamic purview, neither the Pentateuch nor the Hebrew Bible in its entirety is equivalent to the qur'ānic *tawrāt*, nor is the *injīl* (cf. e.g. Q 3:65; 5:110) identifiable as either the four Gospels or the New Testament.

2) E.g. Ibn Ḥazm (383-456/994-1064), one of the earliest and perhaps the best known of such Muslim biblical "exegetes". For a recent survey of these discussions, see M. ACCAD, «The gospels in the Muslim discourse of the ninth to the fourteenth centuries. An exegetical inventorial table» (parts 1-4), in *Islam and Christian-Muslim relations* 14/1-4 (2003), pages vary by issue.

the Qur'ān[3], similar efforts on the part of Christians (and Jews) living within the Islamic world have not been as widely studied (at least in western scholarship[4]). As Christians and Jews living within the Islamic world appear to have been forbidden from examining the Qur'ān at an early period[5], the sparse references to similar cross-confessional examination of the Qur'ān is perhaps not surprising. But the lacunae in the documentation of such efforts do not mean that they were non-existent.

1. *QUR'ĀNIC "CORRUPTION"* (TAḤRĪF AL-QUR'ĀN)

Early Arab Christian use of and familiarity with the qur'ānic text has been demonstrated – particularly by Khalil[6], and a convincing argument has

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3) Cf. e.g. T. BURMAN, *Religious polemic and the intellectual history of the Mozarabs, c. 1050-1200*, Leiden, 1994, esp. 125-56 («'That which his followers related from him': The Mozarabs' polemical use of Islamic tradition»); H. BOBZIN, «Pre-1800 preoccupations of qur'ānic studies», in J.D. MCAULIFFE (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Leiden, 2004, IV, 235-53; M. SCHOELLER, «Post-enlightenment academic study of the Qur'ān», in J.D. MCAULIFFE (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Leiden, 2004, IV, pp. 187-208.

4) One factor in the paucity of western research on this aspect of the history of the relations among the Abrahamic religions is the tendency of scholars of Islam [the majority of Arabists] to focus on Muslim authors, and the unfamiliarity of most scholars of Christianity with Arabic – or many languages of the Christian east. For an example of eastern Christian scholarship on the subject, see P. Khoury, *al-Tafsīr al-masīḥiyy lil-Qur'ān min al-qarn al-thāmin ḥattā l-qarn al-thānī 'ashar*, Juneih, 2002. My thanks to Ibrahim Hanna for bringing this work to my attention.

5) cf. the terms of the "Covenant of 'Umar," in, e.g., A.S. TRITTON, *The caliphs and their non-Muslim subjects. A critical study of the Covenant of 'Umar*, London 1970. But see S. GRIFFITH, "Faith and reason in Christian Kalām: Theodore Abū Qurrah on discerning the true religion", in S. Kh. SAMIR and J.S. NIELSEN (eds.), *Christian Arabic apologetics during the Abbasid period (750-1258)*, Leiden, 1994, pp. 1-43, esp. p. 2, for the argument that in the early period of Islam Christians were extremely conversant with the qur'ānic text.

6) E.g. S. KHALIL, «The earliest Arabic apology for Christianity (c. 750)», in id. and J.S. NIELSEN (eds.), *Christian Arabic apologetics...*, pp. 57-114; M. SWANSON, «Beyond prooftexting. Approaches to the Qur'ān in some early Arabic Christian apologies», in *The Muslim world* 88 (1998), 297-319. Although Christians came to write in Arabic at least by the first 'Abbāsid century (i.e. 200/800), our knowledge of the extent of their familiarity with the qur'ānic text – as well as the "canonical" form of that text – is still rather shadowy. Following Khalil, the "father" of Christian Arab studies, a number of scholars have brought attention to the familiarity of Christians who wrote in Arabic with the text of the Qur'ān. See, among others, S.H. GRIFFITH, «The Qur'ān in Arab Christian texts. The development of an apologetical argument. Abū Qurrah in the *maǧlis* of al-Ma'mūn», in *PdO* 24 (1999), pp. 203-33, as well as that of E. Platti on al-Kindī [see below, n. 18]; D. THOMAS and R. EBIED (eds.), *Muslim-Christian polemic during the Crusades. The letter from the people of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimašqī's response*, Leiden, 2005. In Syriac, J. Amar has worked on the writings of Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī, and R. Ebied is bringing to light the works of Bar Hebraeus, while A. Mingana already in the early 20th century published the dialogue of the Nestorian Catholicos

been made for a direct Christian influence on theological trends in Islam[7] in the first ʿAbbāsid century (i.e. 132-235/750-850). Presuming such an environment of informed inter-confessional interaction, the following will explore an unusual charge of scriptural corruption (taḥrīf) leveled at the Qur'ān that is attributed to a Rūm Orthodox[8] bishop of Ḥarrān in the early ʿAbbāsid period. Due to the allusive nature of the Christian text, the charge only makes sense when read in the light of classical Islamic works of Qur'ān exegesis (tafsīr). But, conversely, the Christian text may help us obtain an insight on the approaches to the canonical text of the Qur'ān that existed in the formative period of classical Islamic civilization.

The accepted understanding of the codification of the Qur'ān for the majority of Muslims is as follows: within a generation of Muḥammad's death, the Qur'ān text that we have today had been established. This tradition places the codification of the Arabic Qur'ān in the reign of the third 'rightly guided caliph' – ʿUthmān (r. 23-35/644-56) – and prior to the sectarian/political divisions arising during ʿAlī's rule (r. 35-40/656-61), and well before the Umayyad (40-132/661-750) – or ʿAbbāsid (132-655/750-1258) dynasties. For the most part, western scholarship accepts this traditional Muslim account of the compilation and codification of the qur'ānic text[9] (arguing that

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Timothy I with the caliph al-Mahdi (r. 158-68/775-85). For Christianity in Arabia in the pre-Islamic period, the works of I. Shahîd are invaluable.

7) Although «[t]here is as yet no completely satisfactory general history of the growth and development of the Islamic *ʿilm al-kalām*... (cf. S. GRIFFITH, *Faith and reason*, 1 n. 1), [o]ne has every reason to believe that the Islamic *ʿilm al-kalām* originally grew out of the early participation of Muslims in the styles of scholarly discussion Christian academicians and intellectuals employed in the Greco-Syrian milieux of the Christian centres of learning in the oriental patriarchates» (ibid., p. 2; cf. also the following, cited by GRIFFITH: J.Van ESS, «Disputationspraxis in der islamischen Theologies, eine vorläufige Skizze», in *Revue des études islamiques* 44 [1976], pp. 23-60; M. COOK, «The origins of Kalām», in *BSOAS* 43 [1980], pp. 32-43).

8) These Christians are commonly called "Melkites" by their [non-Chalcedonian] Christian detractors. This latter term (lit. "king's men", and likely of pre-Islamic Syriac origin – but the first extant attestation of which is in the Arabic writings of the ninth-century Syrian Orthodox Abū Rāʾiṭa) was applied to those Christians living in the Islamic milieu who accepted the first six ecumenical councils (including the Council of Chalcedon), and who used Arabic in their liturgies. Although "Melkite" is the common designation of these Christians (particularly by those outside of the community), as this term originated as a pejorative designation, and as today "Melkite" designates those Rūm Orthodox who are in communion with Rome, the following will discuss those Christians living under the ʿAbbāsids who accepted the first six ecumenical councils as "Rūm Orthodox".

9) John BURTON (*The collection of the Qur'ān*, Cambridge 1977; and, more recently, *The sources of Islamic law. Islamic theories of abrogation*, Edinburgh 1990) proffers an interesting suggestion that places the codification of the qur'ānic text even earlier than the Muslim account: within the lifetime of Muḥammad. According to Burton's thesis, the traditional Mus-

even epigraphic traces and recent finds of early Qur'ān manuscripts – such as those in the mosque of Ṣan'ā' – do not yield significant textual variants on the so-called 'Uthmānic codex in use today). The more radical examples of modern revisionist scholarship, however, question the place and date of this process[10] – and some even express skepticism as to the original "Arabic" nature of the Qur'ān[11].

In the light of these conflicting claims, an intriguing – but little-studied – aspect of Christian Arabic apologetic works is the charge that Muslims have distorted the Qur'ān, an accusation belonging more properly to inter-Muslim polemics. For such a charge of scriptural corruption implies an original scripture that was NOT corrupt, or that at least was more correct than the scripture used by contemporary Muslims (an echo of the Muslim/Qur'ān charge that Jews/Christians have distorted their scriptures[12]). Although the claims that Muḥammad knowingly led people astray, and that the Qur'ān is a heretical and/or erroneous book are far more frequent in Christian polemical or even apologetic writings[13], some early Christian Arabic texts charge later Muslims with distorting or corrupting the received qur'ānic text – a theme also found in the works of some "sects" of Muslims, such as

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lim placement of the codification of the qur'ānic text after the death of Muḥammad allowed for legal exegetical "wiggle room".

10) 8th century Iraq: J. WANSBROUGH, *Quranic studies. Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation*, Oxford, 1977; ID., *The sectarian milieu*, Oxford, 1978; 7th century Palestine: P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. The making of the Islamic world*, New York, 1977.

11) e.g. G. LÜLING, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān. Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān*, Erlangen, 1974 (1993²), in which the words of the qur'ānic text are sometimes altered to better fit the author's thesis that underlying the Qur'ān is a Christian hymnic composition; Eng. trans. *A challenge to Islam for reformation*, Delhi, 2003; C. LUXENBERG, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin, 2000; here, the argument is sometimes proffered that certain of the "difficult" (Arabic) qur'ānic terms are better understood (and, at times, rewritten), as *Syriac* lexemes. For a recent overview of these theses, see e.g. Cl. GILLIOT, *Un non-musulman cultivé et un chercheur occidental face au Coran*, on http://www.up.univ-mrs.fr/oriental/abthis/pages/publications/articles/auticgilliot.htm.

12) cf. e.g. Q 2:42, 59, 75-9; 3:71, 78; 4:46; 5:13, 41; 6:91; 7:162.

13) E.g. the classic Greek diatribe on "the heresy of the Ishmaelites", which is attributed to John of Damascus. This text, found in D. SAHAS, *John of Damascus on Islam. The «Heresy of the Ishmaelites»*, Leiden, 1972, pp. 132-41 (Greek original and English trans.), enjoyed wide circulation outside of the Arabic speaking Islamic world. For a listing of and excerpts from other such early texts from within and outside of the Islamic world, see J.M. GAUDEUL, *Encounters and clashes. Islam and Christianity in history*, 2 vols., Rome, 2000, esp. II, pp. 15-39.

Khārijīs or Muʿtazila[14].

While this charge is similar to the Shīʿī claim that the Sunnīs suppressed certain passages – particularly those that mentioned ʿAlī or the imāms – or slightly altered the reading of certain words in the received text of the Qur'ān (e.g. replacing aʾimma, leaders, with umma, community[15]), it must be noted that (at least since the 4th/10th century) the Imāmī Shīʿīs claim only that passages have been omitted[16]. They do NOT claim that the accepted canonical/codified text of the Qur'ān contains any passages that should not be there. And, although some scholarly attention has been devoted to the Shīʿī claims of Sunnī distortion of the original Qur'ān[17], to date little attention has been paid to other Muslim or early Christian Arab discussions about the "established" qur'ānic text[18]. Although the tone of early Christian discussions of

14) Khārijīs would say that the twelfth sūra, Yūsuf, is not part of the Qur'ān as it is a love story – similar to the rejection of the Song of Songs on the part of certain Jewish and Christian groups (my thanks to Prof. Neuwirth for drawing my attention to the former point, and to Prof. I. Shahîd, for this last point). See below for discussion of Muʿtazilī claims that the received text of the Qurʾān has been tampered with.

15) E.g. at Q 3:110; 2:143.

16) My thanks to David Thomas for prompting the clarification of this comparison with Shīʿī charges of scriptural corruption. See M.M. BAR-ASHER, «Shīʿism and the Qur'ān», in J.D. MCAULIFFE, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Leiden, 2004, IV, pp. 593-604, for further discussion of Shīʿī claims that the ʿUthmānic codex in the possession of the Sunnīs, while incomplete, does not contain falsifications. See also E. KOHLBERG, «Some notes on the Imāmite attitude to the Qur'ān», in S.M. STERN, A. HOURANI, and V. BROWN (eds.), *Islamic philosophy and the classical tradition. Essays presented to Richard Walzer*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 209-24; H. MODARRESSI, «Early debates on the integrity of the Qur'ān. A brief survey», in *Studia islamica* 77 (1993), pp. 5-39.

17) Although arguably more work could be done on Shīʿī claims of qur'ānic corruption prior to the fourth/tenth century. See BAR-ASHER, «Shīʿism and the Qur'ān», for a current bibliography of such scholarship.

18) For some Muslim concerns, see e.g. I. GOLDZIHER, *Introduction to Islamic theology and law*, trans. A. and R. HAMORI, Princeton, 1981; cf. also E. FRANCESCA, «Khārijīs», in J.D. MCAULIFFE (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Leiden, 2003, III, pp. 84-90; S. SCHMIDTKE, «Muʿtazila», in J.D. MCAULIFFE (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'n*, Leiden, 2003, III, pp. 466-71. The relevant passages found in the early third/ninth (?) century correspondence between [the Nestorian?] «ʿAbd al-Masīḥ b. Isḥāq al-Kindī» and the Muslim «ʿAbdallāh b. Ismāʿīl al-Hāshimī», is perhaps the earliest of such Christian discussions. [Although the text is presented as a correspondence between a Christian and a Muslim in the court of the Caliph al-Maʾmūn, it is apparent from the detail of the Christian side that both parts are a Christian composition; cf. GAUDEUL, *Encounters*, I, pp. 53-7, for a brief discussion of this text; cf. also the forthcoming work of E. Platti on al-Kindī.] S.H. GRIFFITH («The prophet Muhammad. His scripture and his message according to the Christian apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the 1st Abbasid century», in *La vie du prophète Mahomet. Colloque du Strasbourg [Octobre 1980]*, Paris, 1983, pp. 99-146) alludes to al-Kindī's discussion as one of the earliest attestations to the process of the codification of the Qur'ān – although he cautions against using it

the Qur'ān is often hostile, some texts from the Rūm Orthodox community (the first Christians to write in Arabic[19]) adopt a conciliatory tone. For example, at least two early texts from this community allude to the Qur'ān as "among the books of God" (min kutub Allāh) and use the Qur'ān as frequently as they do the Bible to prove the truth of Christian doctrines[20].

2. ABŪ QURRA'S CHARGE OF TAḤRĪF AL-QUR'ĀN

One of these texts, available since 1999 in an edition of I. Dick[21] is the debate of the ninth century Bishop of Ḥarrān, Theodore Abū Qurra (ca. 137-214/755-830)[22], with a number of Muslim notables before the caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 197-217/813-33). While the bulk of the discussion follows the traditional lines of Arabic apologies for Christianity[23], in the course of the

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too literally due to its polemical nature; cf. al-Kindī's apology, trans. in Eng., in N.A. NEWMAN (ed.), *The early Christian-Muslim dialogue. A collection of documents from the first three Islamic centuries (632-900 AD). Trans. with comment.*, Hatfield, PA 1993, esp. pp. 452 f.

19) In the words of KHALIL (*The earliest Arab apology for Christianity*, pp. 110-11): «...according to the documents in our possession, the Arabic Christian theology probably originated in Palestine in Melkite circles... I will assign to this same period the numerous apologies of Theodore Abū Qurrah, and the apologetical section of the anonymous *Summa theologica* entitled *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*».

20) cf. e.g. folio 181^{v} of Sinai Arabic 434, ff. 171^{r} – 181^{v} [available in microfiche from the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.] and the debate of Theodore Abū Qurra in the court of al-Ma'mūn, edited in I. DICK (ed.), *La discussion d'Abū Qurra avec les ulémas musulmans devant le calife al-Ma'mūn*, Aleppo, 1999, esp. pp. 95, 98, 107-8, 110-11.

21) Wafik Bishai, a student of S. Khalil at PISAI, is preparing a critical edition of Abū Qurra's for his thesis at PISAI in Rome. It is hoped that this critical edition may clarify some of the textual questions noted below. S.H. Griffith is also preparing an English translation of Dick's edition.

22) Again according to KHALIL (*The earliest Arab apology for Christianity*, pp. 110-11), this "first phase" of the "'Abbāsid apologetical movement", in which Abū Qurra took part, ranged "from more or less the middle of the Eighth to the middle of the Ninth century", and utilized primarily "a biblical and homiletical approach". For more on Theodore and his debate, cf. S. GRIFFITH, *Theodore Abū Qurrah. The intellectual profile of an Arab Christian writer of the first Abbasid century*, Annual Lecture Tel-Aviv University, The Irene Halmos Chair of Arabic Literature, Tel Aviv, 1992 (see p. 23 for the manuscript tradition of this text, which circulated mainly in Rūm Orthodox circles, the earliest being from the early 15th cent.). See also S.H. GRIFFITH, «The monk in the emir's *majlis*. Reflections on a popular genre of Christian literary apologetics in Arabic in the early Islamic period», in H. LAZARUS-YAFEH et al. (eds.), *The majlis. Interreligious encounters in medieval Islam*, Berlin, 1999, pp. 13-65, for a discussion of other such debates.

23) E.g. the divinity/humanity of Christ; his conception and crucifixion; the unity/triune nature of God. While the structure (and some themes) of such argumentation follows that of Syriac Christian arguments against Judaism [see esp. J. NEUSNER, *Aphrahat and Judaism. The Christian-Jewish argument in fourth-century Iran*, Leiden, 1971], the Christian Arabic apologies also address those qur'ānic verses that touch on Christological and

debate, Abū Qurra addresses the charge that the Bible has been corrupted with an enigmatic accusation that touches upon qur'ānic passages that are unlikely participants in Christian-Muslim debates:

> "If you knew the certain truth, you would know that your scripture is the one that is corrupted (distorted; huwa alladhī ḥurrifa)".
> The Iraqi said, "How is that, O Abū Qurra?"
> "You will certainly know it, if God, exalted be he, so wills.
> Tell me, O Muslim, whether you [O Muslim] speak a lie against your lord in that he says, 'We have given you abundance [1], so pray to your lord and slaughter [a sacrifice] [2]. The one who hates you[24] is the one without offspring. [3]' (Q 108:1-3) Tell me, O Muslim, who is this enemy, the one without offspring (*al-abtar*)?
> Also, where it says, 'Perish the hands of Abū Lahab, perish[25]. [1]
> Neither what he has[26] nor what he has acquired enriches him.

Trinitarian issues, as well as those passages that explicitly discuss Christian beliefs and practices, as illustrated by the following excerpt from Abū Qurra's debate (p. 107 of Dick's ed.):

Abū Qurra said, «You [corrupt/distort] your own scripture, O Muslim, glory be to God almighty. How worthless is your opinion, how insignificant your thinking, how blind your heart, and how weak your argument, for you demean your own scripture. You give the lie to the sayings of your own prophet when he says, 'You will find the People of the Gospel making judgments by what was sent down to them from their lord. Among them are priests and monks and they do not act arrogantly. They are closest in affection to those who believe' (cf. Q 5:47, 82). Your scripture calls us believers, but you name us infidels (*kāfirīn*), polytheists (*mushrikīn*), 'corrupters' (distorters: *muḥarrifīn*). You mean to blame us falsely and you hope thereby to be saved from blame». Note Abū Qurra's selective reading (if not willful misreading) of certain passages when he invokes the Qur'ān in support of Christianity. For qur'ānic verses that express a different opinion of Christians and Christianity than that which Abū Qurra wishes to emphasize, cf. e.g. Q 5:17-18, 72-3. For discussion of Christians as the qur'ānic mušrikūn see G. R. HAWTING, *The idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam, From polemic to history*, Cambridge, 1999.

24) *Sha'naka*; in the 'Uthmānic codex, this word is read "*shāni'aka*"; but cf. e.g. the variant readings listed in A. 'UMAR and 'A. al-'Ā. S. MUKRAM, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt al-qur'āniyya*, 8 vols., Kuwait, 1992, VIII, 253.

25) *Tabbat yadā Abī Lahab wa-tabbat*, rather than the *tabbat yadā Abī Lahab wa-tabba* of the 'Uthmānic codex. Although no similar canonical variants are recorded, the "perishing" of Abū Lahab indicated by the third masculine singular perfect *tabba* in the 'Uthmānic codex was problematic for later [theologically-tinged?] exegetical discussions on this verse. For an overview of the exegetical problems with the "'Uthmānic" *wa-tabba*, see U. RUBIN, «Abū Lahab and Sura CXI», in A. RIPPIN (ed.), *The Qur'ān. Style and contents*, Ashgate, 2001, pp. 269-86, esp. 274-8 (cf. also the *tafāsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān [d. 150/767], al-Tha'labī [d. 472/1035], al-Rāzī [d. 606/1210] and al-Qurṭubī [d. 671/1272], ad loc.).

26) In the 'Uthmānic codex, this verse reads: *mā aghnā 'anhu māluhu wa-mā kasaba* ("neither his wealth [*māluhu*] nor what he has acquired enriches him"). In Dick's edition of Theodore, this passage is rendered: *mā aghnā 'anhu wa-mā lahu wa-mā kasaba*. The insertion of an additional *waw* after the verbal phrase encourages the reading of [*wa-*]*mā lahu*, "[neither] what he has" – instead of *māluhu*, "his wealth". No such variants are recorded.

> [2]...[3][27] His wife [is] a carrier of firewood. [4] A rope of palm fiber will be upon her foot[28]. [5]' (Q 111:1-5) This is something bearing no resemblance to inspiration and revelation. It is not true that your messenger said any of this[29]".

This passage, to which no Muslim response is recorded, concludes the section on scriptural corruption (it should be noted that the major part of this section of Abū Qurra's argument, is devoted to the Christian defense of the Bible against such charges, rather than an attack on the Qur'ān).

In the passage just quoted, Abū Qurra cites two short qur'ānic sūras (Q 108 and 111) albeit – in Dick's edition - with some slight variations[30] – as proof of the "corruption" (taḥrīf) of the Qur'ān. His choice of these passages is first of all noteworthy because they have nothing to do with traditional arguments found in Christian apologetics. Secondly, although Abū Qurra's treatment of the passages cannot itself be termed tafsīr, the allusive nature of his remarks indicates that he is echoing a discussion already present in his milieu. Therefore, a brief examination of what the Islamic tradition says on these passages is in order.

3. ISLAMIC EXEGESIS OF Q 108 AND 111

In Muslim Qur'ān exegesis, much ink has been spent on these brief chapters – of 3 and 5 verses, respectively. Q 108 is the enigmatic chapter of "al-Kawthar" – a concept that later Muslim tradition went to great lengths to explain – the general consensus being that it is a river in paradise. Intrigu-

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27) Abū Qurra omits the third verse of the 'Uthmānic version of this sūra: "He will enter a fire of burning flame" (*sayaṣlā nāran dhāta lahabín*). As this verse is understood to foretell Abū Lahab's eschatological punishment, and as it became one of the *crux interpreta*, pointing to the "miraculous" predictive value of this sūra, its omission is noteworthy. See below for further discussion of the arguments for the miraculous nature of this chapter.

28) Instead of "her foot" (*rijlihā*), the 'Uthmānic codex reads "her neck" (*jīdihā*).

29) This passage is found in DICK, *Le débat...*, 108. Abū Qurra continues: "Rather, he said, 'I was sent the Qur'ān confirming what came in the Gospel and the Torah' (cf. Q 3:3) And he also spoke of Muslim men and women, and of men and women believers (cf. Q 33:35). So tell me, O Muslim, who are the Muslims and who are the believers?"

30) See notes 24-28 above. My thanks to Professor Angelika Neuwirth for encouraging the comparison with the known variant readings of the Qur'ān. As the variations noted in Dick's edition of Abū Qurra's text do not conform to any of the known variant readings and serve no obvious theological agenda, it seems most likely that his citation errors have no intended polemical purpose, but are rather merely the result of the vagaries of human memory. Another detail worthy of note is that throughout the debate, sūra is spelled with a *ṣād* and not a *sīn*, a peculiarity also reflected in some early works on the Qur'ān emerging from Spain (cf. BURMAN, *Religious polemic*, pp. 87-8).

ingly, Abū Qurra is more concerned with the identity of al-abtar than with a definition of al-kawthar. The next passage that Abū Qurra quotes, Q 111, is traditionally understood as a curse on one of Muḥammad's uncles who did not heed his prophecy[31].

While both of these passages came to be used by Muslim exegetes to "prove" the miraculous or inimitable nature of the Qur'ān[32], "heterodox" strains in the Islamic tradition also reflect doubts as to the inimitable merits of these two chapters: Within a century after the death of Abū Qurra, Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. ca. 298/910-11), records a tradition that claims that there is "better than" Q 108:1[33]. Although possibly a "freethinker" (zindīq)[34] at his death, early in his life this elusive figure[35] was a proponent of the Mu'tazila, the so-called "rationalist" Muslim theological trend that by the fourth/tenth century was considered heterodox. Other such "rationalist" Mu'tazilīs rejected "those parts of the Qur'ān in which the prophet utters curses against his enemies"[36] as being part of the holy book revealed by God. According to them, God could not have called passages such as Q 111 "a noble Qur'ān on a well-guarded tablet" (Q 85:21-2)[37].

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31) For a recent discussion of scholarship on this sūra, see RUBIN, «Abū Lahab».

32) Sūrat al-Kawthar is frequently put forth as proof that people cannot produce anything comparable to even the shortest sūra [cf. C. GILLIOT, «Le Coran. Fruit d'un travail collectif?», in D. DESMET, G. de CALLATAY and J. VAN REETH (eds.), *Al-kitāb. La sacralité du texte dans le monde de l'Islam. Actes du Symposium International tenu à Leuven et Louvain-la-Neuve du 29 may au 1 juin 2002*, Brussels, 2003, pp. 185-231, esp. pp. 220-2]. For example, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) praises the predictive value, knowledge of the unseen and style of these 3 verses. He also commends Q 111 for its 'miraculous' predictive value, i.e. of Abū Lahab's unbelief and ultimate fate (*Tafsīr*, ad loc.; cf. also al-Tha'labī [d. 427/1035], *Tafsīr*, ad loc.).

33) cf. VAN ESS, *TG*, vi, 472-3. For a brief discussion (and a recent 'revisionist' reading) of this "troublesome" chapter, see GILLIOT, *Non-musulman*, p. 5, sect. 6: "La lecture syro-araméenne du Coran".

34) For an overview of this concept, see S. STROUMSA, *Free thinkers of medieval Islam. Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and their impact on Islamic thought*, Leiden, 1999.

35) Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq is a somewhat better attested individual who was likely behind Ibn al-Rāwandī. See D. THOMAS, *Anti-Christian polemic in early Islam. Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's 'Against the Trinity'*, Cambridge, 1992, esp. pp. 3-30. My thanks to David Thomas for bringing this connection to my attention.

36) cf. GOLDZIHER, *Introduction*, 173. My thanks to Walid Saleh (University of Toronto), who first brought the Mu'tazila rejection of Q 111 to my attention. For a recent overview of the early history of qur'ānic exegesis, see W. SALEH, *The formation of the classical* tafsīr *tradition. The Qur'ān commentary of al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035)*, Brill, 2004.

37) Referencing al-Rāzī's [d. 606/1210] *tafsīr*, U. RUBIN («Abū Lahab», p. 274 n. 36) argues that Q 111:1 «seems to be the main reason for the Mu'tazila's rejection of our sūra because it excludes from the outset any possibility of repentance on the part of Abū Lahab... This point has not yet been explained by Western scholars [Fischer, Barth, Goldziher, all of

The conflicting traditions relating to these chapters indicate a history of tumultuous and varied interpretation. But Islamic tradition[38] is not forthcoming as to the reasons for or nuances of the varied interpretations. Might a Christian Arabic text – such as Abū Qurra's debate – that presumably was not subject to the dictates of what came to be Islamic orthodoxy, enable us to gain insight to the history of this interpretative tradition?[39]

For the present discussion, two points of Abū Qurra's comments are noteworthy:

1. The question, *man huwa hādhā l-ʿaduww al-abtar?* ("Who is this enemy, the one cut off/without offspring?")
2. His conjunction of Q 108 and 111 as proof of qur'ānic corruption.

Abū Qurra's question "Who is this enemy, the abtar?" indicates that al-abtar, rather than al-kawthar, may have been a crux interpretum for Q 108:3. While exegesis on Q 108 devotes much space to definitions of al-kawthar, it is fairly unanimous in its identification of al-abtar: al-ʿAṣṣ b. Wāthir, a Qurashī vehemently opposed to Muḥammad. But, a lone tradition in al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1210) tafsīr brings us to the second point – the conjunction of Q 108 and 111 as proof of qur'ānic corruption.

For al-Rāzī, an encyclopedic and highly logical exegete who has preserved much Muʿtazila material in his arguments[40], records a minority understanding of al-abtar as Abū Lahab, the individual explicitly cursed in Q 111. Abū Qurra's debate, which takes place in the court of the well-known pro-

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whom are cited by Rubin] who dealt with the Mu'tazili attitude towards our sūra». In this context it is interesting to note that al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) addresses the question of whether the passage could have been in the *umm al-kitāb* – but with a twist: he reports an objection that the *umm al-kitāb* could not contain reference to something not yet created, and responds that there is another example: God wrote the Torah before he created Adam – but Adam is still mentioned in the Torah (cf. QURṬUBĪ, *Tafsīr*, ad loc.).

38) E.g. early exegetical works (those of Muqātil [d. 150/767] or al-Ṭabarī [d. 310/923]) record no traces of a conflicted understanding of these verses. Such early works are intent on explaining the meanings of certain "difficult" words – but theological issues are largely absent from their discussions of these passages. It is, rather, the works of later exegetes which retain traces of Muʿtazilite arguments (even if, in some cases, only to refute them) that have the most detailed accounts of (often theologically-charged) interpretations of these verses (see n. 44 below for some discussion of the timeframe for the conflicted understandings of Q 111 and 108).

39) Although our sūras do not appear, compare the similar charges in al-Kindī's "Apology", as discussed in GRIFFITH, *The prophet Muhammad*.

40) See SCHMIDTKE, "*Muʿtazila*", pp. 469-71, for other such exegetes who have preserved Muʿtazilī material.

ponent of the Muʿtazilīs, the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Ma'mūn, may help establish the background for al-Rāzī's minority understanding of al-abtar in Q 108:3 as Abū Lahab, and also the conflicting interpretive tradition on Q 108 and 111.

4. POLITICS AND EXEGESIS?

For, although they trace their roots to the late Umayyad period (Wāṣil b. ʿAṭāʾ, d. 131/728-9), the "glory-days" of the Muʿtazila were in the first ʿAbbāsid century, in Baghdad. Like their predecessors, the Umayyads[41], the ʿAbbāsid caliphate claimed their legitimacy to rule the Muslim community in part because of their familial ties to Muḥammad (both dynasties claimed to be of the "people of the house" from the tribe of Quraysh). But, in contrast to the Umayyads, the ʿAbbāsids narrowed the definition of "people of the house" to the clan of Hāshim, the descendants of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, the paternal grandfather of Muḥammad[42]. This limiting of the "people of the house" could include the descendants of Fāṭima and ʿAlī, but exclude the Umayyad lineage.

Later legal discussions frequently focus on the "virtues" of the (Hāshimī) family of the Prophet – often to justify the ʿAbbāsid caliphate. But – as the ʿAbbāsids (like the Umayyads before them) also cited the Qur'ān in support of their reign, the aforementioned curse on Abū Lahab posed a particular problem for them: How to account for a qur'ānic curse on a member of this supposedly exalted bloodline? For, like their eponym, ʿAbbās, Abū Lahab was also a member of the clan of Hāshim and an uncle of the Prophet.

Abū Qurra's conjunction of Q 108 and 111 as proof of the Qur'ān's cor-

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41) For arguments on Umayyad claims also to be of the "people of the house" (*ahl al-bayt*), although not exclusively the Hāshimī connection, see M. SHARON, «The Umayyads as *ahl al-bayt*», in *JSAI* 14 (1991), pp. 115-52. See also ID., «The development of the debate around the legitimacy of authority in early Islam», in *JSAI* 5 (1984), pp. 121-41; P. COBB, «Al-Maqrīzī, Hashimism, and the early caliphates», in *Mamlūk studies review* VII/2 (2003), pp. 69-81; A. AFSARRUDDIN, *Excellence and precedence. Medieval Islamic discourse on legitimate leadership*, Leiden, 2002; T. EL-HIBRI, *Reinterpreting Islamic historiography. Hārūn al-Rashīd and the narrative of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate*, Cambridge, 1999; A. BORRUT, «Altérité et adversité. La construction de l'image des Omeyyades et de la Syrie dans les chroniquesarabes et syriaques?», in *Actes du colloque international « Lectures historiques des chroniques médiévales (mondes arabe, persan, syriaque et turc)»*, IFPO, Damascus (forthcoming). My thanks to Antoine Borrut for drawing this point of Umayyad claims to be *ahl al-bayt* (and the supporting bibliography) to my attention.

42) See SHARON, *Umayyads*, p. 150, for a family tree detailing the main branches of the Quraysh and the differences between ʿAbbāsid and Umayyad understandings of *ahl al-bayt*.

ruption indicates one aspect of this reaction: Q 111 (and, seemingly, other qur'ānic passages that could be interpreted as denigrating the Hāshimī relatives of the prophet) were not part of the original revelation to Muḥammad.

For if Q 108 and 111 were at some point understood to refer to the same person – an uncle of Muḥammad who rejected Muḥammad's prophecy – this qur'ānic condemnation of a Hāshimī may have been used by Umayyads to show that (Hāshimī) kinship to the Prophet was not sufficient guarantee of piety/virtue, and thus ʿAlī and his descendants could not claim the right to rule the Muslim community on that basis[43]. Similarly, detractors of the ʿAbbāsids could also use the verse(s) to show that ʿAbbāsid – i.e. Hāshimī - kinship to the Prophet was not a guarantor of virtue (nor, therefore, of 'good' or 'virtuous' leadership).

In response, as indicated in Ibn al-Rāwandī's rejection of Q 108 and a general Muʿtazilī rejection of Q 111, ʿAlids or supporters of the ʿAbbāsids initially may have said that such verses were the product of human – possibly Umayyad – tampering[44]: They were not part of the original revelation to Muḥammad, an argument that Abū Qurra picks up in his own – Christian – efforts to refute the Muslim charge that the Bible is a corrupt scripture. But, once the ʿAbbāsids became more firmly situated and as they came to rely on the Qur'ān as support for their authority, the established Qur'ān text could not be questioned. Q 111 (and – seemingly – 108) had to be interpreted in a way that did not detract from the Hāshimīs as a whole. And, particularly as the doctrines of the uncreated and inimitable nature of the Qur'ān became

43) cf. AL-JĀḤIẒ, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, Cairo, 1975, 4 vols. in 2, II, p. 326: «Muʿāwiya said one day, 'O people of Shām, have you heard the saying of God – blessed and exalted – in his book {*tabbat yadā Abī Lahab wa-tabba*}?' They said 'Yes'. He said 'Verily Abū Lahab was his uncle'. And he said... 'Have you heard the saying of God great and mighty {*wa-amratuhu ḥammālatu l-ḥaṭabi*}'? They said 'Yes'. He said 'Verily she was his aunt'...».

44) My thanks to Professor Shahid for first drawing this point to my attention, by his suggestion that the curse on Abū Lahab, in contradistinction to Abū Qurra's claim, actually supports arguments for an early dating of the passage – but to an Umayyad, rather than ʿUthmānic provenance. An oblique argument against Q 111's being understood as an Umayyad invention is the curse on Abū Lahab's wife. She was herself another Qurashī – but the sister of Abū Sufyān, the father of Muʿāwiyya (the first "Umayyad"). But, due to the predominance of tracing kinship through male lineage [Shīʿīs are a notable exception, as they insist on the descent from Muḥammad through his daughter Fāṭima] even in the light of their own *ahl al-bayt* claims, this aspect of Q 111 would likely not have posed problems for the Umayyads. That the passage did not trouble the Umayyads is supported by its emergence as a "problematic" chapter only in ʿAbbāsid times: to my knowledge, Abū Qurra's allusion is the earliest such indication of any doubt as to the legitimacy of its placement in the qur'ānic codex.

more firmly entrenched, these imperfect and/or contingent verses had to be understood as perfect and uncreated: hence, the origin of the arguments for the faḍīla, i.e. exceeding virtues, of these "difficult" chapters.

5. CONCLUSION

A common polemic among Jews, Christians and Muslims is that the scripture of the other is either incomplete (Christian polemics against Jews) or, more commonly, that it is the word of man, not God (Muslims against the Bible; Jews against the New Testament and Jews and Christians against the Qur'ān). From the above discussion, the argument might be made that one condition of Islamic "orthodoxy" came to be the acceptance of the entire [ʿUthmānic] codex of the Qur'ān. A common link between the Muʿtazila and the Khawārij is that each rejected parts of the accepted ʿUthmānic codex. One reason for the survival of the Shīʿa as an accepted Muslim "minority" group could be their refusal to question the originality or divine origin of any part of the canonical Qur'ān. While they do maintain that parts of the original revelation to Muḥammad were not included in the ʿUthmānic text, they refuse to impugn the validity of any part of the received codex. But the politicization of the exegesis of the holy book of Islam (as with those of Christianity and Judaism) was certainly not limited to "heterodox" groups.

The preceding has explored the possible inter-Muslim polemics that might underlie some of the early exegeses of the holy book of Islam, as reflected in a few short statements of an early Christian Arab apologist. The allusive nature of Abū Qurra's remark suggests that his audience would have been familiar with arguments against the inclusion of Q 108 and 111 in the Qur'ān codex. The Islamic tradition indicates that Q 108 and 111 were understood in highly conflicting ways: i.e. both criticized as "faulty" or less-than-sublime examples of Arabic speech, as well as exalted as epitomizing the divine and inimitable nature of the Qur'ān – but it provides little information as to why this was the case. From Abū Qurra's question "man huwa hādhā l-ʿaduww al-abtar?", in conjunction with his allusion to Q 108 and 111 as not part of the Qur'ān, an interpretive tradition identifying this abtar as Abū Lahab was inferred, an inference supported by a lone tradition preserved by al-Rāzī in his commentary on Q 108:3[45]. When these chapters are

45) Although the exegetical works of the following *mufassirūn* were consulted, but did not yield this understanding of *al-abtar*: Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767); al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923); al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035); al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144); al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), the degree of connection between Q 108 and 111 is in need of further study – at a

read in the light of the political situation of the early third/ninth century, the time period from which we have the first indications of doubt as to the suitability of these chapters for a divine revelation, a political, rather than solely theological, background to the debate emerges.

Although discussion on the actual contents of the Qur'ān appears to have been, from the beginning, a primarily Muslim concern possibly grounded in politics, the writings of Christians from the early ʿAbbāsid period reflect knowledge of this discussion, and employ elements thereof that suit their own polemical or apologetic purposes. There is therefore hope that examination of the works of the first Christians to write in Arabic might continue to inform our understanding of the early Muslim approaches to the Qur'ān. And, even taking into account the (intentional or accidental) misrepresentations of their opponents' views, as the Christian writings were not subject to the strictures of what came to be the accepted position of Muslim "orthodoxy," such works may very well preserve a record of Islamic "heterodoxy" that is more varied than that found in even the most comprehensive of the encyclopedic tafāsīr.

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textual, as well as conceptual level. For, while al-Rāzī lists this as only one of several understandings, and a minority one at that (RĀZĪ, *Tafsīr*, ad Q 108:3: fifth variant), Professor Shahîd has suggested to me that sūras 108 and 111 may have originally been one sūra if al-Rāzī's comment about *al-abtar* being Abū Lahab is correct. The change in the rhyme scheme is paralleled in Q 93 (Sūrat al-Ḍuḥā). See the argument in I. SHAHĪD, «Two qur'ānic sūras. Al-Fīl and Quraysh», in W. AL-QĀḌĪ (ed.), *Studia Arabica et Islamica. Festschrift for Iḥsān ʿAbbās*, Beirut, 1981, pp. 429-36, for a similar conjoining of two other disparate sūras (Q 105 and 106).

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