

Qur'an Commentaries in Medieval Christian Arabic Texts

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1 Introduction

The use of *tafsīr*, or commentaries on the Qur'an, by Christian writers has its origins in the medieval Middle Eastern world. Some of the most important analyses of Islamic commentaries on the Qur'an are found in the writings of Middle Eastern Christian authors from this period, suggesting that the spread of knowledge about the Qur'an into Europe also came from Christian writings. This evidence indicates that in order to understand the history of how medieval Christians approached the Qur'an and its commentaries, one must: 1) examine early Middle Eastern Christian literature on the Qur'an; 2) trace how medieval authors acquired qur'anic interpretive sources; 3) examine how these authors utilized qur'anic commentaries in their writings; and 4) observe how those sources of qur'anic interpretation were disseminated into the Christian world.¹

2 Early Encounters with the Qur'an and the Absence of *Tafsīr*

If we think about medieval Middle Eastern Christian approaches to Qur'an exegesis, there are several important stages that developed from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages. In the earliest stages, Christian Arabic authors engaged in proof texting the Qur'an, meaning that they cited it without reference to its context or Muslim interpretations. This approach was especially common from the eighth through the tenth centuries (2nd–4th AH), as Christians began to see Islam as more than just a Christian heresy to be refuted. They began to recog-

¹ Some helpful literature on how Christian Arabic writers used the Qur'an include Clare Wilde, *Approaches to the Qur'an in Early Christian Arabic Texts (750–1258 CE)* (Bethesda, MD: Academica Press, 2014); J. Scott Bridger, *Christian Exegesis of the Qur'an: A Critical Analysis of the Apologetic Use of the Qur'an in Select Medieval and contemporary Arabic Texts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015); and Mark Beaumont, ed., *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

nize that Muslims had their own sacred scripture and different interpretations of biblical stories. During this initial period, Muslims also began to compare the Qur'an with the Bible. Muslims read the Qur'an as a corrective of biblical claims, especially concerning monotheism, prophethood, the status of Jesus, and the practices of Jews and Christians. This pattern of religious debate continued from the seventh century (1st AH) into the medieval era. During this period, Muslim commentaries on the Qur'an began to be written while utilizing biblical material to defend their scripture's authenticity and to critique Christians.²

Middle Eastern Christians found the comparisons and divergences between the Bible and the Qur'an also valuable for defending their faith. In their view, passages in the Qur'an could justify the authenticity of the Bible. Some Muslims accused the Bible of being corrupted or altered, which was alleged in the Qur'an. However, Christians claimed that there was a contradiction with this claim, since the Qur'an also teaches that the Torah and Gospel were earlier authentic scriptures sent by God. For instance, John of Damascus (d. 132/749)³ points out this paradox, but notice that he does not refer to the Qur'an to make his argument about biblical authenticity:

Moreover, they call us *Hetaeriasts*, or *Associators*, because, they say, we introduce an associate with God by declaring Christ to [be] the Son of God and God. We say to them in rejoinder: The Prophets and the Scriptures have delivered this to us, and you, as you persistently maintain, accept the Prophets. So, if we wrongly declare Christ to be the Son of God, it is they who taught this and handed it on to us.⁴

2 On the Bible in the Qur'an, see Sidney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 54–96.

3 On John of Damascus, see Najib Awad, *Umayyad Christianity: John of Damascus as a Contextual Example of Identity Formation in Early Islam* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018). Awad argues that John used Greek rather than Arabic because it would have been understood by Christians including Syriac and Arab peoples. Awad believes that Chapter 100/101 of John's work *On Heresies* reveals that he was not acquainted with the qur'anic text, and that the *Heresy of the Ishmaelites* chapter was in fact a posthumous addition to the work which he composed for a separate occasion. He argues that it has little historical value because it was only based on second-hand hearsay gathered from Muslims. John's folk knowledge of the Qur'an and Islam were used as an act of violent self-protection against encroaching Islamic ideals.

4 Frederic Chase, ed., *Saint John of Damascus: Writings* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1958), 155.

John of Damascus was a Melkite Christian, who worked in Damascus as a finance minister under the Umayyad dynasty. But later he retired to the monastery of Mar Sabas near Jerusalem, where he wrote about the Orthodox faith as well as a book *On Heresies*. He composed the work in Greek, although he probably knew Arabic as well. In chapter 100 on Islam, John explained that the Qur'an was a heretical Christian book that was written with the aid of an Arian monk. He probably gained access to information about the Qur'an through conversations with Muslims rather than reading Muslim commentaries on their scripture, which were rare and not yet doctrinally authoritative in the early eighth century (2nd AH).

At another juncture in his chapter on Islam, John recounts the story of Muḥammad and the wife of his adopted son, Zayd.⁵ This legend is not explicitly outlined in the Qur'an but can be found in the oral traditions: Muḥammad met Zayd's wife at their home, grew attracted to her, and received a revelation from God permitting Zayd to divorce her so that he could marry her instead. John's retelling of this Muslim story does not cite a written source as it is found in Islamic hadith reports. Rather, John appears to be drawing on his past conversations with Muslims to make his argument. When John cites the chapters, or suras, from the Qur'an, likewise he does not give detailed descriptions of their contents but only cites certain passages or alludes to them in a cursory fashion, naming their accounts as "stupid and ridiculous things."⁶ This does not mean that his bias prevented him from accurately assessing Islam as he understood it, but rather that he viewed its traditions through his own Christian worldview.⁷

When one examines the earliest Greek, Syriac, and Christian Arabic writings that refer to Islam and the Qur'an, it seems that at this stage most of their knowledge of Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an was gathered not from written sources but from oral discussions. In some cases, Middle Eastern Christian writings professed vague information regarding the Qur'an's origins, content, and Muslim interpretations of certain passages. They do not exhibit any deep knowledge of Muslim texts, although this does not discount the possibility that some authors were debating Muslim scriptural interpretation in oral conversa-

5 Chase, *Saint John of Damascus*, 157.

6 Chase, *Saint John of Damascus*, 159.

7 Peter Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations* (Leiden: Brill 2018). In contrast to Awad's arguments that John of Damascus relied mostly on conversations with Muslims, Schadler argues that John's reflections, such as the Zayd legend, were reliable accounts of how Muslims understood the formation of their tradition during the early eighth century (2nd AH) in the Umayyad era.

tions. In general, there is an absence of cited references to passages of *tafsīr*, or their authors, in the earliest Middle Eastern Christian writings.

An example from the Syriac language that we have at an early stage is the dialogue of Patriarch Timothy (d. 207/823) with the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī (d. 169/785). Timothy was the Patriarch of the Church of the East and resided in Baghdad, where their conversation took place in Arabic over the course of two days in 164/781. After their question-and-answer debate, Timothy wrote it down in the form of a letter to a colleague in Syriac. In the following centuries, several Arabic translations were produced based upon the Syriac original.⁸ One feature we continue to notice in this period is a greater concern for apologetic defenses of Christian doctrines, rather than close readings of Muslims' scriptures. The Bible is read through Christian eyes, not via Islamic interpretation, such as when al-Mahdī proposes that in Isaiah 21:7, the rider on the camel mentioned there is a prophecy regarding the coming of Muḥammad. Timothy replies using biblical and historical knowledge to argue that the rider is actually Cyrus the Persian and the passage refers to the restoration of Israel in the Second Temple era.⁹ Like most authors of this period, Timothy focuses primarily on biblical texts as well as Christian doctrines on the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ The encounter between Christians and Muslims in the early Abbasid period is marked mostly by Christians trying to explain their own tradition rather than showing a detailed knowledge of Islamic writings on the Qur'an. At the same time, Timothy gives us a hint that Christians were gaining some knowledge of relevant qur'anic verses, since he cites them in his dialogue with al-Mahdī. For instance, when al-Mahdī mentions that Jesus was not crucified but it only appeared to be so (Q. 4:157), Timothy answers with quotations from Q. 19:33 and Q. 3:55, indicating that Jesus must have died prior to his ascension into heaven, if one reads the Arabic word in the Qur'an accurately (*mutawaffika*; meaning, "to cause to die"):

I said, "It is mentioned [in your book], in sūrat 'Isā, 'the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!' And also, 'I am causing you to die and causing you to ascend unto Me.'"

He said, "He did not yet die, but he will die."

8 Samir Khalil Samir and Wafik Nasry, *The Patriarch and the Caliph: An Eighth-Century Dialogue between Timothy I and al-Mahdī* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2018), xxxvii–xlix.

9 Samir and Nasry, *The Patriarch and the Caliph*, 36–39.

10 For example on the crucifixion, see Samir and Nasry, *The Patriarch and the Caliph*, 46–60.

I said, "Thus he has not yet ascended into heaven, nor been raised alive, and will ascend and be raised in the future. However, according to you, he was ascended to heaven alive, and not ascended until he is dead and raised, as mentioned previously. If he ascended, then he died first. And since he died, he was crucified as [stated] in the prophecies."¹¹

Timothy's response shows that in the early Abbasid era, Christian authors were beginning to find their own collections of relevant passages of the Qur'an to use as testimonies against Islamic polemical attacks, not unlike the collections they had developed for disputations with Jews in Late Antiquity.¹² However, his uses of the Qur'an do not show incontrovertible evidence that he had consulted the Qur'an in an Arabic book, or that he had read *tafsīr* that were composed during this period.

By the ninth century (3rd AH), Christian Arabic authors began to utilize the Qur'an in a more nuanced fashion. Sidney Griffith has remarked on this phenomenon of Christian ambivalence towards the Qur'an. It could be seen as a human product devoid of divine revelation, but also as a book capable of being cited as an authority for matters of truth. Griffith characterized these Christian Arabic approaches as: 1) The Qur'an as a Font of Scriptural Proof Texts; and 2) The Qur'an as a Crypto-Christian Scripture.¹³ Indeed, exposure to the wider Islamic culture of the Abbasid era makes it unsurprising to discover Qur'anic phrases permeating the writings of Middle Eastern Christian Arabic authors.

For Christian polemicists, the original Qur'an was faithful to the Christian vision, while later Islamic interpreters had obscured and possibly altered its message. This is the primary message found in the various Syriac and Arabic versions of the *Baḥīrā Legend*, which have been studied in detail by Barbara Roggema. She has shown how the author created a Christian setting for the Qur'an by explaining how Muḥammad met the monk Sergius (Baḥīrā is a title meaning 'elder'), who instructed him in Christian doctrine. He told him what to recite, only to have it corrupted and misinterpreted over time.¹⁴ These arguments were based upon a rhetorical strategy of creating an alternative history

11 Samir and Nasry, *The Patriarch and the Caliph*, 46–47.

12 David Bertaina, "The Development of Testimony Collections in Early Christian Apologetics with Islam," in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 151–73.

13 Sidney Griffith, "The Qur'an in Christian Arabic Literature: A Cursory Overview," in *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period*, ed. Mark Beaumont (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 1–19.

14 Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

regarding the monk Baḥīrā. This demonstrates an awareness of Islamic interpretive traditions about Muḥammad's call to prophecy as being confirmed by a Christian monk, but the Christian author's use of Islamic sources is allusive rather than direct. The awareness of Muslim interpretive sources is never explicit, as the purpose is to ignore them and create another line of interpretation of the Qur'an via proof texts. Griffith has noted regarding this period: "[...] it does not appear that they were normally involved in a deep or disinterested study of the Islamic scripture or its interpreters for their own sakes. Rather, the Christian Arabic writers' interest were the practical ones of deflecting challenges to Christian thought and practice [...]."¹⁵

There is another ninth century (3rd AH) Christian Arabic work representative of this train of thought that uses the Qur'an as a proof text for Christian truth. This account is a famous debate between the Melkite bishop Theodore abū Qurra (d. after 214/829) and Muslim intellectuals at the court of the caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833). The debate was said to have taken place in the year 214/829.¹⁶ While the text itself is anonymous and not specifically attributed to Abū Qurra, it presents him as a hero figure who defeats his opponents in debate. He agrees not to use the Bible for his arguments, but only the Qur'an, since it is the only source of authority upon which they can agree (in addition to using logic and reasoning). Their discussion covered a range of topics, from freedom of speech, to humanity and God's covenant, to matters of theology concerning God and the Trinity and Jesus and the Incarnation, to Christians living under Islam, to various stories found in the Qur'an. This debate text shows us that by the ninth century (3rd AH), Christian Arabic authors had developed sophisticated polemical readings of the Qur'an. In this disputation, Theodore's Christian interpretation of the Qur'an renders any use of Islamic sources inconsequential. On approximately one hundred occasions, Abū Qurra cites the Qur'an in his arguments with his Muslim opponents. Many of these interpretations are related to the Bible and used to justify Christian teachings and show minimal acquaintance with *tafsīr* as Muslims understood it. Unfortunately for contem-

15 Griffith, "The Qur'an in Christian Arabic Literature," 18.

16 See the study, edition, and translation in David Bertaina, "An Arabic Account of Theodore Abu Qurra in Debate at the Court of Caliph al-Ma'mun: A Study in Early Christian and Muslim Literary Dialogues," (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2007). The scholarly consensus for now is that a disciple of Abū Qurra composed the work in Arabic, and that the dating from a medieval chronicle to 829 may not be reliable. Whether the work is based upon a real debate and subsequently stylized, or a complete literary fiction, is disputed, although I favor the former possibility. See also the study and translation in Wafik Nasry, *The Caliph and the Bishop: A 9th Century Muslim-Christian Debate: Al-Ma'mūn and Abū Qurrah* (Beirut: CEDRAC, 2008).

porary scholars, the author of the debate displays little evidence of detailed knowledge of Islamic Qur'anic interpretation.

For instance, on one occasion Theodore Abū Qurra is arguing about the Word of God and its meaning with regard to Jesus. He states that the Qur'an makes it clear that this is a title of honor and akin to its meaning for Christians (e.g., *Logos* in John's Gospel). For example, Theodore argues that God desires a religion of faith (*imān*), which includes God's Word and Spirit, and not a religion of surrender (*islām*) which is inferior, according to the Qur'an:

But know, O Muslim, that the religion of God is faith. You are the Muslims, and we, the assembly of the Nazarenes, are the believers. You have surrendered, as your book mentions on the authority of God, and in regards to the Bedouins in their saying "we believed," [God] said to them, "You did not believe, but say we have surrendered" (Q. 49:14). Thereupon, he said on the authority of God also, "it is equal whether you warned them or did not warn them. God sealed their hearts and hearing and sight so that they would not believe" (Q. 2:6–7). Your book and your prophet have, indeed, witnessed against you, on the authority of God, that you did not believe and the He sealed your heart, hearing, and sight so that you would not enter faith. Hence, do not boast, O Muslim, that you did not believe in the Word of God and His Spirit, the Creator of all things.¹⁷

The overarching purpose of Theodore's debate is to highlight the perceived contradictions between what the Qur'an states versus what his opponents construe the scripture to mean. This indicates that the Christian Arabic author had a nuanced understanding of the content of the Qur'an, how Muslims used it, and how Christians could also use it. But the debate does not show any notable knowledge of specific commentators. Theodore Abū Qurra's disputation is a masterful Christian reading of the Qur'an, but genuine challenges to Islamic interpretations of the Qur'an are largely absent from the debate.

3 Islamic Sources in Ninth Century (3rd AH) Christian Arabic Literature: al-Kindī

Beginning in the ninth century and flourishing into the eleventh century (3rd–5th AH), Christian Arabic writers began to demonstrate a competent knowledge of the commentary tradition and its relevance for Muslims. Some Chris-

¹⁷ Nasry, *The Caliph and the Bishop*, 187–88.

tian Arabic authors by the ninth century (3rd AH) had not only come to use the Qur'an in an adept way, but they were becoming more aware of traditions which Muslims collected and subsequently canonized to be used as a secondary authority alongside the Qur'an. Given the fact that it was only in the Abbasid period that Muslims began to form an orthodox vision employing these collections, it is not surprising that Christians did not engage with these sources until they gained canonical authority and came to be recognized as part of the authoritative tradition for interpretation. Alongside the Qur'an, hadith reports were being incorporated into Qur'an commentaries to elaborate on its meaning for various Muslim communities of the medieval period. As authoritative collections developed among Muslim groups, Arabic-speaking Christians of the Islamic world constructed a parallel schema to defend Christianity and critique Islam by making use of this newly authorized material. Only in this stage could Christian Arabic writers utilize and evaluate Islamic commentaries on the Qur'an.¹⁸

The *Letter* (*Risāla*) of 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī is one of the earliest examples of a Christian Arabic author demonstrating firsthand knowledge of Islamic hadith reports and sources that were incorporated into Islamic commentaries.¹⁹ We know now that this letter was composed in response to a Muslim colleague al-Hāshimī, and that they were both active under the reign of caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833).²⁰ According to scholars, al-Kindī framed his response in three parts, with the first section as an explanation of Christianity and the third as an apologetic for the true religion. Most important for our purposes, the second part reveals implicit references to Muslim interpretations of the Qur'an. Al-Kindī makes mention of material about the biography of Muḥammad in the first section and he critiques the collection and canonization process of the Qur'an in the second section, demonstrating his knowledge of Islamic sources. In summary, he seeks to critique the messenger Muḥammad, his message of the Qur'an, and the interpretation of the message by his followers.

Al-Kindī was familiar with Muḥammad's biography (*sīra*) attributed to Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767). For instance, al-Kindī references Muḥammad's upbringing as a polytheist while quoting from Q. 93:6–7, which was often

18 See for instance some of the writings in Ayman Ibrahim, ed., *Medieval Encounters: Arabic-Speaking Christians and Islam* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2022).

19 Laura Bottini, "The Apology of al-Kindī," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 1 (600–900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 585–94. Scholars have debated his Christian community, although many suggest that he belonged to the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church.

20 Jean Fathi, *Le prince déchu. L'établissement de l'authenticité de l'Apologie d'al-Kindī et l'étude critique de la conclusion* (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2022).

cited in stories about his life.²¹ Another example of al-Kindī's knowledge of biographical reports about Muḥammad include his retelling of how ʿĀ'isha, Muḥammad's wife, returned from a battle on the camel of another man, which led to her chastity being questioned. Al-Kindī notes that this was the occasion for the verse Q. 24:11 ("See, they come to thee with lies conspiring against thee"), showing that he was aware of this material.²² He also indicates that he is familiar with Muslim debates about whether Muḥammad performed miracles: "We do not linger over that as there is some doubt about [the source material legends], and many Muslims, whose opinion has weight, do not accept it, but reject it as inauthentic."²³ Regarding one alleged miracle, al-Kindī notes: "this is a tale told by Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, but it has no authority with historians; your own friends are not sure of its truth."²⁴ There are many more examples of al-Kindī's familiarity with Ibn Ishāq's biography, such as his retelling of the death and burial of Muḥammad. He confirms this as his source, noting: "The whole narrative as I have given it to you, from first to last, is borrowed from the principal authority on these matters, one in whom you have implicit confidence."²⁵

Al-Kindī was also familiar with numerous Islamic hadith reports, based upon his analysis of the formation of the Qur'an.²⁶ He noted that after Muḥammad's death, ʿAlī accepted the rule of Abū Bakr, but not until he had collected physical remains of the revelations. Likewise, Hajjāj ibn Yūsuf ath-Thaqafī (d. 95/714) later collected most of verses but omitted others. These references to the human origin of the Qur'anic text came from Islamic sources, according to al-Kindī: "I am simply narrating the facts, there is no denying them. We have them on the best authority, from sources the veracity of which it is impossible to dispute."²⁷ Subsequently, al-Kindī cites a series of reports about the various

21 See the English translation based upon Anton Tien's version in N. A. Newman, ed., *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632–900 AD); Translations with Commentary* (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 381–545, esp. 426.

22 Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 433.

23 Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 441.

24 Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 443.

25 Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 446.

26 On his use of the Qur'an, see Sandra Keating, "Manipulation of the Qur'an in the Epistolary Exchange between al-Hāshimī and al-Kindī," in *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period*, ed. Mark Beaumont (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 50–65; and Emilio Platti, "Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī on the Qur'an," in *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period*, ed. Mark Beaumont (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 66–82.

27 Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 455.

versions of the Qur'an attributed to 'Alī, the Bedouins, Ibn Mas'ūd, Ubayy ibn Ka'b, and finally relates the account of 'Uthmān's destruction of the Qur'an variants and how he promoted his version, which was later edited and redacted by Hajjāj ibn Yūsuf, according to al-Kindī's sources.

In addition to reports on the Qur'an, al-Kindī demonstrated an acquaintance with oral traditions about the exaltation of Muḥammad advocated by certain Islamic communities. For instance, he notes a tradition that Muḥammad's name is written upon the throne of God. Al-Kindī finds the source logically problematic: "I do not find any of your own people who agree with you on this point. They all, and [e]specially those who know most, treat it as a foolish idea. They say that it is absurd, and that no such thing is mentioned in the Qur'an."²⁸ He also utilizes hadith reports for critiquing Islamic rituals, such as the practices at the Ka'ba and the veneration of the Black Stone. His reading of the sources concludes that the traditions are not consistent with the worship of the one God.

During the early ninth century (3rd AH), when these hadith reports were being debated by Muslim groups relative to their historical merits and canonical authority, the Christian Arabic author al-Kindī demonstrated an expertise with this material. The incorporation of oral traditions in the early Abbasid era continued after al-Kindī's letter, since the reports codified by al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and the famous commentator Abū Ja'far aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) had yet to be collected. But this impetus to create another authoritative layer on top of the Qur'an led to a parallel interest among Christian Arabic writers to acknowledge its value, alongside the Qur'an, in apologetical and polemical analyses. The translation of al-Kindī's letter into Latin on the Iberian Peninsula, and its subsequent dissemination across Europe, resulted in his *Letter* becoming the most popular Christian work analyzing Islam in the Middle Ages.²⁹

While these developments were important, Christian Arabic authors rarely mentioned reports from sources, or specific passages from *tafsīr*, with the exception of the biographer Ibn Ishāq.³⁰ By the eleventh century (5th AH),

28 Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 468–69.

29 See the chapters (esp. 8) in Cándida Ferrero Hernandez and John Tolan, eds., *The Latin Qur'an, 1143–1500: Translation, Transition, Interpretation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

30 Another Christian Arabic author demonstrated more than a passing knowledge of Islamic sources, including at least two references to Muslim commentaries. See Krisztina Szilágyi, "Christian Learning about Islam in the Early 'Abbāsīd Caliphate: The Muslim Sources of the *Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias*," in *The Place to Go: Contexts of Learning in Baghdad, 750–1000 CE*, ed. Jens Scheiner and Damien Janos (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2021), 267–342, esp. 286–94.

Christian Arabic authors begin to acknowledge the Muslim sources used in their analyses.

4 Elias of Nisibis' Use of *Tafsīr* in Eleventh Century (5th AH) Christian-Muslim Dialogue

We begin to see the development of Christian approaches to *tafsīr* on the Qur'an in the writings of Elias of Nisibis (d. 438/1046). Elias is well known for his *Book of Sessions* (*Kitāb al-Majālis*), which relates seven meetings between Elias, the Metropolitan Archbishop of the Church of the East, and the Muslim vizier Abū al-Qāsim al-Maghribī (d. 418/1027). The conversations took place during the year 417/1026 and were written down by Elias and shared in summary form with the vizier for his approval the following year.³¹ The third discussion during their engagement, which addresses the topic of monotheism according to the Qur'an, is particularly relevant for understanding why Christians were concerned with Islamic commentaries – because they could shape the legal rulings for the Christian communities living under Islam. The Qur'an named Christians (along with Jews) as the "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) meaning they were given a scripture by God. As one of the monotheistic communities, Christians were not to fear the Day of Judgment (Q. 2:62). But the Qur'an also denies that certain Christian groups were monotheists, since they claimed that "God is the third of three" (Q. 5:77). In addition, another passage indicates that only Muslims would be saved (Q. 3:85) rather than all of the People of the Book. If the Christians lauded in the Qur'an were not identical with the present churches, then their monotheism, legal protections, and other permissions could be under question. Given the ambiguous message regarding Christians in the Qur'an, Elias sought to explain why the Qur'an and its commentaries supported generous benefits and securities for Christians living under Islam. For Elias, the linguistic, logical, historical, and Qur'anic sources in Islam suggested that Christians were monotheists whom God would save through their own religion. Unlike al-Kindī's attempt to undermine Muḥammad and the Qur'an, Elias employed the Qur'an and its *tafsīr* to argue credibly for its authority, especially with a compassionate regard for Christians. His third dialogue session shows that Christians influenced Islamic interpretations of

31 Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala, "Elias of Nisibis," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 2* (900–1050), ed. David Thomas and Alex Mallett (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 727–41, esp. 730–33.

the Qur'an, their historical narratives about the past, and Muslim views of religious others.³²

Elias is remarkable for citing his Muslim sources and including their names in his writings.³³ In the dialogue, Elias told al-Maghribī that according to commentators, God can abrogate ritual practices, but not his own doctrinal promises, such as his declaration in Q. 2:62: "Indeed, the faithful, the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans – those who have faith in God and the Last Day and act righteously – they shall have their reward near their Lord."³⁴ Al-Maghribī countered that according to Q. 3:85, no religion other than Islam will be accepted by God, which prevents Christians from being saved unless they convert. Yet Elias insists that this passage applies to all Christians throughout time, according to the authoritative Muslim commentator Abū Ja'far aṭ-Ṭabarī, who provided a possibility to read it as inclusive of anyone in a religion that believes in God, the last judgment, the bodily resurrection, and the afterlife. Elias does not quote aṭ-Ṭabarī's commentary on the passage in Q. 2:62, but his analysis of Q. 5:69, which is nearly identical in its promise.³⁵

Elias of Nisibis also used aṭ-Ṭabarī's Qur'an interpretation to his advantage in his commentary on Q. 5:66. This verse describes how there is a "moderate community" which Elias asserts is the Christian community. He affirms that this is the consensus interpretation found among the eighth-century (2nd AH) traditionists Mujāhid, Qatāda, as-Suddī, and Ibn Yazīd, whose comments are quoted from aṭ-Ṭabarī's commentary.³⁶ Then Elias quotes from aṭ-Ṭabarī's analysis of Q. 5:82 to reinforce that the Islamic commentary tradition commends Christians at times and treats Christians legally as monotheists:

32 David Bertaina, "An Arabic Christian Perspective on Monotheism in the Qur'an: Elias of Nisibis' *Kitāb al-Majālis*," in *Heirs of the Apostles: Studies on Arabic Christianity in Honor of Sidney H. Griffith*, ed. David Bertaina, Sandra Keating, Mark Swanson, and Alexander Treiger (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 3–21.

33 In his *Chronicle (Maktbānūtā d-zabnē, Kitāb al-azmina*, see Monferrer Sala, "Elias of Nisibis," 728–30), Elias cited Muslim scholars such as Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī, aṭ-Ṭabarī, Abū Ṭāhir, aṣ-Ṣūlī, and Thābit ibn Sinān.

34 All quotations from the Qur'an are taken from the translation by Ali Quli Qarai, found in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

35 Q. 5:69: "Indeed the faithful, the Jews, the Sabaeans, and the Christians – those who have faith in God and the Last Day and act righteously – they will have no fear, nor will they grieve." Abū Ja'far aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr aṭ-Ṭabarī. Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'an*, ed. 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin at-Turkī (Cairo: Dār Hajar, 1422/2001), vol. 8, 575.

36 aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 8, 562–67.

The correct view of the matter, in our opinion, is to say that the Exalted God speaks about a group of Christians – whom He praises as being closest in affection towards the community that has faith in God and His messenger. He says that the only [reason] why they were so, is that they had people of religion among them, diligent in worship, and monks in monasteries and cells and that they had among them scholars of their Scriptures, knowledgeable in reading them. It is because they humbly submit to the truth, when they recognize it, and are not too arrogant to accept it, when they discern it, that they are not far from the believers – not like the Jews, who have become accustomed to killing the prophets and the messengers, disobeying God's commandments and prohibitions, and corrupting the revelation given in His Scriptures.³⁷

In addition to aṭ-Ṭabarī, Elias cites another contemporary Sunnī commentator and judge, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib, known as al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013). In his *Kitāb aṭ-Ṭams*,³⁸ al-Bāqillānī acknowledges that the arguments between Muslims and Christians over God's unity are differences of language, not reality. Elias quotes him directly:

Know that if we were to have an honest discussion with the Christians about their statement “God is a substance with three hypostases,” no disagreement between them and us would arise, except in nomenclature. This is because they say that “God is a substance” not in the sense of created substances, but [only] in the sense that He is self-subsistent.³⁹

While Elias asserted that Muslim interpreters affirmed Christian theology, al-Maghribī rejected al-Bāqillānī's interpretation on the basis that he was a Sunnī Muslim. Despite his misgivings, al-Maghribī acknowledged the monotheism of Christians as proposed by Elias of Nisibis, given his accurate representation of Islamic sources on the Qur'an and its interpretation. Thus, Elias' interpretation of qur'anic *tafsīr* came to shape Muslim views to a certain extent, at least in the legal realm.

37 aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 8, 600.

38 This work is now lost, but suggests by its title that its goal is to help the reader set their eyes on something far away. See Laurent Basanese, “L'amour de Dieu dans les limites de la simple raison. Foi et raison dans la pensée d'Ibn Taymiyya à la lumière de la théologie spirituelle d'Élie de Nisibe,” (PhD diss., Pontificio istituto di studi arabi e d'islamistica, Roma, 2010), 66–67.

39 Arabic text and translation in Bertaina, “An Arabic Christian Perspective on Monotheism in the Qur'an,” 15.

By the eleventh century (5th AH), some of the elite and educated Christian leaders such as Elias thought it was possible to become acquainted with Islamic commentaries, especially with regard to their relevance for Christian life under Islamic law. Christian Arabic writers established agency in the wider Islamic world to meet Christian needs, especially in the judicial and theological realms, by influencing commentators on the Qur'an and their readers' interpretations.

5 The Convert and Expert in *Tafsīr*: Būluṣ ibn Rajā' and *The Truthful Exposer*

Būluṣ ibn Rajā' (d. after 403/1012) was likely the most adept Christian Arabic author to employ Islamic materials in his work, including the Qur'an, hadith, *tafsīr*, legal rulings, and intra-Islamic polemical material. Nicknamed "al-Wāḍiḥ" ("The Exposer") Ibn Rajā' composed a work known as *The Truthful Exposer* (*Kitāb al-Wāḍiḥ bi-l-ḥaqq*) around the year 400/1009–403/1012.⁴⁰ Ibn Rajā' was born to an elite Muslim family in Cairo, and became a student of the Qur'an, hadith reports, and law as it was taught in the Mālikī and Ismā'īlī legal schools. As a Muslim convert to the Coptic Orthodox Church, Ibn Rajā' brought a wealth of knowledge about Islam into his Christian Arabic writings. Given his background and instruction in *tafsīr* by leading intellectuals in Cairo, Ibn Rajā' was just as comfortable citing specific scholars from whom he transmits his reports (*isnād*) as he was with written texts. The benefit of these lines of authority is that we know exactly who it is that he is quoting from in *The Truthful Exposer*. Ibn Rajā's analysis of Muḥammad, the Qur'an, and Islamic traditions became significant to the Christian world because his analysis was disseminated across Egypt in Coptic monasteries and then spread to the Syriac Orthodox community and later the Maronite Catholic community. In its Arabic form, *The Truthful Exposer* made its way to Spain, where it was translated into Latin, probably during the early thirteenth century (7th AH), where it became known as "The Book of Denuding" (*Liber Denudationis*).⁴¹ Many of his arguments were copied by later Latin Christians in order to incorporate them into their own Christian readings on the Qur'an and its exegetical material.⁴² There-

40 See the study edition, and translation in David Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā': The Fatimid Egyptian Convert Who Shaped Christian Views of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

41 See the study, edition, and translation in Thomas Burman, *Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs, c. 1050–1200* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

42 On Riccoldo da Monte di Croce's use of this material, see Rita George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq. Riccoldo da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam* (Turnhout:

fore, Būluṣ ibn Rajā' greatly assisted with the transmission of knowledge about Islamic commentaries into western Europe.

In addition to *The Truthful Exposer*, Būluṣ ibn Raja mentions that he also composed a work evaluating Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an. The full title of this work is *The Amusing Anecdotes of the Commentators and Corruption of the Opponents* (*Nawādir al-mufasssīrīn wa-taḥrīf al-mukhālīfīn*). Unfortunately, this work is not presently extant, so we cannot analyze the commentators and specific examples that he used in his analysis. But we can get an idea from *The Truthful Exposer* that he did have this in mind. For example, after critiquing some leaders for permitting their followers to marry up to nine wives based upon their reading of the Qur'an, Ibn Rajā' notes:

In every one of these groups is an imam who will support that teaching. So they became [divided into] many sects, calling each other unbeliever and ignorant. I have mentioned the disagreements between the Qur'an's interpreters in the little book known as the *Book of Amusing Anecdotes of the Commentators*.⁴³

In this case, the interpreter gave permission to "marry whoever is pleasing to you among the women, a second and third and fourth" (Q. 4:3) meaning 2+3+4 = 9 total wives. Ibn Rajā's missing work likely critiqued the various schools of interpretation for their inconsistent readings – both in comparison to the Qur'an and to one another. This conjecture fits with what is known about internal polemical debates between Sunnī traditionists, Ismā'īlīs, and Mu'tazilī rationalists that were common under the Fatimids in Cairo during the eleventh century (5th AH).⁴⁴ Since we do not know the sources that Ibn Rajā' chose to cite in *The Anecdotes of the Commentators*, we must remain agnostic about the extent to which it might have influenced subsequent Christian readings of *tafsīr*.

Fortunately, *The Truthful Exposer* casts a clear light on Būluṣ ibn Rajā's extensive use of commentaries and hadith reports to make his arguments. We will examine his methodology in the following eight examples which demonstrate his knowledge of commentaries on the Qur'an. First, Ibn Rajā' cites a pas-

Brepols, 2012). On the legacy of the Qur'an in the Christian West, see the chapters in Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, eds., *The Iberian Qur'an: From the Middle Ages to Modern Times* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

43 Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā'*, 112–13.

44 David Bertaina, "The Arabic Version of the *Liber Denudationis*: How Fatimid Controversies Shaped Medieval European Views of Islam." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 31/4 (2020): 425–43.

sage in the Qur'an, then he narrates a story from an interpreter, and then alleges that there is an inconsistency or contradiction. These examples of Islamic source material can be found in the writings of aṭ-Ṭabarī, who lived about a century earlier but whose commentary was known in the circles of Cairo. However, this does not suggest that his commentary was a direct source for Ibn Rajā'. In some cases, he cites other authors that have the same interpretation. Therefore, it demonstrates that these interpretations of the Qur'an in aṭ-Ṭabarī's commentary were frequently cited by other experts during the Fatimid period.

Q. 2:119: Indeed We have sent you with the truth, as a bearer of good news and as a warner; and you will not be questioned concerning the inmates of hell.

In this example, Ibn Rajā' affirms the pagan origins of Muḥammad and his family by referring to Q. 2:119. According to the interpretation of this passage, Muslims agreed that both of Muḥammad's parents were in hell. Ibn Rajā' cites a *tafsīr* on this verse stating that it is in reference to Muḥammad lamenting: "I wish I knew what He did with my parents." Ibn Rajā' made this argument to claim that Muḥammad did not have special knowledge or an exalted status.⁴⁵ The question of the eternal status of Muḥammad's parents is also found in the *tafsīr* of aṭ-Ṭabarī, where he cites it specifically: "The messenger of God said: 'I wish I knew what He did with my parents'. Then it was revealed (you will not be questioned concerning the inmates of hell)."⁴⁶

Q. 4:157: And for their saying, "We killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the apostle of God" – though they did not kill him nor did they crucify him, but so it was made to appear to them.

Many commentators have suggested that one of Jesus' disciples was crucified in his place based upon this verse, which Ibn Rajā' asserts is a fabrication. The commentary tradition reports that Muḥammad once told his followers that Jesus put his image upon one of his disciples so that he could be crucified instead. This tradition developed as an interpretation of Q 4:157:

Don't you listen to the famous hadith that came from your companion? It is an argument for us against you. Abū al-Abbās Aḥmad an-Naysabūrī reported from Abū 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Aḥmad ibn Shu'ayb an-Nasā'ī from Qutayba ibn Sa'īd, from

45 Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā'*, 242–43.

46 aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, 481.

Mālik ibn Anas from az-Zuhrī from Sa'īd ibn al-Musayyab that Abū Hurayra asked Muḥammad saying to him: "Tell me about the significance of the Christian claim regarding the crucifixion of Christ." He laughed and said to him: "When the Jews wanted to crucify Christ, he went to where all of them were seated. He said to them, 'Which one of you will take my appearance upon himself in order to be crucified, and Paradise will belong to him?' Then a man said to him, 'I will'. Then [Christ] put upon [the man] his appearance. Then the Jews came and they seized that man. They supposed he was Christ so they crucified him."⁴⁷

This interpretation of the verse is also found in the commentary of aṭ-Ṭabarī.⁴⁸ However, what is interesting here is that Ibn Rajā' does not narrate the report on the authority of a text, but on the authority of his contemporary, the Ismā'īlī scholar and Fatimid propagandist Aḥmad an-Naysabūrī. For Ibn Rajā', the verse, hadith, and logic do not all agree on Jesus' death at the crucifixion.

Q. 17:1: Immaculate is He who carried His servant on a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque whose environs We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs.

In the final chapter of *The Truthful Exposer*, Ibn Rajā' retells the legend of Muḥammad's night journey (*isrā'*) from Mecca to Jerusalem, and then up (*mi'rāj*) through the seven levels of heaven on the animal al-Burāq, in order to speak with God about daily prayer, until he eventually returned back to Mecca in the space of one night. The story became a well-known interpretation for Q. 17:1. In the historical reports and *tafsīr* tradition, commentators explained that this verse was the basis for the account, including aṭ-Ṭūfī.⁴⁹ Ibn Rajā' recounts the narrative of events as they are told in Islamic sources on this passage in the Qur'an, but he also gives an extensive account of perceived inconsistencies.⁵⁰ He concludes that the interpretation is not reliable because it is not a historically accurate retelling of what happened in the Qur'an, but a story that was fabricated by manipulators to advance their own theological agendas for reasons of power: "How could reason and logic accept that! There is no disputing that the accounts which people describe are impossible, they embellish

47 Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā'*, 268–71.

48 aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 7, 650–60.

49 aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 14, 411–48; and aṭ-Ṭabarī, *The History of aṭ-Ṭabarī: Muḥammad at Mecca*, transl. W. Montgomery Watt and M.V. McDonald (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), vol. 6, 78–80.

50 Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā'*, 292–99.

them to make an impression upon minds [even] more than this hadith.”⁵¹ These examples demonstrate that Ibn Rajā’ had an adept knowledge not only of the Qur’an, but of its interpretive tradition, and how these sources could be mined for Christian critiques of Islam.

Q. 33:37: When you said to him whom God had blessed, and whom you [too] had blessed, “Retain your wife for yourself, and be wary of God,” and you had hidden in your heart what God was to divulge, and you feared the people though God is worthier that you should fear Him, so when Zayd had got through with her, We wedded her to you, so that there may be no blame on the faithful in respect of the wives of their adopted sons, when the latter have got through with them, and God’s command is bound to be fulfilled.

The passage Q. 33:37 has been a part of the interpretive tradition about Muḥammad’s relationship with his adopted son Zayd ibn Ḥāritha and his wife Zaynab bint Jahsh. Ibn Rajā’ gives the story a full account: after observing Zaynab at their home, Muḥammad becomes smitten with her (“he was speechless looking at her beauty and the loveliness of her appearance”), and he receives a revelation that Zayd could divorce Zaynab so that she could be married to Muḥammad. Then Muḥammad comes to her and notifies her that God has married them, with the angels Gabriel and Michael as witnesses.⁵² For Ibn Rajā’, the passage and its interpretation were not scripture worthy, since the example was not a model for other Muslims to follow (they were prohibited from doing the same), nor did the story confirm that he was a prophet. In the *tafsīr* tradition, the Zaynab affair and their marriage in heaven is found in the commentary of aṭ-Ṭabarī, as well as in hadith collections.⁵³ As someone familiarized with Muḥammad’s marital intrigues as a former Muslim, but now a celibate Coptic monk, Ibn Rajā’ likely found the interpretive tradition valuable for proving that Muḥammad’s moral character was quite flawed, and therefore, he could not have been a prophet.⁵⁴

Q. 33:51: You may put off whichever of them you wish and consort with whichever of them you wish, and as for any whom you may seek [to consort with] from among those you have set aside [earlier], there is no sin upon you [in receiving her again].

⁵¹ Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā’*, 298–99.

⁵² Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā’*, 188–93.

⁵³ aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 19 : 114–19.

⁵⁴ Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā’*, 188–95.

That makes it likelier that they will be comforted and not feel unhappy, all of them being pleased with what you give them. [...]

Another example can be found in the *tafsīr* on Q. 33:51. This passage is about Muḥammad's increasing number of marriages and whether he had permission to set aside older wives for new ones. Ibn Rajā' notes that Muḥammad divorced Sawda bint Zam'a who "had grown old and feeble," although he was not to marry any more women (Q. 3:52: "Beyond that, women are not lawful for you, nor that you should change them for other wives even though their beauty should impress you, except those whom your right hand owns [i.e., concubines] [...]"). We find a reference to Muḥammad setting aside older wives in hadith reports as well as aṭ-Ṭabarī's commentary.⁵⁵ Ibn Rajā' felt that the marital affairs of Muḥammad should not have made their way into the Qur'an and then into the interpretive tradition. Rather than exalting Muḥammad, the material was more fruitful for critique of his status as a prophet.⁵⁶

Q. 66:1–2: O Prophet! Why do you prohibit what God has made lawful for you, seeking to please your wives? And God is all-forgiving, all-merciful. God has certainly made lawful for you the dissolution of your oaths, and God is your master and He is the All-knowing, the All-wise.

Būluṣ ibn Rajā' explains about Q. 66:1–5 that Muslim commentators believed it had to do with Muḥammad having sex with Mary the Copt out of her turn in the marital schedule after she was given to him as a gift. Muḥammad promised his wives 'Ā'isha and Ḥafṣa that he would not sleep with her again. But after being caught with her in bed, God made it acceptable for him to retract his promise. Muḥammad's wives asked him why God permitted this exception for him when he did not permit it for himself initially. In response, Q. 66:5 was revealed, suggesting that Muḥammad could divorce them for better wives if they did not repent of their jealousy.⁵⁷ Ibn Rajā' retells this narrative as it appears in Islamic tradition, not to critique it but to question its benefit.⁵⁸ He argues that the *tafsīr* does not make Muḥammad sound like an impeccable prophet, nor does the verse itself seem appropriate to recite in prayer.

⁵⁵ aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 19, 138–46.

⁵⁶ Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā'*, 186–89.

⁵⁷ Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā'*, 178–81.

⁵⁸ For instance, see aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 23, 83–103.

Q. 93:6–7: Did He not find you an orphan, and shelter you? Did He not find you astray, and guide you?

Būluṣ ibn Rajāʾ's purpose in quoting the *tafsīr* on Q. 93:6–7 was to argue that Muḥammad was a straying pagan prior to his calling to Islam at age forty, and therefore he could not have been a monotheistic and sinless prophet as suggested by Sunnī traditionists.⁵⁹ After citing the verse, he mentions another story about how Muḥammad married off his daughter to pagans ʿUtba ibn Abī Lahab and then later to al-ʿĀṣ ibn Rabīʿ. In this instance, his quotation and argument are reminiscent of one made by the Muʿtazilī rationalist interpreter ʿĪrār ibn ʿAmr al-Ghaṭafānī, who criticized the Sunnī hadith faction for generating fictitious reports about Muḥammad. Al-Ghaṭafānī also used Q. 93:7 (along with Q. 42:52) to acknowledge Muḥammad's polytheist status prior to his first revelation at age forty.⁶⁰ The fact that the same method of argument is found in *The Truthful Exposer* reveals that Ibn Rajāʾ had an extensive knowledge of Fatimid Muslim polemical debates and their use of *tafsīr* to make arguments about the Qurʾan, Muḥammad, and the Islamic tradition.

Q. 113:4: [I seek the protection of the Lord] from the evil of the witches who blow on knots[...]

There are a number of examples of Muslim commentaries recounting the story of sorcerers (who were Jews in the *tafsīr*) casting spells by blowing knots to bewitch Muḥammad at a well. Many Muslim commentators believed that this was the reason why Q. 113:4 was revealed, including aṭ-Ṭabarī.⁶¹ Ibn Rajāʾ finds this interpretation of the verses as contrary to the claim that Muḥammad was granted angelic and physical protection from harm due to his status as a prophet. According to Ibn Rajāʾ, Muḥammad fell ill due to a bewitchment. He was told in a dream by the angels Michael and Gabriel to send ʿAlī to a well, where he discovered a doll figure of Muḥammad full of needles. As ʿAlī took the needles out, Muḥammad was slowly healed from his bewitchment.⁶² However, Ibn Rajāʾ uses the narrative to illustrate that Muḥammad was not

59 Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajāʾ*, 246–47.

60 David Bertaina, "Muhammad's Family and Polytheism: From Middle Eastern Muslim Debate to Iberian Christian Polemic," in *Mark of Toledo: Intellectual Context and Debates between Christians and Muslims in Early Thirteenth Century Iberia*, ed. Charles Burnett and Pedro Mantas-España (Córdoba: University of Córdoba Press, 2022), 239–58, esp. 245–47.

61 aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 24, 749–51.

62 Bertaina, *Būluṣ ibn Rajāʾ*, 238–39.

immune from any type of attacks. Rather, he was a fallible human person and not the miraculous prophet that he was made out to be in the commentary tradition.

6 Conclusion

Christian Arabic writers have had a longstanding interest in the Qur'an and how to use *tafsīr* to their own advantage in analyzing the Qur'an, Muḥammad, the hadith reports, and legal interpretations. This approach to using the Qur'an alongside the commentary tradition was helpful for Christian Arabic authors, who argued that if one reads them in tandem properly, then one will discover a more sympathetic view of Christians, a less flattering portrait of Muḥammad, and discrepancies between the Qur'an and its interpretive tradition. In many ways, Christian Arabic authors believed that commentaries on the Qur'an had failed to observe, record, and transmit history responsibly. Instead, history was narrated according to ideological and theological purposes.

This chapter helps us to understand the process by which Qur'an commentaries were written, read, and then transmitted into the Christian Arabic tradition. Prior to their recognition as canonical authorities alongside the Qur'an, there were few Islamic commentaries and few reasons for Christians to read or utilize them in their writings. In subsequent centuries, Christian encounters with Islam became more informed about the Qur'an and how Muslims interpreted it using *tafsīr* as authoritative sources.

In the first stage, Muslim oral traditions about the Qur'an spread via informal conversations since there was no canonical written collection for them to utilize nor for Christians to answer. By the second stage, Christian Arabic writers noticed patterns of Muslim interpretation and cited the Qur'an with an awareness of these trends in interpretation. In addition, Mu'tazilī rationalist criticisms of the *tafsīr* as fantastic embellishments provided a template for Christians to critique traditionist interpretations of the Qur'an. In the third stage, commentaries making use of hadith collections, such as the *tafsīr* of aṭ-Ṭabarī, made the interpretive tradition more influential among Muslim communities. This increasing authority for commentaries encouraged Christians to respond to their interpretations, especially in the cases of 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, Elias of Nisibis, and Būluṣ ibn Rajā'. We find eleventh century (5th AH) Christian authors taking their knowledge of *tafsīr* and utilizing that material in critiques of Qur'an interpretation. In later stages, these Christian Arabic texts were transmitted from the Middle East across the Mediterranean, and ultimately to Spain, where they were read in Arabic. Later medieval Europeans

TABLE 1 Būluṣ ibn Rajā’s Response to Specific Qur’anic Verses

Qur’an Verse	Commentary Narrative (Būluṣ ibn Rajā’s Response to the Verse)
2:119	Muḥammad did not know the fate of his parents (they are in hell)
4:157	One of Jesus’ disciples was crucified in his place (it is a false claim)
17:1	The Night Journey narrative (it contains inconsistencies)
33:37	Muḥammad dissolved his oath to marry Zaynab (he caused marital intrigues between wives)
33:50–51	God allegedly permitted Muḥammad to set aside his older wives including Sawda (he was not faithful to oaths)
66:1–5	Muḥammad had sex with Mary the Copt out of turn (he caused marital intrigues between wives)
93:6–7	Muḥammad was astray prior to his calling (he was not eternally a prophet)
113:4	Jewish sorceresses cast a spell of illness on Muḥammad (he was not invulnerable despite angelic protection)

began to read these Christian Arabic texts to make use of their Islamic source material in their own treatises. Eventually, intellectuals translated these works into Latin and revised the qur’anic exegetical materials to include them in their Latin Christian polemics. The Christian Arabic tradition played a valuable role as a facilitator of Christian knowledge across the Mediterranean concerning the formation, canonization, utilization, and dissemination of commentaries on the Qur’an.

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