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## The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam

When did Syriac-speaking Christians begin to compose apologetic treatises to defend the Christian doctrines against Islam?<sup>1</sup> If the answer to this question would simply be: shortly after the Arab conquests of Syria and Palestine, then the historical implications of such a statement would be rather sweeping. It would mean that among the Christians at a very early stage after the Arab invasions there was an awareness not only that a new political power had arisen in the Near East, but also that the conquerors had introduced a new religious faith against which it was necessary to define the tenets of Christian belief. And that again would mean that nascent Islam already in the first decade after the Arab invasions manifested itself or was at least recognizable as a religious system which could clearly be distinguished from both Judaism and Christianity, the other two monotheistic religions of the Near East.

However, there does not seem to be much support for this view in the Christian sources which belong with certainty to the seventh century. In the seventh century there was, as Sebastian Brock puts it in his study on Syriac views of emergent Islam, "greater awareness that a new empire (*malkuta*) had arisen,

1 For a survey of the Syriac apologetic literature in response to Islam see S.H. Griffith, *Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: from Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)*, B. Lewis–F. Niewöhner (eds.), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter* [Wolfenbütteler Mittelalter – Studien 4] (Wiesbaden 1992) 251–273; L. Sākō, *Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien. Auteurs chrétiens de langue syriaque*, *Islamochristiana* 10 (1984) 273–292, and, in addition, H. Suermann, *Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien* (huitième partie). *Auteurs chrétiens de langue syriaque*, *Islamochristiana* 15 (1989) 169–174; *idem*, *Une controverse de Jōhannān de Lītārb*, *Parole de l'Orient* 15 (1988–1989) 197–213 (however, Suermann's identification of the Stylite Yōhannān of the monastery of Ze'ōrā, the author of the *Erotapokriseis* in MS syr. 203 of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, fol. 135<sup>v</sup>–139<sup>r</sup>, with Yōhannān of Litarb (died 737) cannot be accepted; cf. A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* [Bonn 1922] 342). For the Arabophone Christian authors see R. Casper *et al.*, *Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien*, *Islamochristiana* 1 (1975) 125–181; 2 (1976) 187–249; 3 (1977) 255–286; 4 (1978) 247–267; 5 (1979) 299–317; 6 (1980) 259–299; 7 (1981) 299–307. Sākō, *o.c.*, 277, mentions a study by B. Landron (not accessible to me), *Apologétique, polémique et attitudes nestoriennes vis-à-vis l'islam entre le 8e et le début du 14e siècle* (thèse de doctorat inédite, Paris 1978), dealing with the Nestorian authors writing in Arabic. For a survey of the Greek works see esp. Adel-Théodore Khoury, *Les théologiens byzantins et l'Islam. Textes et auteurs (VIIIe–XIIIe s.)* (Louvain 1969); *idem*, *Polémique byzantine contre l'Islam (VIIIe– XIIIe s.)* (Leiden 1972); *idem*, *Apologétique byzantine contre l'Islam* (Altenberge 1982).



than that a new religion had been born"<sup>2</sup>. Certainly, people realized that also religious motives had played a rôle in the Arab expansion, as appears from some scanty reports in seventh-century sources<sup>3</sup>. But for different and quite understandable reasons early Islam could be explained at first only in terms of the Jewish or, more exactly formulated, the Old-Testament Abrahamic religion.

Nothing new is happening when the Arabs worship at a place called the "Dome (*qūbtā*) of Abraham," according to an anonymous East Syrian chronicler writing in the 670s<sup>4</sup>. Adopting the Muslim view of the foundation of the Meccan sanctuary by Abraham<sup>5</sup>, he notes, in his explanation of the fact that this is a holy place for the Arabs, their reverence for the founder of their race, whose building of the place was kept alive in memory by them throughout the ages<sup>6</sup>. The author of this chronicle knows Muḥammad as the leader of the "sons of Ishmael"<sup>7</sup>, but he explains the origin of the place-name Medina (the city of the Prophet, the new Muslim name for Yathrib) on the basis of the Old Testament story about Abraham by deriving the name from the fourth son of Abraham and Keturah in Gen. 25:2<sup>8</sup>. There are no compelling reasons to believe that polemic motives lie behind the explanations of this chronicler. His knowledge of the religious background of the "sons of Ishmael", whose victory over the strong

2 S.P. Brock, *Syriac Views of Emergent Islam*, G.H.A. Juynboll (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (Carbondale-Edwardsville 1982) 13 (reprinted in S.P. Brock, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* [London 1984]: VIII).

3 Cf. N. Bonwetsch (ed.), *Doctrina Iacobi nuper baptizati* V.16 [Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, N.F. Bd XII, 3] (Berlin 1910) 86-87 (new edition with French translation by V. Déroche, in G. Dagron-V. Déroche, *Juifs et chrétiens dans l'Orient du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (Paris 1991) 47-229, see 208-211, commentary by G. Dagron and V. Déroche, *ibidem*, 230-273, see esp. 247, 263-268); Sebēos, *History of Heraclius*, Ch. XXX, F. Macler (trans.), *Histoire d'Héraclius par l'évêque Sebēos* (Paris 1904) 94-96; Yohannan bar Penkaye, *ktābā d-rēš mellē*, A. Mingana (ed.), *Sources Syriacques*, Vol. I: *Mšiḥa-Zkha*, Bar-Penkayē (Mossoul 1908) 141\*, 14-19, 146\*, 14-147\*, 1 (text), 175\* (French trans.); S.P. Brock, *North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century*. Book XV of John Bar Penkāyē's *Riṣ Mellē*, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987) 57, 61 (English trans.).

4 Edited with Latin translation by I. Guidi, *Chronica Minora I* [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1,2, Script.Syri, 1,2] (Louvain 1903), Vol. 1: 15-39 (text), Vol. 2: 13-32 (trans.). German translation with commentary by Th. Nöldeke, *Die von Guidi herausgegebene syrische Chronik übersetzt und commentiert* [Sitzungsberichte der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, philosophisch-historische Classe, Bd. 128, Abh. 9] (Vienna 1893). A new edition with Arab translation has been published by P. Haddad, *Chronicon Anonymum Saec. VII* (Baghdad 1976). Cf. also S.P. Brock, *Syriac Sources for Seventh-Century History*, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 2 (1976) 23-24 (reprinted in Brock, *Syriac Perspectives* (n.2):VII); *idem*, *Syriac historical writing: a survey of the main sources*, *Journal of the Iraqi Academy* (Syriac Corporation) 5 (1979/80) 25.

5 Cf. Qur'an 2:119-122; 3:90-91; 22:27.

6 Ed. Guidi (n.4) 38, 8-19 (text), 31, 24-33 (trans.).

7 Ed. Guidi (n.4) 30, 24-25 (text), 26, 15 (trans.).

8 Ed. Guidi (n.4) 38, 21-22 (text), 31, 34-36 (trans.).



kingdoms of the Byzantines and the Persians is attributed by him to God<sup>9</sup>, seems to be very limited indeed.

By the end of the 680s another East Syrian author mentions Muḥammad in a remarkably positive way. Yoḥannan bar Penkaye<sup>10</sup>, a monk from the monastery of Mar Yoḥannan of Kamul in North Iraq, calls Muḥammad in his world history entitled *ktābā d-rēš mellē*<sup>11</sup> the “guide” (*mhaddyānā*) and the “instructor” (*tar’ā*) of the Hagarenes who had led them to “the worship of the One God, in accordance with the customs of the ancient law” (i.e. the Torah)<sup>12</sup>. Muḥammad is portrayed as the spiritual leader who not only instructed the Arabs in Old Testament monotheism and gave them laws, but also issued a special ordinance decreeing that the Christians and the monastic order should be held in honour<sup>13</sup>. Yoḥannan can hardly be suspected of creating a flattering image of Muḥammad for politico-ecclesiastical objectives; the Barbarian kingdom of the Arabs was, in his opinion, called by God as a temporary tool of divine wrath<sup>14</sup> and would soon come to an end as a result of the inter-Arab conflicts during the Second Civil War<sup>15</sup>. It is the unparalleled peace and religious tolerance during the reign of the first Umayyad king Mu‘āwiya I (661-680) which Yoḥannan traces back to the instructions of Muḥammad<sup>16</sup>. And, in so doing, he apparently reflects his-

9 Ed. Guidi (n. 4) 38, 4-7 (text), 31, 21-24 (trans.).

10 For Yoḥannan’s Syriac biography and its editions see T. Jansma, *Projet d’édition du k’tābā d’rēš mellē de Jean bar Penkaye*, *L’Orient Syrien* 8 (1963) 89-92. Yoḥannan’s world history is addressed to his friend Sabrišo’ who probably has to be identified with the abbot of the same name of the monastery of Yoḥannan of Kamul; cf. A. Scher, *Notice sur la vie et les œuvres de Yoḥannan bar Penkayē*, *Journal Asiatique* 10/10 (1907) 162-163 (text), 165 (trans.). For the monastery of Yoḥannan of Kamul see J.M. Fiey, *Nisibe, métropole syriaque orientale et ses suffragants des origines à nos jours* [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 388, Subsidia, 54] (Louvain 1977) 199-201. For Yoḥannan’s spiritual milieu see also M. Albert, *Une centurie de Mar Jean bar Penkayē*, *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont. Contributions à l’étude des christianismes orientaux* [Cahiers d’Orientalisme XX] (Genève 1988) 143-151.

11 Of this work, consisting of XV *mēmre*, only books X-XV have been edited, by Mingana (n. 3). Book XV, which deals with the events of the seventh century, was translated in French by Mingana (n. 3) 172\*-197\*, and in English, including the end of book XIV, by Brock, *North Mesopotamia* (n. 3) 57-74. For a synopsis of the contents of Yoḥannan’s world history see A. Baumstark, *Eine syrische Weltgeschichte des siebten Jahrhunderts*, *Römische Quartalschrift* 15 (1901) 273-280; cf. also Brock, *Syriac Sources* (n. 4) 24; *idem*, *Syriac historical writing* (n. 4) 26. For the manuscripts and the text tradition see Jansma, *Projet d’édition* (n. 10) 96-100.

12 Ed. Mingana (n. 3) 146\*, 16-20 (text), 175\* (trans.); Brock, *North Mesopotamia* (n. 3) 61.

13 Ed. Mingana (n. 3) 141\*, 15-19, 146\*, 14-17 (text), 175\* (trans.); Brock, *North Mesopotamia* (n. 3) 57, 61.

14 Ed. Mingana (n. 3) 141\*, 10-142\*, 7, 145\*, 7-20 (text), 174\* (trans.); Brock, *North Mesopotamia* (n. 3) 57-58, 60.

15 Yoḥannan believes that the establishment of ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr’s anticaliphate in Mecca marks the beginning of the dissolution of the Arab Empire that would be accomplished by the non-Arab troops of the Shī‘ite rebel al-Mukhtār, fulfilling the prophecy in Gen. 16:12; ed. Mingana (n. 3) 155\*, 12-20, 167\*, 1-8 (text), 183\*, 194\* (trans.); Brock, *North Mesopotamia* (n. 3) 64, 73.

16 Ed. Mingana (n. 3) 146\*, 11-17 (text), 175\* (trans.); Brock, *North Mesopotamia* (n. 3) 61.



torical circumstances in which local Arab authorities were granting a conditional yet far-reaching freedom of religion to their subjects, in preference to getting involved themselves in religious discussions between the different confessions<sup>17</sup>.

But may we take these few East Syrian examples as proof that there was no Muslim participation at all in the religious discussions of the seventh century, neither in the former Persian nor in the former Byzantine territories? Michael Cook, in his study on the origins of Muslim *kalām*, argued that there is "a small corpus of evidence of Muslim participation in the theological games of the day well before the end of the first century of the Hijra"<sup>18</sup>. Cook's dossier of evidence of seventh-century Christian-Muslim theological disputation contains the following works<sup>19</sup>: 1. A dialogue of 644 between a Hagarene emir and a Jacobite patriarch<sup>20</sup>; 2. A Chalcedonian-Jewish disputation of 681 known as the *Trophies of Damascus*<sup>21</sup>; 3. A Jacobite-Maronite disputation in the presence of Mu'āwiya mentioned in a fragmentary Maronite chronicle from the mid 660s<sup>22</sup>; 4. The Letter of Jacob of Edessa (died 708) 'On the Genealogy of the

17 Also the Nestorian patriarch Išo'yahb III (died 659) stresses in his letter to bishop Šem'on of Rewardašir the (conditional) religious tolerance of the Arabs; R. Duval, Išo'yahb patriarchae III liber epistularum [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 11, 12, Script.Syri, 11, 12] (Parisii 1904, 1905), Vol. 11: 251, 13-23 (text), Vol. 12: 182, 1-9 (trans.). Cf. also Brock, *Syriac Views* (n. 2) 15. For some early reports of Christian suffering by the Arabs *at the time of the conquest* see P. Crone – M. Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge 1977) 156 (note 33). However, the early Syriac sources which are adduced by Crone and Cook do not state explicitly that the Arabs were primarily guided by religious hostility towards Christianity (cf. Crone-Cook, *o. c.*, 6). The author of the East Syrian chronicle of the 670s speaks of much bloodshed at the capture of Šuštār by the Arabs and then mentions the Christian victims (ed. Guidi [n. 4] 37, 3-14 [text], 30, 30-31, 2 [trans.]). The West Syrian Chronicle ad annum 724 not only reports the slaughter of monks on Mount Mardin, but also, in the foregoing section, the killing of many Christians, Jews and Samaritans in Palestine (ed. E. W. Brooks, *Chronica Minora II* [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 3, Script.Syri, 3] (Louvain 1904) 147, 30-148, 9; trans. I.-B. Chabot [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 4, Script.Syri, 4] (Louvain 1904) 114, 15-22).

18 M. A. Cook, *The Origins of Kalām*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43 (1981) 42.

19 Cook, *The Origins* (n. 18) 41-42.

20 See below, pp. 171 ff.

21 G. Bardy (ed. and trans.), *Les trophées de Damas: controverse judéo-chrétienne du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle* [Patrologia Orientalis XV, 2] (Paris 1927) 171-292. V. Déroche, *L'authenticité de l' 'Apologie contre les Juifs' de Léontius de Néapolis*, *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 110 (1986) 660, n. 34, proposes a date of about 661.

22 This chronicle was edited by E. W. Brooks, *Chronica Minora II* [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 3, Script.Syri, 3] (Louvain 1904) 43-74; Latin translation by I.-B. Chabot [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 4, Script.Syri, 4] (Louvain 1904) 35-57. Edition and German translation of the last part with commentary by Th. Nöldeke, *Zur Geschichte der Araber im 1. Jahrhundert d. H. aus syrischen Quellen*, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 29 (1875/76) 82-98. Partial French translation by F. Nau, *Opus-*



Holy Virgin<sup>23</sup>; 5. The *Hodegos* or *Viae Dux* of Anastasius the Sinaite from the later seventh century<sup>24</sup>.

However, to what extent may we take these sources to be reliable witnesses of actual Muslim participation in the religious discussions of the time? I am afraid that the majority of the examples adduced by Cook rather demonstrate that the Muslims hardly played an active rôle in the religious discussions. In the *Trophies of Damascus* they appear as spectators alongside Hellenes, Samaritans, Jews and Christians attending the discussion between a Chalcedonian Christ and the Jews<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, this treatise is generally held to be a literary fiction not in the last place written to reassure the Christians themselves<sup>26</sup>. The polemic context in which the Muslims are put on the scene concerns the Jews (the *Trophies of Damascus*<sup>27</sup>) or the "heretical" Christians (the Jacobites in the Maronite chronicle<sup>28</sup>, the Monophysites in the *Hodegos* of the neo-Chalcedonian Anastasius<sup>29</sup>).

cules Maronites, *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 4 (1899) 318-328. Cf. also Brock, *Syriac Sources* (n. 4) 18-19; *idem*, *Syriac historical writing* (n. 4) 7.

23 Edition and French translation by F. Nau, *Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse sur la généalogie de la Sainte Vierge*, *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 6 (1901) 512-531.

24 K. H. Uthemann (ed.), *Anastasii Sinaitae, Viae Dux* [Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 8] (Turnhout 1981).

25 Ed. Bardy, *Les trophées de Damas* (n. 21), deuxième entretien VIII [2], 233-234. However, at the beginning (I [1], p. 215) the "Saracens" are not mentioned.

26 For the relation between the fictional character of this treatise and other anti-Jewish disputation texts and the historical reality of religious polemic debate see Averil Cameron, *The eastern provinces in the 7th century AD. Hellenism and the emergence of Islam*, in S. Said (ed.), 'ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΣ. Quelques jalons pour une histoire de l'identité grecque. Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg 25-27 octobre 1989 (Strasbourg 1991) 306-307. Cf. also V. Déroche, *La polémique anti-judaïque au VI<sup>e</sup> et au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Un memento inédit, les Képhalaia*, *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (Paris 1991) 281-288.

27 Cf. Averil Cameron, *The eastern provinces* (n. 26) 304-305.

28 Ed. Brooks (n. 22) 70, 7-21; trans. Chabot (n. 22) 55, 1-12. In this highly tendentious section, the Maronite author suggests that the Jacobite Church authorities bought the protection of Mu'āwīya against the persecution by the "sons of the Church" (i.e. the Church of the Byzantine Empire) by an annual payment of tribute, after the Jacobite bishops Theodoros and Sebokt having been confuted in a religious debate with the Maronites in the presence of Mu'āwīya in Damascus in 970 AG.

29 Ed. Uthemann (n. 24), *Viae Dux* I, 1, 46, VII, 2, 118, X, 2, 4, pp. 9-10, 113, 169-170. The Arabs are adduced paradigmatically in the context of anti-Monophysite polemics. See especially the interesting article of S. H. Griffith, *Anastasios of Sinai, the Hodegos, and the Muslims*, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987) 341-358. Griffith rightly concludes that the Arabs are mentioned in this work of Anastasios only "as part and parcel of the argument against the Monophysites" (347). It is important to note Griffith's conclusion that "Anastasios is in fact reflecting the teaching of the Qur'an when he mentions what the Arabs say about Christian doctrines" (356), and that Anastasios' remarks can be considered as evidence that some time before the year 681 (the *terminus ante quem* for the compilation of the first edition of Anastasios' *Hodegos*) Qur'anic ideas were present in Syria/Palestine, so that they could be put forward "as common knowledge about what Arabs believe about Christian doctrines" (358). Cf. also J. Haldon, *The Works of Anastasios of Sinai: a key source for the history of seventh-century East Mediterranean society and belief*, Averil Cameron and L. I. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and*



It is even questionable whether Jacob of Edessa's letter 'On the Genealogy of the Holy Virgin' to the Stylite Yoḥannan of Litarb (died 737), though written at the end of Jacob's life at the beginning of the eighth century<sup>30</sup>, may be considered as a piece of evidence for actual Christian-Muslim disputation. It rather seems that the knowledge of the Muslim tenet of Jesus son of Mary being the Messiah<sup>31</sup> made it necessary first of all for the Christians themselves<sup>32</sup> to discuss once more the old problem of the Davidic descent of Mary not being mentioned explicitly in the Holy Scriptures<sup>33</sup>. The really polemic expressions in this letter again concern the Jews<sup>34</sup>, whereas the Muslims by their confession of Jesus son of Mary being the Messiah are adduced as allies of the Christians in this respect against the Jews<sup>35</sup>. There were quite a lot of Christian *religious* polemics in the seventh century, even in connection with the Arab conquests, but these polemics were focused on the Jews<sup>36</sup> or the religious politics of the

Early Islamic Near East, I: Problems in the Literary Source Material [Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 1] (Princeton, N.J. 1992) 107-147.

30 See Nau, *Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse* (n. 23) 522 (text), 530 (trans.), esp. note 2.

31 Ed. Nau, *Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse* (n. 23) 518 (text), 524 (trans.).

32 The Christians are mentioned alongside of the Muslims in Jacob's exposition, how it has to be demonstrated by a syllogism that Mary is of Davidic descent; ed. Nau, *Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse* (n. 23) 519-520 (text), 525-526 (trans.). In his *Early Muslim dogma. A source-critical study* (Cambridge 1981) 147, Michael Cook states that Jacob in this letter is "giving advice on the strategy to be adopted in arguing with Hagarene opponents concerning the genealogy of the Virgin". In fact Jacob writes to Yoḥannan: "So, I am of the opinion, that by a compelling and valid syllogism such as this one we ought to demonstrate to every Christian or Muslim who would demand that, that Mary, the Holy Virgin and Theotokos, is of Davidic descent, although that is not demonstrated by the Scriptures... If it would happen that somebody, who is conversing with you, would ask and inquire you on this subject (i. e. the question of the genealogy of the Holy Virgin), whether he would be a Muslim or a Christian, if he would be endowed with reason, being in full possession of his intellectual faculties, he will understand the syllogism, when he hears it, and bear witness of the truth of his own accord without dispute. So the things that have been said are sufficient to demonstrate clearly in front of a Christian or a Muslim who is disputing about this, that the Holy Virgin is of Davidic descent".

33 Ed. Nau, *Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse* (n. 23) 519, 522 (text), 525, 530 (trans.).

34 Ed. Nau, *Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse* (n. 23) 520-522 (text), 526-530 (trans.). In this letter Jacob is not engaged in confuting by biblical arguments etc. the Muslim rejection of the Divinity of Christ. He only says that the Muslims in calling Jesus the son of Mary the Messiah the "Word of God" and by calling him in addition by ignorance also the "Spirit of God" are not able to distinguish between the saying on the "Word" and on the "Spirit", as they also are not able to accept calling the Messiah "God" or the "Son of God"; ed. Nau, *Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse* (n. 23) 518-519 (text), 524 (trans.). Cf. Qur'an 4:169; cf. also 3:40; 66:12.

35 Ed. Nau, *Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse* (n. 23) 518-519 (text), 524 (trans.).

36 Cf. also Averil Cameron, *The eastern provinces* (n. 26) 294; for a survey of the anti-Jewish literature of the seventh century in general in addition to the *Doctrina Jacobi* (n. 3) see now Déroche, *La polémique anti-juдаïque* (n. 26) 278-281. For a general discussion of the historical backgrounds see G. Dagron, *Introduction historique. Entre histoire et apocalypse*, Dagron-Déroche, *Juifs et chrétiens* (n. 3) 17-46.



Byzantine emperors or the rivalling Christian communities<sup>37</sup>, rather than on the Arabs.

There is, however, one exception in Cook's list: The dialogue of a Hagarene emir with a Jacobite patriarch is undoubtedly a representative of Christian-Muslim theological disputation. This text is generally considered not only as the oldest specimen of Christian-Muslim dialogue, but also as a record of an interview which actually took place in the environs of Ḥomṣ (Emesa) shortly after the Arab conquests. Since it takes a key-position in the question of the beginnings of Syriac apologetic literature in response to Islam, I will deal with this text at greater length. In doing so, I will advance some arguments for the following thesis. Firstly, the dialogue, in its present form, is not a historical record of an interview between the highest authority of the Jacobite church and a Muslim emir, but it has to be considered as a representative of the *literary genre* of apologies which were written for certain purposes for the sake of the Christian community itself. Secondly, although this apology may still be regarded as the oldest known Jacobite example of this kind of literature, the general view that it was composed in 644, some eighty years before the first East Syrian dialogue apology was written<sup>38</sup>, can hardly be maintained. I will try to demonstrate that the underlying issues and essential problems discussed in this dialogue fit much better into the historical situation of the first decades of the eighth century.

The dialogue between a Hagarene emir and a Jacobite patriarch is preserved in a West Syrian manuscript in the British Library which was completed on 17 August 874 C.E.<sup>39</sup>. William Wright, in his Catalogue of 1871, described the work (number 88 of the manuscript) as "A letter concerning an interview which John the patriarch had with an Arab amīr"<sup>40</sup>, and François Nau made this text accessible to the scholarly world by its edition and French translation in the *Journal Asiatique* of 1915 under the title "Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens"<sup>41</sup>. In the manuscript the dispute text bears the following

37 Cf. a.o. W.E. Kaegi, Initial Byzantine Reactions to the Arab Conquest, *Church History* 38 (1969) 142-143, 148-149; Brock, *Syriac Views* (n. 2) 10-11.

38 See below, pp. 185-186.

39 For the contents of the Syriac MS Add. 17, 193, containing a rather heterogeneous collection of 125 documents and extracts, see W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, Part II* (London 1871) 989-1002.

40 Wright, *Catalogue* (n. 39) 998.

41 F. Nau, Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716 d'après le ms. du British Museum Add. 17193. Avec un appendice sur le patriarche Jean I<sup>er</sup>, sur un colloque d'un patriarche avec le chef des mages et sur un diplôme qui aurait été donné par Omar à l'évêque du Tour 'Abdin, *Journal Asiatique* 11/5 (1915) 225-279. Introduction by Nau: 225-247; edition of the Syriac text of the colloquy: 248-253; French translation: 257-264. German translation with commentary by H. Suermann, *Orientalische Christen und der Islam. Christliche Texte aus der Zeit von 632-750*, *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 67 (1983) 122-128.



title: "The letter of Mar Yohannan the patriarch on the conversation he had with the emir of the *mhaggrāyē* (i.e. the Muslims)"<sup>42</sup>. The conversation between the emir and the patriarch does indeed appear within the literary framework of a letter, by which not the patriarch himself, but an unnamed sender informs his (equally unnamed) addressees about the interrogation of his patriarch by the (also unnamed) emir, which took place on Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup> of the month of *ıyyōr* (May)<sup>43</sup>. The beginning and the end of the letter present the writer as belonging to an important Jacobite delegation, consisting of the patriarch, several bishops and others, which was summoned to appear before "the illustrious commander, the emir"<sup>44</sup>.

François Nau identified the patriarch Yohannan, mentioned in the title, with the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch Yohannan Sedrā (died 648) and the emir with 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, the famous conqueror of Egypt<sup>45</sup>. The colloquy would have taken place on Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 639, since the other two possible dates

42 Ed. Nau, *Un colloque* (n. 41) 248, 1-2 (text), 257 (trans.). For a discussion of the name *mah-grāyē* / *mhaggrāyē* see S.H. Griffith, *The Prophet Muḥammad, his Scripture and his Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century*, T. Fahd (ed.), *La vie du prophète Mahomet; colloque de Strasbourg*, 1980 (Paris 1983) 122-124. Already c. 650 the name *mhaggrāyē* appears to be used to distinguish Muslim Arabs from others; cf. the expressions *ṭayyāyē mhaggrāyē* in a letter of the patriarch Išo'yahb III (see below, note 72).

43 Ed. Nau, *Un colloque* (n. 41) 248, 6-7 (text), 257 (trans.). The assumption that Mar Severus, mentioned among the members of the delegation at the end of the letter (Nau, 253, 9-10 (text), 263 (trans.)) was the patriarch's secretary, is due to a conjecture. Cf. Kh. Samir, *Qui est l'interlocuteur musulman du patriarche Syrien Jean III (631-648)?*, H.J.W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant, C. Molenberg, and G.J. Reinink (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984. Literary Genres in Syriac Literature [Orientalia Christiana Analecta 229]* (Roma 1987) 388.

44 Ed. Nau, *Un colloque* (n. 41) 248, 3-7, 253, 7-14 (text), 257, 236-264 (trans.). The author of the letter mentions the following members of the delegation by name: Abbas Mar Thomas, Mar Severus, Mar Sargīs, Mar Aytīlāhā, Mar Yohannan and Mar Andreas. Three bishops are mentioned among the twelve bishops belonging to the delegation of the Jacobite patriarch Athanasius summoned to Mabbugh for an interview with the Emperor Heraclius in 630; see Michael Syrus, *Chron. XI*, 3, ed. J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, IV* (Paris 1910) 409 (text), II (Paris 1901) 412 (trans.); cf. also the *Chronicle ad annum 1234*, ed. with Latin trans. by I.-B. Chabot, *Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens, I* [*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 81, 109, *Script.Syri*, 36, 56] (Louvain 1920, 1937) 238, 14-17 (text), 186, 32-35 (trans.). Perhaps Thomas may be identified with Thomas of Mabbugh, Severus with Severus of Qennešrin and Sargīs with Sargīs of 'Arṣ. It is uncertain whether Aytīlāhā is to be identified with the bishop of Marga (c. 630). The historical rightness of the list of names is not to be doubted, but that, of course, does not prove the authenticity of the letter itself, and in particular not the authenticity of the contents of the religious disputation in the letter. The author of the letter intends, for apologetic reasons, to make the first official meeting of the patriarch of his church the historical scene of the religious disputation (see below, p. 184).

45 Nau, *Un colloque* (n. 41) 226-227. Nau (231-232) also points out the interview between 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ and the Coptic patriarch Benjamin as it is reported in the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church [Patrologia Orientalis I]* (Paris 1907) 494-498. However, there is nothing in this report that shows that during the interview *religious* topics were discussed.



were less likely (in the years of Yoḥannan's patriarchate the 9<sup>th</sup> of May fell on a Sunday in 633, 639 and 644)<sup>46</sup>.

After Nau's study scholars were more concerned with the question of the identity of the emir and the date of meeting than with the contents of the colloquy. Nau's identification, based on a tradition in the chronicle of Michael Syrus (12<sup>th</sup> century), in which Yoḥannan's opponent is named 'Amrou bar Sa'd<sup>47</sup>, was contested already in 1919 by Henri Lammens who suggested Sa'īd ibn 'Āmir, the governor of the *ḡund* (military district) of Ḥomṣ, as the most likely candidate for being Yoḥannan's interrogator and 644 as the year in which the colloquy took place<sup>48</sup>. More recently Patricia Crone & Michael Cook and Khalil Samir have argued that Michael's 'Amrou bar Sa'd rather has to be identified with 'Umayr ibn Sa'd, who was appointed military governor of the *ḡund* of Ḥomṣ by the caliph 'Umar in the period 641-644. Accordingly the colloquy would most probably have taken place on Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 644<sup>49</sup>.

At this point I have to make a short remark on the question of the source of Michael Syrus, especially on the question of the connection between the tradition in Michael with regard to the colloquy and the dispute text in the London manuscript. In connection with 'Amrou bar Sa'd a cluster of traditions appears in Michael. First a story connected with 'Amrou's forbidding the public display of crosses. Then a short remark on 'Amrou's summoning by letter the patriarch Yoḥannan and the following interview in which the patriarch answered the emir's contentious questions. Finally, a more elaborated story on the translation of the Gospel into Arabic: the emir, impressed by the patriarch's brave defence, orders to translate the Gospel into Arabic on the condition that the word God, applied to Christ, the word Baptism and the word Cross are suppressed; when Yoḥannan vehemently resists this demand of 'Amrou, the emir permits him to write as he wishes; Yoḥannan then assembles the bishops and sends for Christian Arabs belonging to the Tānūkāyē, 'Aqūlāyē and Ṭū'āyē<sup>50</sup>, who knew both Arabic and Syriac; these Christian Arabs translated the Gospel into Arabic that was subsequently presented to 'Amrou<sup>51</sup>.

The same cluster of traditions occurs, independently of Michael, in the Syriac *Chronicle ad annum 1234*<sup>52</sup> and is undoubtedly to be traced back to the (for the most part) lost history, covering the years 582-842, composed by Dionysius of Tel-Mahrē, who was Jacobite patriarch

46 Nau, Un colloque (n. 41) 227, note 3.

47 Chron. XI, 8, ed. Chabot (n. 44), IV, 421-422 (text), II, 431-432 (trans.). In his ecclesiastical history Bar Hebraeus is dependent on Michael, ed. J.B. Abbeloos and Th.J. Lamy, Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon ecclesiasticum, I (Lovanii 1872) 275-276.

48 H. Lammens, A propos d'un colloque entre le patriarche Jean I<sup>er</sup> et 'Amr Ibn al-'Āṣi, Journal Asiatique 11/13 (1919) 97-110.

49 Crone-Cook, Hagarism (n. 17) 162, note 11; Samir, Qui est l'interlocuteur (n. 43) 394-400.

50 These same three tribes are mentioned in the history of the Jacobite metropolitan Aḥūdemmeḥ who had evangelized among Arab tribes in Mesopotamia in the sixth century; F. Nau (ed.), Histoires d'Ahoudeemeh et de Marouta, métropolitains jacobites de Tagrit et de l'Orient [Patrologia Orientalis III] (Paris 1905) 21-22. See J. Spencer Trimingham, Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times (London-New York 1979) 171-173, and the bibliographical notes in Griffith, Disputes with Muslims (n. 1) 258, note 32.

51 Chron. XI, 8, ed. Chabot (n. 44), IV, 421-422 (text), II, 431-432 (trans.).

52 Ed. Chabot (n. 44), 262,3-264,2 (text), 205,1-206,14 (trans.).



from 818 to 845<sup>53</sup>. The question to what extent Dionysius, in his turn, here may depend on his sources, as well as their possible identity, must remain open for the moment<sup>54</sup>. However, as to the relation between the report in Dionysius and the dispute text there are, hypothetically, at least three options: 1. there is not a direct (textual or source-) relation between them, i.e. they have to be regarded as independent witnesses of some interview between the patriarch Yohannan and the emir; 2. there is a direct relation in the sense that the author of the dispute text knew of the tradition as preserved in Dionysius and elaborated the theme in his work; 3. there is a direct relation in the sense that Dionysius or his source knew the dispute text, identified the unnamed emir with 'Amrou and connected the reference to the interview with the story of the interdiction of the public display of crosses.

There may be some arguments in favor of the third possibility on internal grounds. In the *Chronicle ad annum 1234* the reference to the interview is introduced by the following words: "This emir Bar Sa'd summoned by letter the patriarch Yohannan, either because of his hatred of the Christians or because he wanted to stop Christ being called God"<sup>55</sup>. The first alternative appears to be a deduction from the foregoing episode on the suppression of the public display of crosses by 'Amrou, the second alternative, however, seems to presuppose the acquaintance with the contents of the disputation. Also the following story on the translation of the Gospel into Arabic may presuppose the acquaintance with the dispute text, and it may even represent a tradition that was developed from the dispute text. This story, the historicity of which is indeed not uncontested in modern scholarship<sup>56</sup>, adduces Christians from three Arab groups as the translators of the Gospel into Arabic. The same groups are mentioned at the end of the disputation alongside Muslim notables and governors of cities attending the interview. Their rôle in the dispute text seems to be determined by the apologetic context, in which the patriarch resists the emir's claim that the Christians should adhere to the Muslim law if the Christian laws are not written in the Gospel<sup>57</sup>, but it would be quite understandable if the Gospel-topic of the disputation would have generated the story of the translation of the Gospel into Arabic with the Christian members of the three Arab groups in the rôle of translators. However this may be, even if the first option would be the right one, to rush into the conclusion, without comment and any further investigation, that the disputation in the London manuscript represents an authentic record of the interview, may be a rather uncritical way of dealing with this source.

53 Cf. R. Abramowski, Dionysius von Tellmahre: Jakobitischer Patriarch von 815-845. Zur Geschichte der Kirche unter dem Islam [Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes XXV, 2] (Leipzig 1940); Brock, Syriac historical writing (n. 4) 14-15.

54 Research into the complex question of Dionysius' sources has only recently started; see L.I. Conrad, The Conquest of Arwād: A Source-Critical Study in the Historiography of the Early Medieval Near East, Cameron-Conrad (eds.), The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East (n. 29) 322-348; cf. also *idem*, Theophanes and the Arabic Historical Tradition: Some Indications of Intercultural Transmission, Byzantinische Forschungen 15 (1990) 37-44, and esp. A. Palmer, The Seventh Century in West-Syrian Chronicles [Translated Texts for Historians 15] (Liverpool 1993) 85-104.

55 Ed. Chabot (n. 44) 263,5-7 (text), 205,30-32 (trans.).

56 See G. Graf, Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur [Studi e Testi 118] Bd. I (Città del Vaticano 1944) 35; A. Vööbus, Early Versions of the New Testament. Manuscript Studies [Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 6] (Stockholm 1954) 284; Spencer Trimingham, Christianity among the Arabs (n. 50) 225. Also S.H. Griffith, The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century, Oriens Christianus 69 (1985) 135-137, 166, is cautious as to the reliability of this tradition, arguing that the first translation of the Gospel in Arabic for general use in the church was made in the first Abbasid century.

57 Ed. Nau, Un colloque (n. 41) 251,20-22 (text), p. 261 (trans.); see further below pp. 179-181 and notes 79 and 85.



The historicity of the religious disputation between Yohannan and the emir in the London manuscript, however, is not called in question by the above-mentioned authors, dealing with the question of the date and the identity of the emir, and other scholars<sup>58</sup>, although some of them do not feel quite comfortable in every respect. Crone & Cook, for instance, who use this dispute text in their much-discussed *Hagarism* as a source of information for early Islam in the seventh century<sup>59</sup>, suggest that one section of the disputation, which might contain an implicit reference to the Qur'anic law of inheritance, could be suspected of being a later reworking of the original text<sup>60</sup>. Already in 1930 Erdmann Fritsch, adopting the views of François Nau, could not conceal a certain embarrassment in the introductory sentences of his book on the history of Muslim polemics against Christianity:<sup>61</sup>

Ein energischer Eroberungsdrang ließ den Islam schon in den ersten Jahrzehnten seines Lebens mitten in die Zentren der großen Religionen Vorderasiens eindringen. Aber er ging nicht auf Bekehrung aus, es kam ihm zunächst nur auf die Aufrichtung seiner politischen Oberherrschaft und auf wirtschaftliche Ausbeute an. Die »Schriftbesitzer«, Juden und Christen, die sich unterwarfen und die Toleranztaxe bezahlten, wurden in den Schutzrechtsverband aufgenommen, ohne in ihrer Religionsübung gefährdet zu sein. Daß aber die Eroberer auch den religiösen Verhältnissen der neuen Gebiete Interesse entgegenbrachten, beweist das Religionsgespräch, das der arabische General 'Amr Ibn-al-Āṣ i. J. 639, im 5. Jahre des Kalifates 'Omars, mit dem nestorianischen [this is, of course, a slip of the pen of Fritsch] Patriarchen Johann I. von Antiochien in Anwesenheit von fünf Bischöfen und einer großen Zahl vornehmer Christen veranstaltete; der Patriarch verfaßte mit dem Beistand der Bischöfe darüber einen syrischen Bericht und sandte ihn an die Christen von Mesopotamien. Aber dem arabischen Emir kam es weniger auf Bekehrung oder religiöse Information an als darauf, politische Bundesgenossen zu werben, ebenso wie bei seinem Religionsgespräch mit Benjamin, dem Patriarchen der ägyptischen Jakobiten i. J. 643 (s. Nau, l.c. 231)<sup>62</sup>.

Of course, one would expect that the main concern of an Arab emir in the first years following the conquests would be the stabilization of power and the making of politico-social arrangements with the authorities of the important religious communities in the conquered countries, but it cannot be denied that the emir of the disputation text is portrayed as somebody who is primarily and mainly interested in theological questions.

However, a few other voices can be heard too. So Sidney Griffith suggests for the conversation between Yohannan and the Muslim emir a date of some forty

58 Cf. a.o. Khoury, *Les théologiens byzantins* (n. 1) 39; Suermann, *Orientalische Christen* (n. 41) 125-126.

59 See Crone-Cook, *Hagarism* (n. 17) 11, 14.

60 *Ibidem*, 18 and 168, note 20.

61 E. Fritsch, *Islam und Christentum im Mittelalter. Beiträge zur Geschichte der muslimischen Polemik gegen das Christentum in arabischer Sprache* [Breslauer Studien zur historischen Theologie, Bd. XVII] (Breslau 1930) 1.

62 See note 45.



years before the first Abbasid century<sup>63</sup>, relating the dispute text to a following chronicle of events in the London manuscript<sup>64</sup>, and Louis Sākō, in a note to his “Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien”, rejects the assumption that the colloquy is authentic, although he does not exclude that “il est bien possible que le patriache ait rencontré l’émir et que plus tard le colloque ait été écrit”<sup>65</sup>.

The above-mentioned examples betray something of the tension between the way of taking this text as a historical record dating from the 640s and the actual contents of the disputation. It may, therefore, be appropriate to approach the problem from the other side by taking the scope of the disputation itself as the starting-point for the question of the date and the “Sitz im Leben” of the work as a whole.

Sidney Griffith quite rightly classified the conversation between Yoḥannan and the emir under the *genre* of Christian apologies in response to Islam, defining the letter as “a miniature catechism of Christian beliefs, designed to furnish the reader with ready answers to the customary questions raised by Muslims”<sup>66</sup>. Although Griffith’s definition of the apologetic objectives of the letter may have to be adjusted slightly<sup>67</sup>, it is evident that the dialogue, in terms of the order of its questions and answers, the gradual development of its themes, and the theological scope of its arguments, displays all the characteristics of a carefully composed literary fiction, in which the main controversial issues between Christianity and Islam are raised: the doctrine of the Godhead of Christ and the Trinity<sup>68</sup>. The author is well aware of Islam being a religion different from Christianity, Judaism and Samaritanism<sup>69</sup>; however, he takes great pains to prove that the faith of the new rulers is not a *new* religion, but rather a variant of the old Mosaic

63 Griffith, *The Prophet Muḥammad* (n. 42) 99.

64 *Idem*, Chapter ten of the *Scholion*. Theodore Bar Kōnī’s Apology for Christianity, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 47 (1981) 159. This chronicle was edited, with a French translation, by Nau, *Un colloque* (n. 41) 253-256 (text), 264-267 (trans.). It contains a list of natural disasters between the years 712 (during the reign of al-Walīd) and 716 (during the reign of Sulaymān). The author of this record was very probably a contemporary of the events described by him, but this in itself does, of course, not prove that the foregoing letter in the London manuscript was composed about the same time. However, the results of my analysis of the contents of the dispute text point at a comparable date of the composition of the letter, so that there may have been a close connection between both texts at least with respect to their transmission.

65 Sākō, *Bibliographie* (n. 1) 277, note 3.

66 Griffith, *The Prophet Muḥammad* (n. 42) 100.

67 The main apologetic objective of the letter rather lies in its intention to ward off the increasing danger of apostasy to Islam (see below, pp. 181-182, 186-187).

68 The author makes the emir put the right questions in the right order to develop the following theological line of thought: The oneness of Christianity consists in the one Gospel of the salvation of mankind by the incarnation at the end of times of God the Word, being one of the hypostases and persons of the eternal divine Trinity, fulfilling the Old Testament promises; and Christian life, in every respect, is rooted in the one divine Gospel succeeding and fulfilling Old Testament law.

69 Ed. Nau, *Un colloque* (n. 41) 248, 16-17 (text), 257-258 (trans.). Also in his use of the expression



religion<sup>70</sup>. It is not very surprising that the author, in doing so, employs a lot of traditional anti-Jewish polemical material<sup>71</sup>. What is important is that his attention is primarily focused on the Christological issue<sup>72</sup> and that the way in which

*nōmōsā d-mahgrā* the author shows that he is well aware of Muslim law being distinct from the Pentateuchal law (see below, pp. 180-181).

- 70 In explaining nascent Islam as a manifestation of the Mosaic religion the author is joining the common views of Syriac authors already of the seventh century (see above). However, it is important to note that the author is writing in a time, in which the idea of Islam being a new religion, distinguishing itself from both Judaism and Christianity, had become a problem that was to be solved through an apology for Christianity.
- 71 Cf. for the discussion of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ and the Pentateuchal *testimonia* adduced by the patriarch (Deut. 6:2, Gen. 19:24), ed. Nau, *Un colloque* (n. 41) 249, 21-250, 13, 251, 2-11 (text), 259-261 (trans.), a.o. Severus of Antioch, *Hom.cath.* LXX, ed. M. Brière, *Les Homiliae Cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche. Traduction syriaque de Jacques d'Édesse* [Patrologia Orientalis XII,1] (Paris 1919) 19-29; *Doctrina Jacobi* II.3, ed. Déroche (n. 3) 140-141; Jacob of Serugh, *Hom.* IV against the Jews, ed. M. Albert, Jacques de Saroug, *homélies contre les Juifs* [Patrologia Orientalis XXXVIII, 1] (Turnhout 1976) 113-135, esp. 114-115. Cf. also A.L. Williams, *Adversus Judaeos. A Bird's-eye View of Christian Apologiae until the Renaissance* (Cambridge 1935) 120. In particular, the parallels in Severus, already mentioned by Nau, are very striking indeed, and it is probable that the author of the dispute text was a.o. inspired by a Syriac translation of Severus' *Hom.cath.*, although it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide, whether it was the first translation of c. 530 by Paul of Callinice or Jacob of Edessa's revision/translation of 701, the first translation of homily LXX not being preserved.
- 72 The Christological issue in connection with the Muslim tenet of Jesus seems to begin to play a more distinct rôle only in the Christian sources from the last third of the seventh century. When Išo'yahb, ed. Duval (n. 17) 97, 4-5 (text), 73, 35-37 (trans.), remarks that the Muslim Arabs (*tayyāyē mbaggrāyē*) do not help those "who speak of passion and death in relation to God the Lord of All" (i.e. the Monophysites), he is only referring to their monotheism (cf. also Brock, *Syriac Views* [n. 2] 16). The East Syrian chronicle of the 670s (notes 4-9) and Yoḥannan bar Penkaye (notes 3, 10-16) are conspicuously silent as to the Muslim view of Jesus. The Maronite chronicle, ed. Brooks (n. 22) 71, 4-7, trans. Chabot (n. 22) 55, 23-26, reports Mu'āwiya's visiting Christian holy places in Jerusalem (Golgotha, Gethsemane, the tomb of Mary), suggesting Mu'āwiya's devotion for these holy places (however, a certain caution in respect to the reports in this chronicle is due (see note 28), and this chronicle also speaks of the coins without the cross minted by Mu'āwiya not being accepted, ed. Brooks (n. 22) 71, 18-20, trans. Chabot (n. 22) 55, 37-56, 1; cf. also Crone-Cook, *Hagarism* [n. 17] 11). Sebēos, *History of Heraclius*, Ch. XXXVI, trans. Macler (n. 3) 139-140, even makes an Arab ruler in a letter to the Byzantine Emperor Constans requiring of the Emperor to renounce Jesus, thus testifying that he was only aware of the monotheism of the "Ishmaelites". The reference in Crone-Cook, *Hagarism* (n. 17) 162-163, note 14, to a text published by F. Nau, *Notice historique sur le monastère de Qartamin, suivi d'une note sur le monastère de Qennešré*, *Actes du XIV<sup>e</sup> congrès international des orientalistes*, Alger, 1905, deuxième partie (Paris 1907) 76-99 [122-125], in which it is reported that the demons prefer the "pagans" (*ḥanpē*, identified with the Muslims by Crone and Cook) to the Jews in that the *ḥanpē* "do not believe Christ to be God", whereas the Jews "in some degree know Him, who is dwelling in heaven" (ed. Nau, 94 [130], 3-6 (text), 82 [118] (trans.)), cannot be regarded as a reliable testimony from the second half of the seventh century (see my forthcoming article *Die Muslime in einer Sammlung von Dämonengeschichten des Klosters von Qennešrin*). The Nestorian patriarch Ḥenanišo' I (died 699/700), however, in mentioning a "new absurdity" that takes Jesus for a prophet, is undoubtedly referring to the Muslims (see G.J. Reinink, *Fragmente der Evangelienexegese des Katholikos Ḥenanišo' I*, R. Lavenant (ed.), *V Symposium Syriacum 1988* [Orientalia Christiana Analecta 236] (Roma 1990) 89-90), and the Nestorian patriarch Mar Aba II (died c. 751 in the age of 110 years) is refuting the rejection of the Divinity



he is dealing with this question seems to reveal a particular problem in his time and in his ecclesiastical milieu.

This particular problem is, to put it briefly, the dividedness of Christendom, as a result of the Christological controversies, as opposed to the concept of the unity of Islam, based upon its absolute monotheism and, accordingly, its "undivided" opinion on Christ. Right at the beginning of the disputation the author makes the emir the mouth-piece of this problem by the question whether all who are Christians and are so called in the whole world possess *one and the same* Gospel without any difference<sup>73</sup>. The patriarch's answer in the affirmative<sup>74</sup> enables the emir to put his finger on the sore spot<sup>75</sup>:

The Gospel being one, why, then, is the faith [of the Christians] differing?

The patriarch's answer to this question is very significant, as it defines the whole setting of the following discussion on the Divinity of Christ and the Trinity<sup>76</sup>:

And the Blessed replied: Just as the Law is *one and the same* and is accepted by us Christians, and by you *mbaggrāyē* (Muslims), and by the Jews and by the Samaritans, and [still] all have a different faith, so it is also with the faith in the Gospel: every heresy understands and explains it differently and not like us.

By the comparison between the Gospel and the Mosaic Law (the Pentateuch) the author wants to demonstrate that the concept of the oneness of Islam as opposed to the dividedness of Christianity is in fact a false antithesis. On the one hand, Christianity would be a unity if all Christians were to cling to the right interpretation of the Gospel (i.e. the Jacobite Christology)<sup>77</sup>. On the other hand, Islam is no more than a derivation or variant of the Pentateuchal religion

of Christ by the "Arabs of our time" in his exegesis of John 20:17 (see G. J. Reinink, *Studien zur Quellen- und Traditionsgeschichte des Evangelienkommentars der Gannat Bussame* [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 414, Subsidia, 57] (Louvain 1979) 64-68). Also Anastasius the Sinaite (note 29) and Jacob of Edessa (note 34) know of the Muslim rejection of the Divinity of Christ.

73 Ed. Nau, *Un colloque* (n. 41) 248, 7-10 (text), 257 (trans.).

74 Ed. Nau, 248, 10-13 (text), 257 (trans.).

75 Ed. Nau, 248, 14-15 (text), 257 (trans.).

76 Ed. Nau, 248, 15-19 (text), 257-258 (trans.).

77 The definition of the Divinity of Christ in the patriarch's answer to the question of the emir whether Christ is God or not (ed. Nau, 249, 1-4 (text), p. 258 (trans.)) is much in line with the wordings of the Symbolum Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum, but note the statement that Christ is "God and the Word" that was made flesh and became man, and the addition of the name *Theotokos* to the Holy Virgin; cf. in particular Philoxenos of Mabbugh's Commentary on the prologue of John, ed. A. de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabbog. Commentaire du prologue johannique* (Ms Br.Mus.Add. 14,534) [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 165, 166, Script.Syri, 380, 381] (Louvain 1977), Vol. 165: 27,25-28,4, 207,6-9 (text), Vol. 166: 27, 10-19, 204,30-205,4 (trans.). See also A. de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabbog. Sa vie, ses écrits, sa théologie* (Louvain 1963) 321-323. By joining closely the formulations of the Symbolum Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum the author implicitly signifies that his church in rejecting Chalcedon sticks to the orthodoxy of the first councils.



as long as it rejects the Christian doctrines of the Divinity of Christ and the Trinity. In the following discussion on the Trinity the patriarch argues that Pentateuchal authorities like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aaron – it is striking that these names represent Qur'anic authorities too – possessed the Christian belief, suggesting that if the Muslims were to know and accept the right, that is to say the Christian, interpretation of the Mosaic writings, they would be Christians<sup>78</sup>.

After having demonstrated that the Muslim faith is neither something new or superior to the Christian confession, since it has not yet grasped the real (Christian) meaning of the Mosaic writings<sup>79</sup>, the author raises in the final section of the dialogue the question of Muslim law. The section is introduced by the emir's inquiring about the Christian laws. The emir in particular wants to know whether or not the Christian laws are written in the Gospel, instancing the question of inheritance<sup>80</sup>:

If a man dies and leaves sons or daughters and a wife and a mother and a sister and a cousin, how should his property be divided among them?

The example of the law of inheritance is not taken haphazardly. Crone & Cook observed rightly, in my opinion, that "if, as the context suggests, the emir feels that the answer ought to be found in the Christian scripture, then the presumption is that an answer was also to be found in his own; and the Koranic norms, with their elaborate division of the inheritance (Koran 4:8 etc.), go somewhat better with the question than those of the Pentateuch..."<sup>81</sup>. The assumption

78 Ed. Nau, Un colloque (n. 41) 249, 17-21 (text), p. 259 (trans.).

79 See above, notes 70 and 71. The first part of the disputation ends with the emir's demand to show him that the *testimonium* Gen. 19:24 for Christ's divinity quoted by the patriarch indeed agrees with the written text of the Pentateuch. The patriarch shows the emir and then the attending Muslims the text in question in the *complete* Greek and Syriac versions (so that the evidence cannot be suspected of being a falsification!), so that "they saw with their own eyes the written words and the glorious names of the Lord and the Lord". The emir thereupon summons a certain Jew, who was regarded by the Muslims as an expert of the Scriptures, to inquire of him about the text of Gen. 19:24. The Jew, who on the one hand cannot deny that the Hebrew text is agreeing with the Greek and Syriac versions, being on the other hand reluctant to put the patriarch in the right, answers that he does not know it exactly (ed. Nau, 251, 4-11 (text), 260-261 (trans.)). It is in particular this episode that makes Sākō, Bibliographie (n. 1) 277, note 3, doubt the authenticity of the letter. It is clear that the rôle of the Jew is completely determined by the apologetic objectives of the author, as it is the case with the rôle of the Christian Arabs who appear on the scene, when the topic of conversion to Islam is raised (see below, note 85), and that of the Chalcedonians in the eulogy of the patriarch who defended Christianity as such in front of the secular rulers (see below, p. 181).

80 Ed. Nau, Un colloque (n. 41) 251, 12-16 (text), 261 (trans.).

81 Crone-Cook, Hagarism (n. 17) 168, note 20. Compare Qur'an 4:4-16 with Num. 24:8ff. Cf. also A. Rippin, Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices. Volume 1: The Formative Period (London-New York 1990) 21. That the formulation of the emir's question is much in the style of the Christian law-books, is, of course, quite understandable (Crone-Cook, *ibidem*, point at E. Sachau, Syrische Rechtsbücher, Bd. II: Richterliche Urteile des Patriarchen Chenânishō.



that the author at least had some knowledge of the existence of the Qur'an is only a problem if the dialogue *a priori* is considered to be a historical record dating from the 640s. In any case, the author is well aware of the fact that the Muslim law (*nōmōsā d-mahgrā*) has to be distinguished from the Pentateuchal law. But here again he wants to suggest to his readers that the Muslim law is not something entirely new, but no more than a derivation of the Old Law. The Gospel, on the contrary, being divine, has a much higher level, since it "teaches and prescribes heavenly doctrines and life-giving commands and rejects all sins and evils and teaches by itself virtue and justice"<sup>82</sup>. By this answer of the patriarch the author again wants to demonstrate that not Islam but Christianity is the superior religion. It is quite possible that the inheritance example has been chosen for another reason too. In the first part of the dialogue the problem of the oneness of Islam and the diversity of Christianity was solved on the theological level, in the final section the same problem had to be solved on the level of the implementation of faith in human life. Unlike the detailed inheritance regulations of the Muslim community which are found in the one Muslim law (in fact the Qur'an), the Christian inheritance regulations are not written in the Gospel which, as the patriarch had argued in the foregoing discussion, marks the unity of Christianity. This problem very distinctly comes to the fore in the emir's final words<sup>83</sup>:

I want you to do one of three things<sup>84</sup>: either show me that your laws [plural!] are written in the Gospel and live according to them, or follow the Muslim law (*nōmōsā d-mahgrā*) [singular!].

In other words: If the regulations of the Christian community cannot be found in the one Gospel, then the alternative is to follow the one Muslim law, and that,

Gesetzbuch des Patriarchen Timotheos. Gesetzbuch des Patriarchen Jesubarnun (Berlin 1908) 90-91; Bd. II: Corpus juris des persischen Erzbischofs Simeon. Eherecht des Patriarchen Mār Abhā [Berlin 1914] 94-95). Cf. also K. G. Bruns – E. Sachau, Syrisch-römisches Rechtsbuch aus dem fünften Jahrhundert (Leipzig 1880) 173-180; W. Selb, Orientalisches Kirchenrecht, Bd. I: Die Geschichte des Kirchenrechts der Nestorianer (von den Anfängen bis zur Mongolenzeit) (Wien 1981) 42-44; Bd. II: Die Geschichte des Kirchenrechts der Westsyrier (von den Anfängen bis zur Mongolenzeit) (Wien 1989) 80-81; *idem*, 'Abdīšō' bar Bahrīz, Ordnung der Ehe und der Erbschaften sowie Entscheidung von Rechtsfällen [Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, 268. Bd., 1. Abh.] (Wien 1970) 42-103.

82 Ed. Nau, Un colloque (n. 41) 251, 16-19 (text), 261 (trans.).

83 Ed. Nau, 251, 23-252,2 (text), 262 (trans.).

84 Perhaps the text speaking of "three things" should be emended into "two things", since only two options are given. However, if the text of the manuscript is not corrupt in this point, then it looks as if the author omitted mentioning a third option. But what could have been the third option? Griffith, Disputes with Muslims (n. 1) 259, note 33, suggests that the writer may have in mind "the three conditions said to have been put to the *ahl al-kitāb* at the conquest: to convert, to pay the *gizyah* and become *ahl adh-dhimmah*, or to fight to the finish". Another possible solution could be that in the words "I want you to do one of three things", the number "three" simply refers to the three verbs, namely to (1) "show" (that your laws are written in the Gospel) and to (2) "live" (according to them) or to (3) "follow" (the Muslim law), taking into account that the



as a matter of fact, implies that Christians would become Muslims<sup>85</sup>. The patriarch replies that the Christians possess laws that are just and right, and that *agree with* the doctrine and the commands of the Gospel and with the rules of the Apostles and the laws of the Church<sup>86</sup>. As in the first part of the dialogue, the author also in the last question suggests that the antithesis is a false one. Just as the Christian laws can be traced back to the Gospel, so the Muslim law is rooted in the Old Testament law. Conversion to Islam would, therefore, mean no less than sliding down from the highest level of the Gospel to the lower level of Muslim practice of the Old Law.

The apology reaches its apogee in the final section of the letter. The dialogue being concluded, we are suddenly told that also leaders of the Chalcedonian community attended the discussion. The Orthodox (i. e. the Jacobites) and the Chalcedonians prayed in concord for the life and the safety of the patriarch who defended Christian faith in front of the secular rulers (the author quotes Matt. 10:19-20)<sup>87</sup>. For the patriarch spoke on behalf of *the whole community of the Christians* and did not exclude the Chalcedonians. The patriarch did not take advantage of the politically weak and dangerous position of the adherents of the Church of the Byzantine Empire, but he defended Christianity as a whole against the claims of Islam<sup>88</sup>.

The *Letter of Mar Yohannan the Patriarch* represents a deliberate piece of Christian apologetics. It was composed for the sake of the Christian community itself, with the purpose of defining the real nature of Islam as compared with Christianity: the faith of the new rulers is not a new religion, succeeding Christianity, but at best a new manifestation of the old Pentateuchal religion. Applying the traditional *genre* of the religious disputation, the author makes the first official meeting of the patriarch of his Church with the Arab conquerors the historical scene of the conversation. The patriarch, who already in the earliest

first two verbs belong to one and the same option. In fact the emir wants three things: (1) he wants that the Christians show that their laws are written in the Gospel, and, if they are written in the Gospel, (2) he wants that they live according to these laws, but if they are not written in the Gospel, then (3) he wants that the Christians follow the Muslim law. Since the first demand of the emir implies the second, there are in fact two options: (1) The Christian laws are written in the Gospel and then the Christians have to live according to these or (2) the Christian laws are not written in the Gospel and then they have to follow the Muslim law.

85 It is precisely for this reason that the author here introduces the Tānūkāyē, 'Aqūlāyē and Tū'āyē, the three Christian Arab tribes who are mentioned in the history of Aḥūdemmeḥ as examples of zealous Christians, prepared to give their lives in times of persecution (see note 50). Their rôle in the letter is defined by the apologetic objectives of the author. The Tānūkāyē, 'Aqūlāyē and Tū'āyē, who attended their patriarch's brave defense, should serve as an example for the co-religionists of the author's days, since these Arabs stuck to their Christian religion, despite of being akin to the *mhaggrāyē*.

86 Ed. Nau, Un colloque (n. 41) 252, 2-4 (text), 262 (trans.).

87 Ed. Nau, 252, 7-16 (text), 262 (trans.).

88 Ed. Nau, 252, 22-253, 6 (text), 263 (trans.).



days of Arab domination successfully resisted the Muslim challenge, should serve as an example for the stand the author's contemporaries and co-religionists should take against the religion of the authorities.

The work appears to presuppose historical circumstances which can hardly be assumed for the first decade after the Arab conquests: 1. the awareness of Islam manifesting itself as a new religious faith, succeeding both Judaism and Christianity; 2. the dividedness of Christianity being felt as a problem in the face of nascent Islam; 3. the growing fear of the possibility of Christian apostasy to the religion of the rulers. These conditions, put together, take us, in my opinion, at the earliest to the end of the seventh century, but more probably to the first decades of the eighth century; not much later, since the letter makes the impression of being an early response to the radical politico-social changes in consequence of the arabization policies which were initiated by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik in the second half of his reign (from c. 691/2 to his death in 705) and energetically pursued by his son al-Walid I (705-715).

The most important point for the determination of the historical setting of the letter is, in my opinion, its stress on the unity of Christianity in the face of nascent Islam. The author takes great pains to make the readers believe that it is an authentic document, and in doing so, he obviously intends to affect the minds of his co-religionists<sup>89</sup>. One may say that something of a propagandist flavour can be detected in the letter. The way in which the patriarch is portrayed as the advocate of Christianity as such, defending both Jacobites and Chalcedonians, may contain implicitly the message that the political circumstances should not be exploited to fight the inter-Christian doctrinarian battles at the cost of the rivalling Christian community, as had happened in earlier times<sup>90</sup>. There is now a much higher interest than that: the common danger of the religion of the new rulers, Islam, claiming to be a new religion, succeeding Christianity and superior to it. Now that certainly was not a popular topic before the end of the seventh century. The end of the seventh century, however, saw the sudden rise and rapid diffusion of Syriac Apocalypses, in which the idea of the unity of Christianity finds a remark-

<sup>89</sup> See note 44.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. o.a. W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge etc. 1979) 336-337; J.B. Segal, *Edessa 'The Blessed City'* (Oxford 1970) 95-100; Brock, *Syriac Views* (n. 2) 10-11, 15. Cf. also Yohānnan bar Penkaye who reproaches the "heretics" (*i.e.* the Monophysites) for taking advantage of the time of peace during the reign of Mu'āwiya by "turning almost all the churches of the Romans (*i.e.* the Chalcedonian churches) to their own impious opinion" (ed. Mingana (n. 3) 147\*, 12-19 (text), 175\*-176\* (trans.); Brock, *North Mesopotamia* (n. 3) 62). See G.J. Reinink, *Pseudo-Methodius und die Legende vom römischen Endkaiser*, W. Verbeke, D. Verhelst and A. Welkenhuysen (eds.), *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages [Mediaevalia Lovaniensia I/XV]* (Leuven 1988) 87, 108.



able politico-religious expression in connection with vehement polemics against the Arabs<sup>91</sup>.

The prophecy that the Arab empire would very soon be finished by a large-scale military operation of the Christian emperor of Byzantium, who would establish subsequently the final world dominion of the Christian empire, constitutes the nucleus of the apocalyptic message during the last decade of the seventh century. In these Apocalypses the imminent war of the Christian emperor against the Arabs is explained as a holy war provoked by the extraordinary oppressive and impious policies of the Arabs towards the Christians<sup>92</sup>. They appear to have been composed first of all for the sake of the Jacobite communities, with the purpose of warding off the increasing danger of apostasy<sup>93</sup>. To win over the large Monophysite communities to the view that the coming liberating Byzantine emperor would not act as a partisan for only one Christian community (the Chalcedonian Church of the Empire), the emperor is portrayed as a second Constantine and a second Jovian who, being the archetypes of the good Christian king, established or restored the Christian kingdom and liberated the Christians from pagan rule<sup>94</sup>. So the Byzantine emperor who would establish the final world dominion of the Christian empire after his vic-

91 See for the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius (written about 691) Reinink, *Pseudo-Methodius und die Legende vom römischen Endkaiser* (n. 90) 82-111; *idem*, *Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam*, Cameron-Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East* (n. 29) 149-187 (see for the editions and translations of Pseudo-Methodius and the rather comprehensive literature on this Apocalypse the bibliographical references in the notes of both articles and also, for a general view, W. Brandes, *Die apokalyptische Literatur*, F. Winkermann-W. Brandes (eds.), *Quellen zur Geschichte des frühen Byzanz* (4.-9. Jahrhundert). Bestand und Probleme (Amsterdam 1990) 305-322); for the Edessene Apocalypse (probably written before the end of 692) G.J. Reinink, *Der edessenische "Pseudo-Methodius"*, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83 (1990) 31-45, and the bibliographical references in the notes of this article; for the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles (probably written by the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century) H.J.W. Drijvers, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: A Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period*, Cameron-Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East* (n. 29) 189-213.

92 Pseudo-Methodius XIII, 1-90, ed. F.J. Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius* (dissertation Catholic University of America, Washington 1985) 85-88 (text), 147-151 (trans.); the Edessene Apocalypse, ed. F. Nau, *Révélation et légendes. Méthodius-Clément-Andronicus*, *Journal Asiatique* 11/9 (1917) 425-427 (text), 434-437 (trans.); the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles, ed. J.R. Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles together with the Apocalypses of each one of them* (Cambridge 1900) 18-21 (text), 37-39 (trans.).

93 Reinink, *Pseudo-Methodius und die Legende vom römischen Endkaiser* (n. 90) 104, 107, 108-111; *idem*, *Der edessenische "Pseudo-Methodius"* (n. 91) 33, note 26, 44, note 96; for the Jacobite origin of the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles see Drijvers, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* (n. 91) 190-191.

94 Reinink, *Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History* (n. 91) 176; *idem*, *Der edessenische "Pseudo-Methodius"* (n. 91) 41-42; *idem*, *The Romance of Julian the Apostate as a Source for Seventh Century Syriac Apocalypses*, P. Canivet, J.-P. Rey-Coquais (eds.), *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam* (Damas 1992) 75-86; Drijvers, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* (n. 91) 212-213.



tory over the Arabs would also establish one Christian empire, in which all Christians were to be united and protected<sup>95</sup>.

The wave of apocalyptic hopes in the late seventh century coincides with important political, social and cultural changes in the caliphate. The successful military restoration of the unity of the Arab empire by 'Abd al-Malik after a long period of political disturbance (the Second Arab Civil War) was attended with all kinds of measures which were aimed at the consolidation of the caliph's authority: drastic tax reforms, administrative and political centralization, the Arabization of the administration and the development of standard Arab coinage<sup>96</sup>. Arab rule manifested itself again, and more emphatically than ever before, as a lasting power, being the political successor of Byzantium, the Christian empire. But no less important was the circumstance that this political power began to manifest itself officially as the religious successor of Judaism and Christianity. By the building of the Dome of the Rock on the site of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, which was completed in 691, 'Abd al-Malik displayed a clear-cut politico-religious propaganda, claiming the old religious centre of the world for the supreme Arab ruler, the *khalīfat Allāh* (Deputy of God), and his religion, Islam, as the successor of the other two monotheistic religions of the Near East<sup>97</sup>. It is very significant indeed that in the Syriac Apocalypses dating from the end of the seventh century such great emphasis is put on Jerusalem being and always remaining the unique City of Christendom<sup>98</sup>. The assumption that the violent polemics against the Arabs in these apocalyptic works have to be considered as a first Christian response to the self-definition of nascent Islam in the face of Christianity may be not too far-fetched.

The political and military reality, however, would not confirm the expecta-

95 For the stress on the politico-religious unity of the Christian empire in Pseudo-Methodius and in the Edessene Apocalypse see Reinink, *Der edessenische "Pseudo-Methodius"* (n. 91) 44-45 and note 96; *idem*, *The Romance of Julian the Apostate* (n. 94) 85-86. However, whereas Pseudo-Methodius and the Edessene Apocalypse avoid making any allusion to the inter-Christian religious dissensions, it is the return of the Diophysites to the one true flock and holy church by which the eschatological unity of Christianity is defined in the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles (ed. Harris (n. 92) 13 (text), 33 (trans.)).

96 Cf. in general a.o. H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the sixth to the eleventh century* (London-New York 1986) 98-99; G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam* (London-Sydney 1986) 61-66.

97 For a general discussion of the significance and meaning of the building of the Dome of the Rock see now Rippin, *Muslims* (n. 81) 51-57. Cf. also P. Crone-M. Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious authority in the first centuries of Islam* (Cambridge etc. 1986) esp. 4-42, 111-115.

98 Pseudo-Methodius IX, 48-63, X, 1-16, XIV, 9-28, ed. Martinez (n. 92) 73-75, 90-91 (text), 136-138, 152-153 (trans.); the Edessene Apocalypse, ed. Nau (n. 92) 427, 432-433 (text), 435-436, 443-444 (trans.); the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles, ed. Harris (n. 92) 13-15 (text), 33-34 (trans.). For a discussion of these passages see Reinink, *Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History* (n. 91) 176-178, 181-184; *idem*, *Der edessenische "Pseudo-Methodius"* (n. 91) 39-45; *idem*, *The Romance of Julian the Apostate* (n. 94) 78-79, 84-85; Drijvers, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* (n. 91) 196-199.



tion, expressed in the Apocalypses, that by the intervention of the Byzantine emperor, being Christ's Deputy on earth, the position of Christianity as the politically dominant religion would be restored. On the contrary, after the peace treaty which was concluded between 'Abd al-Malik and Justinian II in about 688 had come to an end in 691/2 military successes were rather on the side of the Arabs<sup>99</sup>. At the same time, the arabization and islamization policies of 'Abd al-Malik and his successors, which in the long run affected the Christian signature of public life itself, created favourable terms for conversion to Islam<sup>100</sup>. Now the time was ripe for another response to the changing social circumstances, in which Umayyad authority more and more used the development, confirmation and propagation of the politico-religious Islamic identity to consolidate the perpetually threatened and fragile unity of the Empire. A new orientation of the Christian populations towards the Arab government was needed; and I presume that it is in that context that the rise of Syriac apologetic literature has to be explained.

The *Letter of Mar Yohannan the Patriarch* may be explained very well as an early witness of the attempts of the Jacobite clergy to find a new equilibrium in its relation to the Arab authority after a period of fierce anti-Arab polemics at the end of the seventh century which followed an attitude towards the Arab domination that in general may have been not so negative or was rather neutral<sup>101</sup>. The problem of the Arab authority that manifested itself by very concrete measures as the religion of the conquerors, superior to Christianity, was now to be solved on the level of theological apology, which should demonstrate that it would be a mistake to believe that the political superiority of the Arabs implied religious superiority. This problem was not felt in Jacobite circles alone; the oldest known Nestorian Christian-Muslim disputation, the *Disputation between a Monk of the monastery of Bēth Ḥālē and an Arab Notable* (c. 720), shows a comparable reorientation towards the Arab authority that claimed the Muslim faith to be superior to Christianity<sup>102</sup>. Right at the beginning of this disputation

99 Cf. G. Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates* [Byzantinisches Handbuch I,2] (München 1963<sup>3</sup>) 108-110.

100 Cf. for the assertive policies, directed against Christian doctrines and practices, during the caliphates of 'Abd al-Malik, 'Umar II and Yazid II G. R. D. King, *Islam, iconoclasm, and the declaration of doctrine*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48/2 (1985) 267-277.

101 Cf. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (n. 96) 4-5; J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transforming of a Culture* (Cambridge etc. 1990) 50, and esp. the bibliographical references in note 27.

102 This disputation is a.o. preserved in the East Syrian manuscript Diyarbakir 95, quire 29, f. 1-8. Cf. A. Scher, *Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés à l'archevêché de Diyarbakir*, *Journal Asiatique* 10/10 (1907) 398 (item 35°); P. Jager, *Intended Edition of a Disputation between a Monk of the Monastery of Bet Hale and one of the Tayoye*, Drijvers *et al.* (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984* (n. 43) 401-402. Prof. H. J. W. Drijvers of Groningen Univer-



the Arab notable expresses the burning question of the Nestorian author's time: Isn't the Muslim religion better than all religions in the whole world, since God gave the Arabs dominion over all religions and all peoples?<sup>103</sup> At the end of the disputation the Arab notable admits the superiority of the Christian religion to Islam, but he again requires an explanation for the political and social inferiority of the Christians<sup>104</sup>. The way in which the author makes the monk answer is very revealing. Using the arguments he found in the apocalyptic literature, the author turns the "offensive" politico-religious apocalyptic answer back to the "defensive" answer of the monk: the oppression of the Christians by the Arab authority shows the very love of God for the Christians, since He wants to bring the Christians by his fatherly chastisement to the *heavenly* Kingdom<sup>105</sup>. By the final words of the Arab notable in this disputation, confessing that many people would become Christians if they were not refrained from doing so by the fear of the authority and for shame of the people, the author in fact impresses upon his co-religionists that if even a Muslim, being convinced of the truth of the Christian belief, desires to become a Christian, then the Christians should not make the mistake of renouncing their Christian faith and defecting to Islam<sup>106</sup>.

Summarizing, I would suggest the following answer to the initial question of my paper. The oldest examples of Syriac apologetics in response to Islam are not the result of actual Muslim-Christian dialogue or disputation, but have to be considered as literary fictions written by Christians for the members of their own communities, with the purpose of warding off the increasing danger of apostasy<sup>107</sup>. It is *au fond* "reactive" literature, written in response to the changing historical conditions since the end of the seventh century, when for political

sity is preparing an edition of this text. The dialogue partner of the monk is said to be an Arab notable in the entourage of the emir Maslama (f. 1'), with whom probably Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik is meant (governor in Iraq about 720; cf. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (n. 96) 108). The location of the monastery of Bēth Hālē may be the Dayr Mār 'Abdā near Kufa and Hira in Iraq (cf. Griffith, *Disputes with Muslims* (n. 1) 259).

103 Diyarbakir 95, quire 29, f. 1<sup>v</sup>-2<sup>r</sup>.

104 Diyarbakir 95, quire 29, f. 8<sup>r</sup>.

105 Diyarbakir 95, quire 29, f. 8<sup>r</sup>-8<sup>v</sup>. The author of the disputation, using the arguments of Pseudo-Methodius referring to the four kings of the Midianites Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah and Zalmunna who were defeated by Gideon (Judg. 7-8; cf. G.J. Reinink, *Ismael, der Wildesel in der Wüste. Zur Typologie der Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 75 (1982) 336-344, esp. 341), points out the temporariness of Arab domination in Old Testament times. However, whereas Pseudo-Methodius prophesies the imminent destruction of the Arab domination by the Christian Emperor, the author of the disputation contrasts the transiency of the earthly kingdom with the eternal kingdom of God. Cf. for the connections between the disputation and Pseudo-Methodius also Reinink, *Pseudo-Methodius und die Legende vom römischen Endkaiser* (n. 90) 105, note 103.

106 Diyarbakir 95, quire 29, f. 8<sup>v</sup>.

107 For the question of the historicity of the Syriac Christian-Muslim dispute texts in general see Griffith, *Disputes with Muslims* (n. 1) 256-257; cf. also *idem*, *The Prophet Muḥammad* (n. 42) 111, 116-118.



reasons the Umayyad caliphs began to profile nascent Islam explicitly and strongly in the face of Judaism and Christianity, and the Christian clergy increasingly realized that the view that the "sons of Ishmael", although they made a remarkable progress by returning from their former idolatry to Mosaic monotheism, still had not reached the highest level of the Christian religion, was not shared by the Muslim rulers and their policies. For the first time since the Arab conquests the Christian clergy had good grounds for fearing that the reforms which were now initiated by the highest Arab authority would accelerate the process of degradation of the Christians to second-rate citizens in the Arab empire and formed a direct threat to their religious communities. It is against these new challenges that the Jacobite author of the *Letter of Mar Yoḥannan the Patriarch* connects the defence of the confession of his Church with the concept of the unity of Christendom over against nascent Islam.