

**The Nature of the Qur'ānic Christ:
An Inquiry into the Christological Foundation of
the Qur'ān**

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Bachelor Thesis

The Nature of the Qur'ānic Christ: An Inquiry into the Christological Foundation of the Qur'ān

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Introduction

Aber auf jedem dieser Gebiete erweist der Islam seine Fähigkeit zu organischer Einverleibung und Verarbeitung der fremden Elemente, so daß ihr fremder Charakter sich nur der scharfen Analyse kritischer Forschung offenbart.¹

Ignaz Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam*

Perhaps the most fundamental question in the discipline of Qur'ānic studies concerns the origin of the Qur'ān. However, while the significance of this question is undisputed, the historical background of the Qur'ān remain opaque: "For the history of the Qur'ān we are mainly still in the world of 'Alice in wonderland' or to be more in the local colour, in the world of the 'Marvels of Aladdin's Lamp'."² Seemingly straightforward and elementary questions concerning the Qur'ān continue to elude scholars in their attempt to clarify this tantalizing issue. Fred Donner, according to many the most visible and highly-regarded historian of early Islam writing today, expresses himself as follows: "Those of us who study Islam's origins have to admit collectively that we simply do not know some very basic things about the Qur'ān – things so basic that the knowledge of them is usually taken for granted by scholars dealing with other texts."³ A similar concern is voiced by Andrew Rippin, a well-known scholar of the Qur'ān, who is amazed by the paucity of critical scholarship concerning Islam: "While topics of interest are often broached, there seems to be little concern for a critical analysis of the approaches to the sources... continuing the general lack of critical reflection upon the Muslim historical sources in general."⁴ A general, but undeniably important question concerns the paucity of scholarship relating to the historical and theological foundation of the Qur'ān: What explains the lack of critical scholarship?⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued "that no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers."⁶ Perhaps the answer to the aforementioned question is to be found in Cantwell

¹ Ignaz Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1910), 3.

² Claude Gilliot, "Reconsidering the Authorship of the Qur'ān: Is the Qur'ān partly the fruit of a progressive and collective work?," in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. G. S. Reynolds (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 88.

³ Fred M. Donner, "The Qur'an in Recent Scholarship: Challenges and Desiderata," in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 29.

⁴ Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices (Third Edition)* (Routledge: London and New York, 2005), 2.

⁵ Angelika Neuwirth, "Qur'an and History – a Disputed Relationship. Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2010): 3. Neuwirth expresses a similar concern: "It is often lamented that Qur'anic studies in terms of methodology lag far behind Biblical studies. Close textual analysis as was applied to the Jewish and Christian scriptures, particularly in the last century, has no serious counterpart in Qur'anic scholarship."

⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 42.

Smith's ostensibly considerate statement. But should we, in our pursuit to elucidate 'challenging' subjects, heed Cantwell Smith's call to bear in mind the sentiments of a community of believers in order not to appear anti-religious, or, in the case of Islam, anti-Islamic? Should we not question the foundations of a religious tradition for fear of offending the feelings of religiously inclined people? Is the integrity of academic inquiry not genuinely impaired by the refusal to present certain, perhaps contentious questions? These questions may appear rather pretentious, trivial or just commonplace. However, I believe that they should be posed and that every scholar or otherwise academically inclined person interested in the diverse field of the religious sciences ought to consider these 'self-evident' questions.

While no attempt will be made to address these queries comprehensively, the main topic of this paper does concern one of these allegedly 'contentious' issues. In fact, it concerns an issue that is undeniably burdened by the questions presented above. Therefore, it is vital to address, albeit fleetingly, these questions shimmering in the background of articles addressing the origins of the Qur'ān. The Islamic tradition asserts that the Qur'ān was revealed by God to the prophet Muhammad. This holy book reigns supreme in Islam precisely because it is regarded by the Islamic community as the divinely revealed word.⁷ Muhammad Abdel Haleem, one of the most prominent scholars of the Qur'ān today, proclaims the following: "The Qur'ān is the supreme authority in Islam. It is the fundamental and paramount source of the creed, rituals, ethics and law of the Islamic religion."⁸ Are inquisitive scholars allowed to inquire into and critique a book, deemed fundamental in construing Islamic identity, in their aspiration to gain further insights into the character of the Qur'ān? Are we perhaps allowed to consider the Qur'ān as a work fashioned by man and beholden to regional religious traditions? Arthur Jeffery neatly articulates this perspective: "Even a cursory reading of the book makes it plain that Muhammad drew his inspiration not from the religious life and experiences of his own land and his own people, but from the great monotheistic religions which were pressing down into Arabia in his day."⁹ This question occasions numerous accompanying questions: Did the Qur'ān originate in the Hijaz or was it written someplace else? When and how was the Qur'ān written? Was the Qur'ān compiled by the solitary prophet Muhammad or did he enlist the help of his kinsmen? And perhaps most divisively, is there any plausible

⁷ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, "Qur'an and Hadith," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. T. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19-20; Gabriela Profeta Philips, "The Qur'an and Its Biblical Under-text: New Perspectives on Non-Muslim Readings of the Qur'an," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 8, no. 2 (2012): 83.

⁸ *The Qur'an*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9.

⁹ Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*. 1938. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1. Jeffery is but one, among a number of authors, who subscribe to this hypothesis. Other scholars who suggest that the Qur'ān ought to be considered in light of the religious traditions of the Late Antique world of the Middle-East include Jonathan Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39-43; Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1926), 41-42; and Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and his People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

evidence that indicates Muhammad as the author of the Qur'ān?¹⁰ These are but a number of questions that emerge if we assume that the Qur'ān is not a revelation, but a work of literary construction indebted to the traditions and beliefs of the sixth and seventh centuries circulating in and making their way along the trade routes traversing the Hijaz. The aforementioned proposition concerning the Qur'ān as a work indebted to regional religious traditions presupposes that 'Arabia Deserta' – the empty quarter – was, contrary to the suggestion that the “ancient Hijaz is a blank on the map”, a region exposed to the world of Late Antiquity.¹¹

Trade is thought to be a driving force in enabling the flow of ideas, goods and peoples into the Hijaz. However, Patricia Crone briskly rejects the claim that Meccan trade inspired the genesis of Islam: “The impact of Byzantium and Persia on Arabia ought to be at the forefront of research on the rise of the new religion, not Meccan trade.”¹² But is such a conclusion, drawn with a sweeping gesture, not a bit rash? Are established trade routes not the main thoroughfares for ideas seeping into previously unfamiliar lands? In the same vein, Mikhail Bukharin argues that the trade routes exploited by caravans from the southern Hijaz in pre-Islamic Arabia did extend to the surrounding world and must have facilitated the dispersion of religious beliefs.¹³

The main topic of this study concerns the transposition of theological notions between the Abrahamic traditions, specifically between Christianity and Islam. The purpose of this inquiry is to evaluate a selection of *āyāt* (viz. Qur'ānic verses) which are supported by an Abrahamic foundation. Furthermore, an attempt is made to probe into the potential bestowal of Christological concepts, espoused by both schismatic and established (Jewish) Christian group, on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ānic verses incorporating

¹⁰ These questions have been addressed by a few revisionist scholars, whose controversial claims have sparked a passionate debate concerning the origin of the Qur'ān. I will briefly discuss two of the most provocative books to highlight this debate. John Wansbrough advances two startling propositions in *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2004). According to Wansbrough, the process of Qur'ānic canonization occurred outside the confines of Arabia and transpired during the seventh and eighth centuries. A similarly notorious thesis was postulated by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). The authors argue that the Islam was originally a Jewish movement, distinguished by a messianic inclination, which originated, in concurrence with Wansbrough, outside the Hijaz. This religious movement transformed into what is nowadays known as Islam upon its incursion into the barren lands of Arabia.

¹¹ François de Blois, “Islam in its Arabian context,” in *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 616. Robert M. Kerr, “Von der aramäischen Lesekultur zur aramäischen Schreibkultur II: Der aramäische Wortschatz des Koran,” in *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion II: Von der Koranischen Bewegung zum Frühislam*, ed. M. Gross and K-H. Ohlig (Berlin: Schiller, 2012), 533-534.

¹² Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 250.

¹³ Mikhail D. Bukharin, “Mecca on the Caravan Routes in Pre-Islamic Antiquity,” in *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 131.

portraits of Christ will be the focal point of this study.¹⁴ Inquiry into this subject by means of a systematic examination of the tenets and religious doctrines upheld by Jewish Christian, schismatic or orthodox Christian sects and offshoots may offer further clarification of the theological roots of the Islam. In addition, when positioned in a broader theoretical setting, it may contribute to the scholarly field concerning the transmission of theological notions between the Abrahamic religious traditions. While several subjects are broached in the subsequent chapters, the principal objective of this study is to reflect upon the following question: To what extent have the Christological notions entertained by Jewish Christian and Christian religious communities present in and around the Hijaz during the sixth and seventh centuries had an influence on the composition of the Qur'ānic verses with a Christological foundation?

In the first chapter, the emergence of pre-Islamic Arabia into the world of Late Antiquity will be elaborated on more extensively and additional arguments will be furnished to buttress this proposition. This is followed by a chapter on the Jewish Christian and Christian communities present in and around the Hijaz. The third chapter concerns the Christological disposition of the religious communities described in chapter two. The last chapter is dedicated to the Christological foundation of the Qur'ān. In this last chapter, we will attempt to discover if the Christology of the religious communities elaborated on in the preceding chapters has had an influence on the construction of several Qur'ānic verses that appear to reveal a Christological foundation. The conclusion presents a discussion on the findings of this study and incorporates several suggestions for further research.

¹⁴ Several examples of Qur'ānic verses cognizant of Christological concepts are Q.4:157; 4:171; 5:72-5:73; 5:75; 5:116 and 72:3 in *The Holy Qur'ān*, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000).

Chapter 1: The Emergence of pre-Islamic Arabia into the World of Late Antiquity

A swift perusal of the Qur'ān immediately reveals the distinctiveness of its content. The text is a written discourse, it is an attempt at dialogue with the older Abrahamic traditions.¹⁵ According to Geoffrey Parrinder, “there is a great deal of its material which parallels stories and teachings of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments.”¹⁶ However, the Islamic accounts are keen to stress that the Qur'ān was revealed to Muhammad and does not bear the mark of external influences. God alone is the fountain from which the Qur'ān sprang.¹⁷ Evidently, entertaining such a notion eliminates the possibility of inquiring into the origins of the Qur'ān. In this article, as noted in the introduction, the Qur'ān is to be considered as a work of literary construction appreciative of its local religious surroundings. To reveal the potential Christological influence on the realization of the Qur'ān, we must first attempt to shed some light on the religious and political landscape of the pre-Islamic Hijaz. To this extent, we will initially illustrate the appearance of pre-Islamic Arabia onto the stage of the world of Late Antiquity and secondly attempt to discover which Jewish Christian or Christian groups roamed about the Hijaz during the sixth and seventh centuries.

Was pre-Islamic Arabia a region unto itself, secluded and barred to the outside world, or was this barren expanse, previously believed to be devoid of civilized peoples, firmly rooted in the world of Late Antiquity? Theories abound, but most agree that the people of the Hijaz maintained ties – the question remains to what extent – through commerce, trade and pilgrimage with the outside world. Peter Brown sketches a beautiful, although slightly embellished portrait of emerging Arabia:

We know just enough about the Hijaz in the early seventh century to see how this sudden detonation fitted into the culture of the Near East. The inhabitants of Mecca and Medina were far from being primitive Beduin. The towns had grown rapidly through trade and

¹⁵ C. Jonn Block, *The Qur'an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 35. See also Angelika Neuwirth, “Locating the Qur'an and Early Islam in the ‘Epistemic Space’ of Late Antiquity, in *Islam and its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, ed. C. Bakhos and M. Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 173-178. Two examples of interfaith Qur'ānic verses will be presented here to substantiate this assertion. 1.) Q. 11:76: O Abraham! Seek not this. The decree of thy Lord hath gone forth: for them there cometh a Penalty that cannot be turned back! 2.) Q. 40:53: We did aforetime give Moses the (Book of) Guidance, and We gave the Book in inheritance to the children of Israel. Both of these verses are taken from *The Holy Qur'ān*, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000).

¹⁶ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 10.

¹⁷ Michael E. Pregill, “The Hebrew Bible and the Quran: the problem of the Jewish ‘influence’ on Islam,” *Religion Compass* 1, no. 6 (2007): 644; Samir Khalil Samir, “The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur'ān: A Reflection,” in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 141.

were supported by settled agriculture. They were ruled by oligarchies, who had suddenly found themselves the merchant-princes of the seventh century Near East.¹⁸

In the introduction, we whisked over the question of trade and its role in facilitating the spread of a broad range of religious ideas, both ortho- and heterodox. Let us now delve deeper into the question of trade on the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth and early seventh centuries by considering the extremities of the scholarly spectrum. Crone, a fierce opponent of the aforementioned thesis, must have been disconcerted by Brown's description of the Meccans as "merchant-princes". She insists that Meccan trade did not extend across the frontiers of Arabia, but was instead confined to the hinterlands of the Arabian deserts.¹⁹ Trade conducted by the Meccans was "not so much of an export-import trade as of a distribution of diverse goods within Arabia itself."²⁰ Crone argues that if we wish to understand the dawn of Islam, we should, instead of underlining the question of Meccan trade, emphasize the encroachment of the Byzantine and Sassanian empires on Arabia.²¹ Opposite, we discover William Montgomery Watt, the author accused by Crone of promulgating the "view that Meccan trade is the ultimate cause of the rise of Islam."²² However, this somewhat brazen statement does not entirely encapsulate Watt's thesis. Watt does indeed acknowledge the importance of trade, but does he regard trade as "the ultimate cause" of the advent of Islam? He merely suggests that commerce was the main reason for the vested interest of the Byzantine and Persian empires in the region of Arabia.²³ Essentially, while both differ on the magnitude and nature of the influence of the imperial realms bordering Arabia, they wholeheartedly agree that the attention lavished on the Arabian wastelands by the Byzantine and Sassanian empires ought to be recognized and discussed. But how did the incorporation of Arabia into the sphere of interest of these majestic empires transpire? What were the historical circumstances that compelled the Sassanians and Byzantines to set their sights on the Hijaz? We must consider the gradual change in the mercantile strategy of both empires against the backdrop of the interminable wars between the Sassanids and Byzantines during the sixth and early seventh centuries. These wars impeded the trade conducted via the Silk Road, which forced the Byzantines to acquire new trading outposts.²⁴ Touraj Daryaee pointedly argues that the fraught state of affairs between the empires forced the Byzantines to recalibrate their trade

¹⁸ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), 189.

¹⁹ Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, 151-153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

²² *Ibid.*, 231.

²³ William M. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 11.

²⁴ Bahman Zeinali et al., "Analysis of the Role of World Trade in the Cultural Evolution of Mecca (Fifth to Sixth Century AD)," *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 6, no. 4 (2017): 259-260; Howard L. Adelson, "Early medieval trade routes," *The American Historical Review* 65, no. 2 (1960): 281; Touraj Daryaee, "The Persian Gulf trade in Late Antiquity," *Journal of World History* (2003): 4-5.

policy. This, in turn, explains the appearance of formerly peripheral Arabia on the trade map of the world of Late Antiquity.²⁵ This account is concurrent to the argument advanced by Irfan Kavar who likewise tells us that the Arabian Peninsula was lifted from obscurity during the sixth century due to the eruption of the Byzantine-Sasanian wars. This caused the Arabian Peninsula to become the “focal point of international interest and intrigue, and the scene of military, diplomatic, religious, and commercial transactions.”²⁶ Both Daryaee and Kavar substantiate the claim, whereas Crone merely states, that the advance of the two rivalling empires on Arabia may have given cause to the advent of Islam due to the ceaseless wars between the imperial powers of the turbulent sixth and seventh centuries. However, this is by no means the only probable account to explain the appearance of Islam on the world stage.

Other arguments, offered by those opposed to or diverging from the ‘encroachment’-theory to account for advent of Islam, should also be considered. Was Meccan trade, as Crone suggests, indeed confined to Arabia or did the Meccan merchants engage in trade far beyond its boundaries? Is the broadening of the trade horizons of the Byzantine empire, caused by the disputes with the warring Sassanians, the sole reason for the increase in Meccan trade or should other factors be considered? Robert Serjeant, in a scathing review of Crone’s ‘Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam’, presents several convincing arguments favourable to the assertion that the Quraysh did engage in transboundary trade and commerce.²⁷ A particular enticing argument, which highlights the tussle between Crone and Serjeant, concerns the alleged winter and summer journeys mentioned in Q. 106:1-4:

For the covenants (of security and safeguard enjoyed) by the Quraysh,
 Their covenants (covering) journeys by winter and summer –
 Let them adore the Lord of this House,
 Who provides them with food against hunger, and with security against fear (of danger).²⁸

Crone disputes that valuable information can be obtained from exegesis of the Qur’ān. Information thus acquired is chucked under the epitaph: “dubious historical value.”²⁹ In the same vein, Crone concludes that it is impossible to establish the destination of the biannual journey based on the exegetical tradition: “Taken in its entirety, the tradition says nothing that cannot be inferred from the text of the sura itself.”³⁰ However, she does present an inventory of possible destinations – Tā’if, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, Rūm –

²⁵ Daryaee, “The Persian Gulf Trade in Late Antiquity,” 5.

²⁶ Irfan Kavar, “The Arabs in the peace treaty of AD 561,” *Arabica* 3, no. 2 (1956): 181.

²⁷ Robert B. Serjeant, “Meccan trade and the rise of Islam: misconceptions and flawed polemics,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110, no. 3 (1990): 472-486.

²⁸ Q. 106:1-4 in *The Holy Qur’ān*, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000).

²⁹ Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, 204.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 209-210.

the Quraysh might have headed to on their biannual journey.³¹ Crone herself is somewhat inconsistent. First, she argues that Meccan trade was limited to the hinterlands of the Arabian desert, but she backtracks when discussing sūrah 106 by volunteering that “it may well be that Quraysh... traded with Syria.” Serjeant, however, refutes Crone’s hypothesis. He argues, based on an exhaustive reading of the Arabic sources, in which particular attention is paid to Ibn al-Kalbī’s *Kitāb al-Munammaq*, that the Quraysh did indeed embark on a biannual journey from Yemen to Syria to procure goods and provisions.³² Mahmood Ibrahim addresses the question of Meccan transboundary trade from yet another perspective: the institution of *īlāf*.³³ The *īlāf* – an agreement between the Quraysh and neighbouring chieftains concerning the sale of produce and goods in exchange for shelter and safe passage – enabled the Quraysh to partake in the activity of transboundary commerce. This allowed the merchants of the Quraysh clan to embark on journeys to various regions abroad, among which are Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Yemen.³⁴ In this chapter, we have briefly discussed several contemporary authors concerned with the question of Meccan trade. It appears that the Quraysh were engaged in transboundary trade and that merchant caravans plied the trade routes passing through the Hijaz, thus enabling the diffusion of diverging Judaeo-Christian beliefs across the Arabian Peninsula. It is exceedingly difficult to ascertain precisely if either the encroachment of the Sassanian and Byzantine empires on the Hijaz or transboundary commerce was more conducive to the dissemination of Judaeo-Christian beliefs in the Hijaz. However, we may infer that Muhammad either through trade or exposure to the empires straddling the borders of the Hijaz was exposed to these unfamiliar notions percolating through the deserts of Arabia.

³¹ Ibid., 205-206.

³² Bukharin, “Mecca on the Caravan Routes in Pre-Islamic Antiquity,” 116; Serjeant, “Meccan trade and the rise of Islam,” 478-479.

³³ Mahmood Ibrahim, “Social and Economic Conditions in Pre-Islamic Mecca,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, no. 3 (1982): 347.

³⁴ Ibrahim, “Social and Economic Conditions in Pre-Islamic Mecca,” 344-347.

Chapter 2: The Religious Landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia: The Jewish-Christian and Christian Groups of the Hijaz.

In the previous chapter, we have discussed the existence of transboundary commerce in pre-Islamic Arabia and have argued for the presence of merchant caravans, defined as vehicles of transmission, and their importance in the dispersion and diffusion of beliefs. However, did the crystallization of early Islamic belief transpire exclusively through exposure to the religious notions coursing along the Hijazi trade routes? Or should we also attend to a description of the religious communities existing in and around the Hijaz prior to the upsurge of trade in the sixth and seventh centuries? Whilst trade certainly constitutes a major factor in the spread of beliefs, acquaintance with neighbouring communities of divergent denominations may offer us yet another insight into the religious ideas circulating in the Arabian desert prior to the appearance of the Qur'ān. The following excerpt neatly illustrates this point: “The Arabs’ exposure to other religious and secular cultures in the Mediterranean basin, both through trade connections and as a result of physical-geographical proximity, paved the way for the infiltration of monotheistic and non-monotheistic religions.”³⁵ No attempt will be made to present a complete overview of all the Jewish-Christian and Christian communities residing in and around the Hijaz during the sixth and seventh centuries. This chapter will instead offer a brief survey of several then existent religious communities to not only contest the idea of a supposedly barren Hijaz bereft of people but also to dispel the following hypothesis advanced by Richard Bell³⁶:

What we have to do with is not a native Arab Church, or any deep impression of Christianity upon the Arab tribes, though some of them were Christian in name, but rather with Christian churches on the confines of Arabia exercising upon the ruder inhabitants of the Peninsula a certain amount of influence and attraction. In this way a certain knowledge of Christianity must have been diffused throughout Arabia.³⁷

Was knowledge of Christianity solely imposed on the Arab tribes of the Hijaz by the churches and their Christian communities straddling the periphery of the peninsula? Should we not also include the Christian communities already established in the pre-Islamic Hijaz to construct a more inclusive portrait of the possible Christian influences bearing on the Arabian Peninsula? First, we will inquire into the presence of

³⁵ Khalil Athamina, “Abraham in Islamic perspective reflections on the development of monotheism in pre-Islamic Arabia,” *Der Islam* 81, no. 2 (2004): 200-201.

³⁶ See the introduction, where we have touched upon the notion of the Hijaz as the ‘empty quarter’.

³⁷ Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, 17.

Christianity in the pre-Islamic Hijaz, followed by an account of the churches on the fringes of Arabia. However, before evaluating the ecclesiastical landscape of the pre-Islamic Hijaz, we must pose a few unassuming questions concerning the advent of Christianity in Arabia: What initiated the encroachment of Christianity on the Arabian Peninsula? And what mould of Christianity permeated the lands of Arabia?³⁸

The name *Arabia Hearesium Ferax*, or “Arabia, the breeding ground of heresies”, conjures up a lucid image of a heterogenous religious landscape, home to assorted strands of Christianity.³⁹ Epiphanius and Eusebius, celebrated ecclesiastical historians of the second and third centuries, already referred to Arabia by this name.⁴⁰ This merely shows that Arabia occupied a distinct place in the world of Byzantium. It was portrayed as a nether region: a sanctuary for heretics and schismatics.⁴¹ However, before asking ourselves if these Christians, harboured by the deserts of Arabia, did indeed subscribe to dissenting Christological notions, we must first broach yet another delicate subject: the designation ‘Arab’. This designation appears to be both provocative and ambiguous, raising a few nagging questions: Who did the classic authors refer to when speaking of ‘Arabs’? And are we able to establish the approximate location of the region inhabited by the ‘Arabs’? Gabriel Said Reynolds dismisses the notion that the Christian authors of the fourth and fifth centuries referred to Arabia as the desert beyond the borders (*limes*) of the Byzantine empire. He remarks that “to my knowledge [...] the reference to “Arabia” would presumably mean Arabia Petraea – an area well to the north of the Hijaz.”⁴² Consequently, we may safely infer that Reynolds would refer to the inhabitants of Arabia Petraea as ‘Arabs’, but would not employ this designation to denote the natives of the Hijaz. The designation ‘Arab’, however, appears to be a generic term, not constricted to signify the peoples of the region of Arabia Petraea. To clarify this observation, we must consult Eusebius’ ‘Commentary on Isaiah.’ Eusebius in his commentary on Isaiah 42:11-12 relates:

³⁸ Irfan Shahid, “Byzantium in South Arabia,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979): 28.

³⁹ Peter Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 169. Schadler translates *Arabia Hearesium Ferax* as “Arabia, the breeding ground of heresies.” See also Darren M. Slade, “Arabia Haeresium Ferax (Arabia Bearer of Heresies): Schismatic Christianity’s Potential Influence on Muhammad and the Qur’an,” *American Theological Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (2014): 43-53; Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, 20, notes that “Arabia had a reputation in the early Church as a source of heresies.” See also Wilhelm Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum* (Verlag von W. Kohlhammer: Stuttgart, 1922), 8: “Von den arabischen Christen gilt: Arabia ferax haereseōn.”

⁴⁰ Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), 278-279; Irfan Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), 36.

⁴¹ Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, 28.

⁴² Gabriel Said Reynolds, “On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur’ān and the Many Aspects of Qur’anic Rhetoric,” *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur’an and Hadith Studies* 12, no. 1 (2014): 43.

“And Kedar lies beyond Arabia in the furthest wilderness, where he says the Saracen race dwells.”⁴³ In his commentary on Isaiah 13: 19-20, he equates the Arabs with the Saracens: “When he [Isaiah] says *Nor will Arabs pass through it*, I [Eusebius] suppose he is speaking of those whom we call Saracens.”⁴⁴ Thus, the designation ‘Arab’ is not only applied to the inhabitants of Arabia Petraea, but probably also encompasses the peoples beyond its borders.⁴⁵

The aforementioned question concerning the Christological notions circulating among the Christian groups in Hijaz has caused somewhat of a stir among scholars occupied with early Christianity in pre-Islamic Arabia, with both sides sternly reproaching one another for scholarly laxness. Sidney Griffith, in a nod to Bell’s assertion that “Arabia was ringed about with Christian influences,” argues that: “The Qur’ān’s Christians were in fact among the contemporary Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians, the dominant Christian congregations on the Arabian periphery and in Arabia proper.”⁴⁶ This observation is anything but surprising to the reader with a firm grasp of the events that engrossed the Church in the fourth and fifth centuries. However, Griffith is not inclined to provide the necessary background information. Therefore, to discover why Griffith considers the Christian congregations on the fringes of the Hijaz to be among the “contemporary Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians”, we must delve into the animated Christological disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries. The straw that broke the camel’s back, rupturing the Eastern Churches, was the ecumenical council of Chalcedon. This council, convened by emperor Marcian in 451, was the last heroic effort to reconcile the Church. However, instead of pacification, this council heralded the rift between the Eastern Churches spawning the Nestorian Church otherwise known as the ‘Church of the East’, which affirmed the Dyophysite doctrine – the existence of two (*dyo*) natures embedded in Christ – and the Monophysites, who stressed the composite oneness of Christ’s nature.⁴⁷ These divisions rippled through the East and into Persia, thereby impressing themselves on the Arab tribes residing on the periphery, but still firmly within the spheres of either Byzantine or

⁴³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. J. J. Armstrong (Downers Grove (IL): InterVarsity Press, 2013), 213.

⁴⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 76.

⁴⁵ See Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 508-509 and Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, 279-280. Both Shahid and Retsö, acknowledge the enigmatic nature of the designation ‘Arab’, but convincingly argue that the designation ‘Saracen’ or ‘Arab’ also pertained to the nomadic tribes beyond the borders of the Byzantine empire. See also David D. Grafton, “The Arabs’ in the ecclesiastical historians of the 4th/5th centuries: Effects on contemporary Christian-Muslim relations,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 64, no. 1 (2008): 182, for a comprehensive analysis of the relation between ‘Arab’ and ‘Saracen’ in Eusebius’ ‘Commentary on Isaiah’.

⁴⁶ Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, 41; Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the ‘People of the Book’ in the Language of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 9.

⁴⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 226-228; Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: a biblical, historical, and systematic study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 196-197.

Persian influence.⁴⁸ Let us briefly consider two of these Arab tribes: the Lakhmids and the Ghassanids. These tribal confederations, who reached their zenith during the 3rd and 6th century CE, straddled the border region between the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian and Byzantine empires.⁴⁹ The Lakhmid dynasty, an Arab alliance in vassalage to the Persian emperor, maintained an extensive trade network throughout the Hijaz and attempted to incorporate the Hijazi tribes into the realm of the Persian Empire.⁵⁰ It appears that the Lakhmids, while subjected to the ‘pagan’ rule of the house of Persia, had nonetheless sworn allegiance to the ‘Church of the East’, better known as the ‘Nestorian Church.’⁵¹

The Ghassanids, a tribal confederation noted for their marauding in Byzantine territory, were recognized by Justinian as a confederacy in the fifth century in the hope of quelling their incursions into Byzantine lands.⁵² The Ghassanids, who gradually became the main representatives of the Roman imperial administration in the deserts of Syria, were unwavering in their support of the Monophysite Church.⁵³ The Monophysite Ghassanids, after their chieftain Hārith Ibn Jabala in 541 had pleaded with empress Theodora to consecrate the Syrian Jacob Baradaeus as bishop of his region, became known as the Jacobites.⁵⁴ Hence Griffith’s argument that the forms of Christianity embraced by the tribes on the peninsula – Griffiths speaks of ‘Qur’ān’s Christians’ – were aligned to the peripheral Christian configuration. The argument advanced by Griffith is, however, valid only if the author consents to the following hypothesis proposed by Isabel Toral-Niehoff: “Since commerce usually involves the transfer of people as well as of ideas, it is likely that reports about the Christianized Arabs should have reached and left an impression on the earliest community of Muhammad.”⁵⁵

⁴⁸ J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London and New York: Longman, 1979), 159; Barbara Finster, “Arabia in Late Antiquity: An Outline of the Cultural Situation in the Peninsula at the Time of Muhammad,” in *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010)70, relates that the forms of Christianity fostered by the council of Chalcedon were not constricted to the border regions of the empire, but infiltrated the Arabian peninsula.

⁴⁹ David D. Grafton, “The identity and witness of Arab pre-Islamic Arab Christianity: The Arabic language and the Bible,” *HTS Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 4.

⁵⁰ David Oates, “Qasr Serj—A Sixth Century Basilica in Northern Iraq,” *Iraq* 24, no. 2 (1962): 84; Isabel Toral-Niehoff, “The ‘Ibād of al-Ḥīra: an Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq,” in *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 323.

⁵¹ David Thomas, “Arab Christianity,” in *The Blackwell companion to Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Parry (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 2; Grafton, “The identity and witness of Arab pre-Islamic Arab Christianity,” 5.

⁵² Oates, “Qasr Serj—A Sixth Century Basilica in Northern Iraq,” 84.

⁵³ Irfan Kavar, “Procopius on the Ghassanids,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 77, no. 2 (1957): 80; Thomas, “Arab Christianity,” 2-3.

⁵⁴ Jonn C. Block, “Philoponian Monophysitism in South Arabia at the Advent of Islam With Implications for the English Translation of ‘Thalātha’ in Qur’ān 4.171 and 5.73,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 23, no. 1 (2011): 62. The difference between the Jacobites and Monophysites will be discussed more extensively in the following chapter.

⁵⁵ Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 9; Toral-Niehoff, “The ‘Ibād of al-Ḥīra: an Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq,” 323. See also Athamina, “Abraham in Islamic perspective reflections on the development of monotheism in pre-Islamic Arabia,” 200-201. She argues that “trade connections and physical-geographical proximity paved the way for the infiltration of monotheistic and non-monotheistic religions” into Arabia. See also Isabel Toral-Niehoff, “Late Antique Iran and the Arabs: The Case of al-Hira,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 6, no.

The argument concerning the Melkite, Jacobite or Nestorian persuasion of the “Qur’ān’s Christians” is indeed convincing. However, we should also take into consideration the following, equally persuasive thesis:

Scholars have preferred to see the Christians living in Arabia in Muhammad’s time to more or less be represented by the existing Christians within the borders of the Empire and/or the larger Christian sects well known in Persia, such as the Church of the East. However, this is a flawed extrapolation, primarily because imperial authority often regulated forms of Christianity present within the borders of the empire, while it could not do so outside those borders, making variant forms more likely.⁵⁶

It is easy to consider such an environment, free from imperial authority, to be a haven for religious groups clinging to sectarian ideas deemed unorthodox or worse by the established churches firmly rooted in the imperial lands. Persecutions and purges, a timely example are the religious reforms adopted by emperor Justinian to cleanse the land under his rule of ‘heretics’, must have provided an incentive for these dissident groups to seek refuge in faraway places, notably Arabia.⁵⁷ Wilhelm Rudolph beautifully depicts the nature of these sectarian groups: “Dieses Christentum war nicht das offizielle und orthodoxe der byzantinischen Reichskirche, nicht einmal das der häretischen Nationalkirchen des Orients, sondern es waren obskure Sekten.”⁵⁸ However, if we follow this line of thought, we ought to address the following question: Which ‘heretical’ groups retreated to or were perhaps already present in the deserts of Arabia? Schadler remarks that “no one has attempted to identify precisely the confessional makeup of these [heretical Christian groups].”⁵⁹ This, however, is not entirely correct. The history of Christianity in Arabia is indeed “muted by the fog of time, the scarcity of sources, and confused by the often legendary character of the few materials that remain,” but this has not in the least withheld scholars from attempting to portray the religious landscape of the Arabian peninsula in the fifth and sixth centuries in their desire to decipher

1-2 (2013): 118. She notes the following in this follow-up article on al-Ḥira: “Commerce means the exchange of commodities, but also of ideas. Traders have always functioned as important cultural mediators.”

⁵⁶ Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations*, 169.

⁵⁷ Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, 20; Walid A. Saleh, “The Arabian Context of Muhammad’s life,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad*, ed. Jonathan E. Brockopp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 212. See also Michael Maas, “Roman history and Christian ideology in Justinianic reform legislation,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 40 (1986): 25. Maas neatly describes the Justinian reform measures.

⁵⁸ Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum*, 8.

⁵⁹ Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations*, 169.

the Christological material embedded in the Qur'ān.⁶⁰ Several scholars have indicated that, if we wish to understand the origin of the Qur'ānic Christological material, we should consider the (possible) existence of various Jewish Christian groups.⁶¹

In this chapter, we will only touch upon a select number of the groups present in the Hijaz proper.⁶² The first group that emerges are the *Naṣārā*, roughly translated as 'Nazarenes'. But who are these Qur'ānic Nazarenes? It appears to be a generic name given to Christians in the Qur'ān.⁶³ Hans Joachim Schoeps relates that the name Nazarenes refers to "einer Sammelbezeichnung der Sekten Ostsyriens-Arabiens."⁶⁴ Rudolph concurs but, interestingly, adds the following: "Ob dieser Name auf eine bestimmte christliche Sekte zurückgeht ist heute nicht mehr auszumachen."⁶⁵ However, both authors agree that the Nazarenes incorporated a Jewish Christian Christological character. François De Blois likewise concludes that it is probable that the Nazarenes exhibited a Jewish Christian Christological tendency.⁶⁶ Griffith offers perhaps the most thought-provoking analysis of the religious nature of the Nazarenes, concluding that:

When the Qur'ān speaks of *an-naṣārā* it means to refer to those who, in its view, are like the followers of Jesus in his own day; perhaps those in its audience who were ready to accept the Qur'ānic message, including its critique of contemporary intra-Christian controversy.⁶⁷

Heribert Busse, Crone, Schoeps and Irfan Shahid are the only scholars, to my knowledge, who have endeavoured to systematically sift through and winnow down an array of Jewish Christian and Christian groups. The Docetists, or to be more specific the Julianists who retained various docetic notions, figure prominently in Shahid's recounting of the various Jewish Christian and Christian denominations who

⁶⁰ Jonn C. Block, *The Qur'an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and modern interpretations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 19.

⁶¹ Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (Tübingen: Verlag J.C.B. Mohr, 1949), 333-334; Patricia Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qur'ān (Part II)," in *The Qur'ānic Pagans and Related Matters: Collected Studies in Three Volumes* (Vol. 1), ed. H. Siurua (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 281-282; Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum*, 6-25.

⁶² See chapters three and four, for a more thorough discussion of the topic.

⁶³ Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Quran and the apostles of Jesus." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76, no. 2 (2013): 212;

⁶⁴ Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums*, 34.

⁶⁵ Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum*, 6.

⁶⁶ De Blois, François. "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and ḥanīf (ἕθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies. University of London* 65, no. 1 (2002): 13-16.

⁶⁷ Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 32.

prospered in the region.⁶⁸ This is corroborated by both Busse and Crone who, based on a reading of sūrah 4:157, posit that the compiler – compilers? – of the Qur’ān were acquainted with docetic notions appertaining to the crucifixion of Christ.⁶⁹ Schoeps, however, holds a different view. He argues that the Ebionites have left an indelible mark on the composition of the Qur’ān.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Irfan Shahid, “Islam and Oriens Christianus: Makka 610-622 AD,” in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. E. Grypeou (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 19-21.

⁶⁹ Crone, “Jewish Christianity and the Qur’ān (Part II),” 285-291; Heribert Busse, “Jesu Errettung vom Kreuz in der islamischen Koranexegese von Sure 4: 157.” *Oriens* 36 (2001): 186-188.

⁷⁰ Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums*, 334-342.

Chapter 3: The Christological Constellation of Arabia: An Account of the Christological Nature of the Jewish-Christian and Christian groups in the Hijaz

In the preceding chapter, we have presented an overview, though incomplete, of the various Christian and Jewish Christian – a hyponymy for Jewish groups considered to be non-Pauline and Christ-believing, such as the Ebionites – denominations and sects present in the Hijaz and the surrounding border regions.⁷¹ In this chapter, we will elaborate on the makeup, or to be more specific, the Christological nature of these religious groups. For the sake of clarity and to dispel any notion of confusion, we will once more list the groups to be discussed in this chapter: Nestorians, Jacobites, Melkites, the ambiguous ‘Nazarenes’, the dubious ‘Docetists’ and the Ebionites. However, before probing into the often-perplexing Christological nature of these groups, we ought to establish the exact meaning of Christology and address the mesmerizing questions it indisputably evokes. Christology is the branch of theology that reflects upon the person of Jesus Christ in an attempt to determine the true nature of his being.⁷² The following biblical verses, found in the gospel according to St. John, epitomize the bewildering nature of Christ and perfectly illustrate why generations of theologians have endeavoured to explain the nature of the divinely infused Christ:

(1:1) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (1:14) And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.⁷³

Upon reading, a worn, but everlasting question springs to mind: Was Jesus both human and divine, divine or just human? It is this question, among others (e.g. the title of the virgin Mary or the celebration of the eucharist) that rivetted the imperial Church and led to the deterioration of the (unified?) Church into squabbling factions.⁷⁴ In this chapter, we will set out to trace and discuss the debate provoked by this question in the aforementioned groups.

⁷¹ Carlos Andrés Segovia, “The Jews and Christians of Pre-Islamic Yemen (Himyar) and the Elusive Matrix of the Qur’ān’s Christology,” in *Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins – Papers presented at the Eighth Annual ASMEA Conference* (Washington DC, October 29-31, 2015), 3, ed. Francisco del Río Sánchez. JAOC. Turnhout: Brepols, 2016. Forthcoming. Here Segovia presents a detailed discussion of the designation Jewish Christian.

⁷² O’Collins, *Christology: a biblical, historical, and systematic study of Jesus*, 1.

⁷³ “John 1:1, 14” in *The Holy Bible* (Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers Limited, 1991).

⁷⁴ See also MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, 77-228, for an extensive account of the various controversies surrounding the nature of Jesus Christ that arose in the early centuries and eventually led to the collapse of the Church into opposing denominations. For the controversies surrounding the celebration of the Eucharist, see Andrew McGowan, “Rethinking Eucharistic Origins,” *Pacifica* 23, no. 2 (2010): 173-191 and Andrew McGowan, “Rethinking Agape and Eucharist in Early North African Christianity,” *Studia*

Let us proceed with a description of the Christological notions entertained by the Nestorians. The misfortune that befell Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople and infamous namesake of the Nestorian tradition, arose during the Council of Ephesus (431 CE). This council denounced Nestorius and declared Nestorianism an abhorrent heresy. The condemnation of Nestorius was reiterated and confirmed at the Fourth Ecumenical Council which transpired at Chalcedon in 451.⁷⁵ But what provoked this condemnation of Nestorianism? The dispute revolved around the relation of the two ‘persons’ (πρόσωπα) embedded in Christ: Did they exist in ‘oneness/union’ (*henosis*) or ‘combination/conjunction’ (*synapheia*)?⁷⁶ Nestorius, to the exasperation of those present, preferred to uphold the doctrine of two distinct ‘persons’ – human and divine – conjoined in Christ.⁷⁷ He expressed himself thus in The First Letter of Nestorius to Celestine: “We worship one Son and Lord Jesus Christ, neither putting apart and dividing man and God, as joined with each other by a union of dignity and authority.”⁷⁸

Before considering the Christology of the groups demoted by Reynolds to the dubious rank of “exotic heresies”, we will shed some light on the Christological intricacies of the Jacobites and Melkites.⁷⁹ The Jacobites derived their name from Jacob Baradaeus, a sixth-century bishop of Edessa, who appeared to be instrumental in founding an ecclesiastical structure opposed to the Chalcedonian Church.⁸⁰ The Christology espoused by the Jacobite Church inclined towards Monophysitism, derived from the compound of *monos* (single) and *physis* (nature).⁸¹ But what did the Monophysite understanding of the nature of Christ encompass? The Chalcedonian creed endeavoured to reconcile the two natures – human and divine – in the person of Jesus Christ: “He is of the same reality as God [*homoousion tō patri*] as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves [*homoousion hemin*] as far as his

liturgica 34, no. 2 (2004): 165-176. See Donald Fairbairn, “Allies or merely friends? John of Antioch and Nestorius in the Christological controversy,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 58, no. 3 (2007): 383-399 and Eirini Artemi, “El rechazo del término Theotokos por Nestorio de Constantinopla y la refutación de su enseñanza por Cirilo de Alejandría,” *De Medio Aevo* 2, no. 2 (2013): 125-146, for a discussion on the debate between Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius concerning the title of the virgin Mary – the designation *Theotokos* or *Anthropotokos*.

⁷⁵ Carl E. Braaten, “Modern interpretations of Nestorius,” *Church History* 32, no. 3 (1963): 251-267; Milton V. Anastos, “Nestorius was orthodox,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 (1962): 119-120; Robert L. Wilken, “Tradition, Exegesis, and the Christological Controversies,” *Church History* 34, no. 2 (1965): 123.

⁷⁶ πρόσωπα (*prosopa*) may refer to either ‘persons’/ ‘faces’/ ‘external aspects’. The translation depends on the author. However, ‘person’ is the most often encountered translation. For an extensive discussion on the origin and translation of πρόσωπα, see Joseph Ratzinger, “Concerning the notion of person in theology,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17, no. 3 (1990): 439-454, specifically pages 440-442.

⁷⁷ Charles M. Stang, “The Two “I”s of Christ: Revisiting the Christological Controversy,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (2012): 533-534.

⁷⁸ Nestorius, “Dogmatic Letters of Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria – The First Letter of Nestorius to Celestine,” in *Christology of the later Fathers*, ed. E. R. Hardy (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1954), 350.

⁷⁹ Reynolds, “On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur’ān and the Many Aspects of Qur’anic Rhetoric,” 44.

⁸⁰ Kenny Parry, “Byzantine-Rite Christians (Melkites) in Central Asia in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” *Modern Greek Studies: A Journal for Greek Letters* 16 (2012): 93; Nikolai N. Seleznyov, “Jacobs and Jacobites: the Syrian origins of the Name and Its Egyptian Arabic Interpretations,” *Scrinium* 9, no. 1 (2013): 383.

⁸¹ Andrew Louth, “Christology in the East from the Council of Chalcedon to John Damascene,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. F. A. Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 149.

human-ness is concerned.”⁸² However, the Monophysites stressed that, following the union, only the divine nature remained in Christ.⁸³ Pope Leo the Great, in his denunciation of the avowed Monophysite Eutyches, neatly encapsulates the Monophysite Christological creed: “If the bodily manifestation of the Word is the union of the divine and the human natures, but [through] this conjunction the two distinct [natures] became singular; his divinity alone was brought into existence by the Virgin's womb.”⁸⁴

The last church that Griffith makes mention of is the Melkite Church. The designation Melkite, derived from the Arabic *malik* (ملك) – “king”, was bestowed upon the Arab Orthodox ‘Royalists’ who concurred with the Chalcedonian Christology advocated by the imperial Byzantine authorities.⁸⁵ The aforementioned Monophysites, illustrated by the excerpt found in sermon 28 of Pope Leo’s *Tome*, argued that the synthesis of the two natures of Christ resulted in the singular nature of the embodied Word. The Byzantine Church, to which the Melkites were aligned, resisted the collapse of the two natures into one. Instead, see the excerpt taken from the Chalcedonian definition above, they argued that the two natures, while bound in one *prosopon* (‘person’), are separate and retain their fundamental properties.⁸⁶

In the final part of this chapter we will inquire into the Christology of the following “exotic heresies”: the Docetists, Ebionites and Nazarenes. However, we must first address a difficulty related to the Docetists and Nazarenes. Both ‘heresies’ do not constitute a specific group with a concomitant Christology. The Nazarenes appear to denote a loose assemblage of Christian offshoots characterized by a Judaic disposition.⁸⁷ It becomes even more muddled upon the arrival of the ‘Docetists’: no such ‘group’ appears to have existed. Ignatius and Eusebius, patristic heresiologists, merely identify certain groups – the most notorious being the followers of Basilides (d. 138) – that reveal a docetic tendency.⁸⁸

⁸² “The Definition of Chalcedon (451),” in *Creeeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, ed. J. H. Leith (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 36.

⁸³ We have presented here a condensed description of the Monophysite creed. Considerable disagreement exists within the Monophysite Church pertaining to the formulation of the nature of Christ. For a discussion on the various definitions of the Monophysite creed, see Theodore Sabo, *From Monophysitism to Nestorianism: AD 431-681* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 85-100.

⁸⁴ Philip L. Barclift, “The shifting tones of Pope Leo the Great's Christological vocabulary,” *Church history* 66, no. 2 (1997): 229. The quoted excerpt is a translation from sermon 28 Cap V found in Sancti Leonis Magni, *Sermones* (Romae: Typis S. Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1849): “Si enim Verbi incarnatio unitio est divinae humanaeque naturae, sed hic ipso concursu quod erat geminum factum est singular; sola divinitas utero Virginis nata est.”

⁸⁵ Alexander Treiger, “Unpublished Texts from the Arab Orthodox Tradition (1): On the Origin of the Term ‘Melkite’ and On the Destruction of the Maryamiyya Cathedral in Damascus.” *Chronos: Revue d'Histoire de l'Université de Balamand* no. 29 (2014): 8.

⁸⁶ John Meyendorff, “Justinian, the Empire and the Church,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 22 (1968): 53.

⁸⁷ For a description of the makeup of the Nazarenes, see Reynolds, “On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur’ān and the Many Aspects of Qur’anic Rhetoric,” 47.

⁸⁸ A. K. M. Adam, “Docetism, Käsemann, and Christology: Why historical criticism can't protect Christological orthodoxy,” *Scottish journal of theology* 49, no. 4 (1996): 392-396; Michael D. Goulder, “Ignatius’ ‘Docetists,’” *Vigiliae christianae* 53, no. 1 (1999): 22-23.

Docetism, derived from the Greek *dokein* (“to seem” or “to appear”), contends that the human Christ is illusory. He may ‘appear’ to be human, however, in reality, his being is solely imbued with the divine. To recapitulate, allowing for dissimilarities between the various ‘docetic’ groups, the human Christ is an apparition. The tangible and corporeal circumstances of Christ – the act of taking on the flesh – are unreal.⁸⁹ We will not pursue this topic any further, but we must address one particularly thorny question elicited by the ‘Docetists’: Can Christ redeem humanity if he himself is not of the flesh? The early church fathers, in response to the ‘Docetists’, held that salvation by Christ could only occur if Christ himself was of human nature: “For Christ could redeem only that which he actually possessed.”⁹⁰

We find ourselves, proverbially speaking, in a pickle, when we attempt to clarify the particular Christological notions of the Nazarenes. This, above all, since hardly anything is known about the Nazarene sect: “We possess no detailed information on the character of the sect of the Nazarenes.”⁹¹ Griffith relays that the Qur’ān refers to the *an-nasārā* as “New Testament Christians” to emphasize the distinction between the enigmatic Nazarenes and the Nestorian or Jacobite Christians who, according to Griffith, the Qur’ān “finds radically objectionable.”⁹² Be that as it may, Griffith does not tell us why the Qur’ān appears to find the Nazarenes agreeable, except for the perfunctory phrase that they were “perhaps [...] ready to accept the Qur’ānic message”, and what, if the Nazarenes are receptive to the Qur’ānic message in the first place, makes them tractable?⁹³ Even though little to nothing is known about the Nazarenes, an attempt should nonetheless be made to shed some light on the history and doctrines of the Nazarenes. A description of the doctrine espoused by the Nazarenes is found in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis, the 4th-century bishop of Constantia in Cyprus, who imparts the following:

They use not only the New Testament but the Old Testament as well, as the Jews do. For they do not repudiate the legislation, the prophets, and the books which are called Writings by the Jews and by themselves. They have no different views but confess everything in full accord with the doctrine of the Law and like the Jews, except that they are supposedly believers in Christ. (For they acknowledge both the resurrection of the

⁸⁹ Michael Slusser, “Docetism: a historical definition,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 3 (1981): 172; James L. Papandrea, *The Earliest Christologies: Five Images of Christ in the Postapostolic Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 45-48.

⁹⁰ Smith, Gerald Birney. “The Religious Significance of the Humanity of Jesus.” *The American Journal of Theology* 24, no. 2 (1920): 194.

⁹¹ Edwin A. Judge, “The early Christians as a scholastic community,” *Journal of Religious History* 1, no.1 (1960): 14.

⁹² Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 31-32.

⁹³ Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 32.

dead and that all things have been created by God, and they declare that God is one, and that his Son is Jesus Christ.⁹⁴

This account is corroborated by Ray Pritz who informs us that the Nazarenes were law-abiding Christians of Jewish extraction, but who (spectacularly?) entertained trinitarian notions, rejoiced in the immaculate conception, and acknowledged the divinity of Christ.⁹⁵ Petri Luomanen cautions that we should be wary to fully embrace Epiphanius' account of the Nazarenes, but still, watchful of "spiced up" language, would such a group of Christians be placated by the decidedly anti-trinitarian formulas embedded in the Qur'ān?⁹⁶

The final group, and perhaps the most controversial, to be discussed in this chapter are the Ebionites. According to Pritz, the Ebionites emerged out of the Nazarene sect either after a Christological dispute or following an argument concerning the rule of the community.⁹⁷ However, the Christology of the two 'sects' differed significantly. The Nazarenes were inclined to concur with the Christology advocated by the wider 'orthodox' Church, whereas the Ebionites departed from 'conventional' Christology.⁹⁸ The following excerpt taken from Epiphanius' *Panarion* neatly illustrates the baffling ebionite Christology:

This is because they maintain that Jesus is really a man, as I said, but that Christ, who descended in the form of a dove, has entered him — as we have found already in other sects — < and > been united with him. Christ himself < is from God on high, but Jesus > is the offspring of a man's seed and a woman.⁹⁹

The Ebionites stressed the humanity of Jesus, conceived by the union of man and wife, who distinguished himself from mankind through his righteousness and rectitude. The baptism of Jesus heralded the arrival of Christ – the divine Spirit – who coalesced with Jesus until his death on the cross. This form of

⁹⁴ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion Book 1 (Sects 1-46)*, trans. F. Williams (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 128.

⁹⁵ Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament Period Until Its Disappearance in the Fourth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 108-109.

⁹⁶ Petri Luomanen, "Nazarenes," in *A Companion to Second-century Christian 'heretics'*, ed. P. Luomanen and A. Marjanen (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 293-296. See also the anti-trinitarian surah 112: "Say: He Is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is begotten; And there is none like unto him," in *The Holy Qur'ān*, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000).

⁹⁷ Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 108.

⁹⁸ Luomanen, "Nazarenes," 280-281; Philip J. Rosato, "Spirit Christology: Ambiguity and Promise," *Theological Studies* 38, no. 3 (1977): 431.

⁹⁹ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion*, 142.

Christology has become known as ‘adoptionist’: the decision of God to ‘adopt’ the child Jesus, after his baptism, as his son.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 100-101; Goulder, “Ignatius’ “Docetists,”” 25; Sakari Häkkinen, “Ebionites,” in *A Companion to Second-century Christian ‘heretics’*, ed. P. Luomanen and A. Marjanen (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 268.

Chapter 4: Reality or Illusion?: The Christological foundation of the Qur'ān

In this chapter we will consider several Qur'ānic verses which either portray or present a description of Jesus Christ to discover to what extent the Christology of the previously discussed Jewish Christian and Christian groups may have had an influence on the shape of the Qur'ān.¹⁰¹ We will heed the piercing call of Böwering:

More scholarly emphasis will have to be given to the first forty years of Muhammad's life, the time before his "call". There are important and still open questions about this period that have been neglected by recent scholarship on the construction of the Qur'ān. For example, prior to his call, to what degree did Muhammad assimilate many of the religious ideas that became essential elements of his Qur'ānic message?¹⁰²

It is this question that will take centre stage in this chapter. Besides a general discussion on the potential Christological foundation of the selected Qur'ānic verses, we will also consider several of the arguments concerning the possible Christological influence on the Qur'ān posited by some of the household names in the field – Crone, Reynolds and Griffith.

Upon reading the Qur'ān, it becomes immediately apparent that Muhammad appropriated numerous theological notions from the great Abrahamic traditions.¹⁰³ This is, in and of itself, not a novel idea. However, it is a notion that has caused considerable disquiet among scholars. Günter Lüling was, although preceded by Tor Andrae, one of the first scholars to argue, based on extensive research of the Qur'ān, that the Qur'ānic text is deeply rooted in Christian teachings.¹⁰⁴ However, as Donner points out: "it [the aforementioned thesis of Lüling] has never received the kind of full and open examination it deserved."¹⁰⁵ This is corroborated by Claude Gilliot who relays: "The theses of Lüling [the most important thesis for our research is perhaps the following: the Qur'ān incorporates a pre-Islamic Christian foundational layer], which have been largely ignored, deserve serious consideration."¹⁰⁶ The following

¹⁰¹ See Chapter 2, for a list of the groups categorized under the hypernymy 'Jewish Christian'

¹⁰² Gerhard Böwering, "Recent Research on the Construction of the Qur'ān," in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 82.

¹⁰³ Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "The Christian Context of the Qur'ān," in *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations*, ed. D. Thomas (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 27; Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'an: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'an* (Erlangen: Verlagsbuchhandlung H. Lüling, 1974).

¹⁰⁵ Donner, "The Qur'an in Recent Scholarship: Challenges and Desiderata," 33.

¹⁰⁶ Gilliot, "Reconsidering the Authorship of the Qur'ān: Is the Qur'ān partly the fruit of a progressive and collective work?," 97.

question arises: What has caused the neglect of these theses postulated by Lüling and likeminded scholars on the Christian foundation of the Qur'ān?

To provide an answer to this question, we must probe deeper into the current debate concerning the origins of the Qur'ān. This debate, which has turned into a veritable academic row, revolves around the following question: To what extent may scholars draw on Christological notions, unearthed in Christian polemical sources, to clarify the nature of the Qur'ānic Christ? An imposing question, that has polarized the academic field and sown confusion. Reynolds, a vocal opponent of the theory that Christian dissident groups may offer an insight into the Qur'ānic material on the nature of Christ, means to “criticize the tendency of scholars – in Andrae’s time and still today – to seek out Christian heretics whom Muhammad might have met as a way of explaining the Qur'ānic material on Christianity.”¹⁰⁷ Instead, he argues that if we wish to gain an understanding of the Qur'ānic verses that entertain Christological notions we ought to resort to the Qur'ān itself: “The Qur'ān is a creative work, a work which purposefully exaggerates and satirizes the views of its opponents in order to refute them more effectively.”¹⁰⁸ Reynolds cautions that we must not look at heretical Christian groups, instead we should consider the Qur'ān’s “creative use of rhetorical tools such as irony and hyperbole” to explain the appearance of Christian theological notions in the Qur'ān.¹⁰⁹

Let us then heed the warning of Reynolds and attempt to follow his line of reasoning. A moment of reflection and the first stumbling blocks appear on the horizon. Reynolds derides the academics who draw solely on the tainted sources of patristic polemicists in their wish to clarify. Instead we must make do with the intrinsic inventiveness of the Qur'ān.¹¹⁰ He accuses those who employ polemics to expound on the Christian material in the Qur'ān of one-sidedness, but does Reynolds not fall into the exact same trap? May we not disparage Reynolds for partiality? Next, we ought to discuss a selection of the exegetical tools deployed by Reynolds: irony and hyperbole. An unassuming, but nonetheless ingenious thought experiment, which relies on the notion developed by Saussure that meaning is constructed by means of binary opposites, may assist in shedding some necessary light on the two semantic concepts deployed by Reynolds.¹¹¹ Could the light exist without the dark? Or good without evil? Does binary opposition not give rise to meaning? In analogy to Ferdinand de Saussure’s insight, does Reynolds’

¹⁰⁷ Reynolds, “On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur'ān and the Many Aspects of Qur'anic Rhetoric,” 46.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹¹⁰ Reynolds in his paper “On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur'ān and the Many Aspects of Qur'anic Rhetoric,” argues (exclusively?) for an intra-Qur'ānic exegetical approach. However, in his carefully researched book *The Qur'an and its biblical subtext* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), Reynolds increases his scope significantly. Instead of an exclusive reliance on the “rhetorical creativity of the Qur'ān”, he attempts to demonstrate that the Qur'ān “can be fruitfully read in the light of Biblical literature.”

¹¹¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. W. Baskin. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 88.

understanding of irony and hyperbole hold its footing? Does satire not necessitate an understanding of the sources it parodies? Could irony exist without a firm understanding of the object or notion it endeavours to ridicule? Is hyperbole not a rhetorical device which demands intricate knowledge of the object it intends to inflate? Hyperbole and irony may be the preferred tools of the Qur'ān to outwit its perceived opponents, to be effective they nonetheless require considerable understanding of the foes – Jewish Christian and Christian dissidents – it tries to confront. This is not to say that Reynolds categorically rejects the biblical foundation of the Qur'ān, nor does he purport to say that the Qur'ān was not aware of its Christian surroundings.¹¹² However, he does appear, notably in his article 'On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur'ān', to argue against the possible influence of heterodox groups, either Jewish Christian or Christian, on the composition of the Qur'ān.¹¹³ It is this argument that I mean to criticize.

Griffith aligns himself to Reynolds. He, likewise, argues that Qur'ān was aware of the notions entertained by the Christian population in its near proximity and similarly discards the notion of heterodox Christian influence on the Qur'ān.¹¹⁴ Griffith imparts the following¹¹⁵:

Hermeneutically speaking, an important corollary of the recognition of the Qur'ān's intention polemically to criticize Christian belief and practice is the further recognition that in the service of this purpose the Qur'ān rhetorically does not simply report or repeat what Christians say; it reproves what they say, corrects it, or caricatures it.¹¹⁶

Accordingly, the composition of the Qur'ān, at least the surah displaying a Christological foundation, came into being as a scathing reflection on the Christological convictions espoused by the 'Qur'ān's Christians'. Let us first briefly consider the perplexing surah 4:171, the most unlikely of Qur'ānic verses¹¹⁷:

¹¹² Gabriel S. Reynolds *The Qur'an and its biblical subtext* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 246-257.

¹¹³ Reynolds in *The Qur'an and its biblical subtext* wishes to explain the biblical foundation of the Qur'ān in light of its resemblance to the Syriac Christian homiletic tradition: "The Qur'an's relationship to the Syriac Christian homiletic tradition is evident also in regard to content." This is, in and of itself, an important addition to the field of early Qur'ānic studies. But does the Qur'ān resemble the Syriac Christian homiletic tradition, exclude the possibility of other influences, perhaps dissident or heretical, on the composition of the Qur'ān?

¹¹⁴ Sidney H. Griffith, "Al-Nasārā in the Qur'ān: A Hermeneutical Reflection," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context 2*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2011), 310-320

¹¹⁵ Note its likeness to Reynolds argument on the Qur'ān's "creative use of rhetorical tools such as irony and hyperbole."

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 311.

¹¹⁷ Samir, "The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur'ān: A Reflection," 156. Samir likewise expresses his amazement of the inclusion of this particular surah in the Qur'ān: "It is surprising to find it in the Qur'an, for it does not correspond to that which is normally said of the messengers of God."

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion. Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and his Word, which he Bestowed on Mary and a Spirit proceeding from Him; so believe in Allah and His Messenger. Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: glory be to him (far Exalted is He) above having a son.¹¹⁸

The Qur’ānic verse 4:171 stands in stark contrast to the rest of the corpus of surahs concerned with Jesus Christ. This verse, while blunt in its denunciation of the trinitarian formula, appears to speak of Christ as the Word of God (*kalimat Allāh*), while simultaneously emphasizing the absolute oneness of God. To my knowledge, very few scholars have earnestly discussed surah 4:171 and those who have are all but amazed.¹¹⁹ Parrinder, in his treatment of surah 4:171, only notes that “this verse seems to be directed against certain Christian heresies”, but refrains from discussing which heresies the Qur’ān attempts to rebut.¹²⁰ Upon consideration of Q. 4:171, it appears that the notion of *kalimat Allāh* or the ‘Word of God’ was perhaps gleaned from a variant of Johannine Christianity – the resemblance to John 1:1 is striking – but Samir Khalil Samir, who devotes an entire paragraph to this astonishing verse, concludes that “evidently it does not mean that which John (and Christians after him) understand by the “Word of God.”¹²¹ However, Samir’s conclusion is rather peculiar. For example, why is Samir convinced that the Qur’ān’s understanding of the Word of God is not identical, or at least similar, to John’s conception of the Word of God?¹²² Grant Kynaston in his recently published paper on the Qur’ānic nature of Christ lavishes considerable attention on surah 4:171.¹²³ He argues that the association of the Qur’ānic Jesus with the designation *kalimat Allāh* ought to be understood ‘indirectly’. The Qur’ānic Jesus is not the incarnation of the Godhead – does this rule out the possibility of either Melkite, Nestorian or Jacobite influence on surah 4:171? – instead he must be seen as a prophetic messenger who transmitted the Word of God to mankind. Jesus Christ in the Qur’ān bears the epitaph *kalimat Allāh* because he conveys the divine directive.¹²⁴ This is indeed a possible reading of surah 4:171, however does surah 4:171 not explicitly state that Christ Jesus *is* his word? And if this literal reading of surah 4:171 is indeed correct, should we not, as opposed to Samir, read this

¹¹⁸ Q. 4:171 in *The Holy Qur’ān*, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000).

¹¹⁹ Crone, Griffith and Reynolds, as far as I am aware, disregard surah 4:171 altogether. Carlos Andrés Segovia, *The Quranic Jesus: A New Interpretation* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 38-39. Segovia does not dwell long on Q. 4:171, except for the nebulous remark that “the identity of Word and Spirit overturns the trinity.”

¹²⁰ Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’an*, 46.

¹²¹ Samir, “The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur’ān: A Reflection,” 156.

¹²² This question, while not in the immediate scope of this study, merits further attention.

¹²³ Grant Kynaston, “Jesus as God’s Word,” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018): 68-85.

¹²⁴ Idem, 79-83.

Qur'ānic verse in light of a Johannine understanding of the nature of Christ? After all, as noted by Griffith, Muhammad must have been aware of the notions of the dominant Christian congregations on the Arabian periphery and in Arabia proper who most likely entertained a Johannine conception of the Word of God.

Next, let us inquire into the fiercely discussed Qur'ānic verse 4:157. This verse, which perhaps best encapsulates the bewildering debate surrounding the nature of Christ, has sparked considerable controversy:

That they said (in boast), 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah' – but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not.¹²⁵

A quick glance at Qur'ānic verse 4:157, noticeably the clause – “it was made to appear to them”, immediately reveals the docetic notion that the human Christ is an apparition. However, while seemingly evident, the scholarly debate has apparently not resolved itself. Reynolds maintains that it is rather unlikely that the Qur'ān was influenced by 'Christian Docetists': “In fact there is no reason for recourse to Docetism at all, as the Qur'ān never denies (either in al-Nisā' (4)157 or elsewhere) that Jesus was crucified or that he died.”¹²⁶ Reynolds argues instead that if we wish to elucidate the theological roots of surah 4:157, we ought to delve into “the tradition of anti-Jewish polemic in Syriac Christian writings.”¹²⁷ While a thorough appraisal of Syriac Christian writings may certainly divulge more thought-provoking material to further research into the Christological foundation of surah 4:157, the contention that recourse to Docetism is needless is, based on a reading of verse 4:157, strikingly odd.

Griffith argues, in light of this verse, that we should examine the Christological beliefs espoused by the Qur'ānic Christians, but that “there is no need to go beyond the contemporary 'Melkites', 'Jacobites' and 'Nestorians' to account for the Qur'ān's awareness of this line of thinking.”¹²⁸ However, if we take a closer look at the Christology of these Christian groups, we soon discover that neither the Melkites and Jacobites nor the Nestorians promulgated the docetic doctrine.¹²⁹ It would be unwise to

¹²⁵ Q. 4:157 in *The Holy Qur'ān*, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000).

¹²⁶ Reynolds, “On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur'ān and the Many Aspects of Qur'ānic Rhetoric,” 51.

¹²⁷ Reynolds, Gabriel Said, “The Muslim Jesus: dead or alive?,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72, no. 2 (2009): 257.

¹²⁸ Griffith, “Al-Nasārā in the Qur'ān,” 319.

¹²⁹ See the discussion on the Christology of the Jacobites, Melkites and Nestorians in chapter three.

dismiss the notion that these groups have exerted an influence on the composition of the Qur'ān. However, it is rather challenging to explain the Christological foundation of surah 4:157 by resorting to one of the groups mentioned by Griffith. Therefore, while Griffith's proposition that we should explore the beliefs of the Qur'ānic Christians ought to be taken seriously, his range of Qur'ānic Christians must be extended. Especially, if we wish to clarify the Christological foundation of surah 4:157. Crone argues most persuasively in favour of just such an expansion of range. She, like Griffith, affirms that "the Qur'ān here [verse 4:157] explains the crucifixion docetically."¹³⁰ However, whereas Griffith is inclined to clarify verse 4:157 by employing the teachings of the Melkite, Nestorian and Jacobite Church, Crone proposes to inquire into the doctrines endorsed by the Jewish Christian communities possibly residing in the Hijaz: "The milieu from which the docetic interpretation of the crucifixion passed into the Qur'ān was Israelite Christian (or, in the traditional nomenclature, Jewish Christian)."¹³¹

The Qur'ānic verse 4:157 neatly illustrates the discussion on the Qur'ānic adoption and subsequent alteration of docetic Christology. However, it does not expound on what is perhaps the most staggering Qur'ānic notion: the explicit denial of the divinity of Christ. Several excerpts of Qur'ānic verses from surah 5 al- Mā'ida will be enumerated here to underscore the Qur'ānic rejection of Christ's divinity:

They do blaspheme who say: 'God is Christ the son of Mary.'¹³²

They do Blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One God.¹³³

Christ, the son of Mary, was no more than a Messenger; many were the messengers that passed away before him.¹³⁴

The Qur'ān deprives Christ of his divinity. The Qur'ānic Christ is a human, nothing but a messenger. This is in and of itself not remarkable. After all, the Qur'ān enshrines a rigid monotheism. His divinity cannot be partaken of: God is one. However, in light of the Qur'ān's exposure to a wide variety of Christian – Jewish Christian? – groups and denominations, it does become noteworthy. None of the Christian groups listed in the previous chapters, except for the Ebionites, understood Christ to be just a man. Griffith

¹³⁰ Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qur'ān (Part II)," 285.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹³² Q. 5:72 in *The Holy Qur'ān*, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000).

¹³³ Q. 5:73.

¹³⁴ Q. 5:75.

argues that the verses in Surah 5 al- Mā'ida intent to mock the conventional Christian conception of Christ to underline “the incompatibility of the Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God with the main premise of Qur’ānic monotheism.”¹³⁵ This is indeed a promising approach to the question of how the Qur’ānic message concerning the nature of Jesus Christ came about, but is it the only one? Crone argues that “the Messenger’s view of Jesus as an ordinary human prophet was so unusual by his time” that it is improbable that the Qur’ānic portrait of Jesus was fashioned by the creative use of either caricature or satire.¹³⁶ We must turn to the Jewish Christians for the “Messenger inherited the conception of Jesus as a purely human prophet from Jewish Christians.”¹³⁷ Crone does not specify which particular Jewish Christian group – perhaps due to scant historical evidence – may have imparted the notion of the human Christ on Muhammad, but Griffith is perhaps too quick to judge the hypothesis wrong. After all, the similarities between the Jewish Christian tradition and the Qur’ān are striking. Does Q. 5:72 not relate that those who assign divinity to Christ are blasphemers? Does Q. 5:75 not state that Christ is the son of Mary? The Jewish Christian tradition likewise depicts Jesus as “just a human being, the son of Mary” and similarly considers those who “ascribe divine honour to him” as “ridiculous and blasphemous.”¹³⁸ Perhaps Schoeps’ was right to argue that we should look into the ebionite tradition. The Qur’ān is founded on the premise that “there is no God except One God.”¹³⁹ The Ebionites would have assented, for no ebionite tongue would ever confess “that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”¹⁴⁰ The depiction of Jesus Christ Lord was blasphemy: “there is only one God.”¹⁴¹

Before drawing to a close, I would like to present several findings and suggestions regarding the foundation of Qur’ānic Christology. It appears, on the basis of the preceding deliberations, that the author – perhaps even authors – of the Qur’ān had recourse to a wide variety of Christological doctrines espoused by numerous Jewish Christian and Christian groups, both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian, dwelling in or near the Hijaz. This has become apparent upon consideration of the surahs discussed in this chapter. Perhaps we may conclude that Qur’ānic Christology is inconsistent and, at times, even conflicting.¹⁴² This remark, if we indeed consider Qur’ānic Christology to be incongruous, most certainly spawns many new questions: Has Qur’ānic Christology changed over the course of the composition of the

¹³⁵ Griffith, “Al-Nasārā in the Qur’ān,” 316.

¹³⁶ Crone, “Jewish Christianity and the Qur’ān (Part II),” 282.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 284-285.

¹³⁸ Michael Goulder, “A Poor Man’s Christology,” *New Testament Studies* 45, no. 3 (1999): 342.

¹³⁹ Q. 5:73.

¹⁴⁰ “Philippians 2:11” in *The Holy Bible* (Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers Limited, 1991).

¹⁴¹ Goulder, “A Poor Man’s Christology,” 346.

¹⁴² See the discussion on surah 4:171

Qur'ān? Has the Qur'ān been the work of one man, harbouring an assortment of Christological ideas, or have there been several composers of the Qur'ānic verses, entertaining different thoughts on the Christological notions prevailing in the Hijaz in the sixth and seventh centuries? While I do not wish to draw any hasty conclusions concerning the Christological foundation of the Qur'ān, I do believe that it would be rash to disregard, as some authors have done and still do, the influence of Jewish Christian and heterodox Christian groups on the composition of the Qur'ān. I would uphold the theory, in concurrence with Crone, that the subtext of several of the Qur'ānic verses concerned with the nature of Jesus Christ does reveal a heterodox Christian or Jewish Christian tendency, be it docetic or ebionite.

Conclusion

In this study an attempt has been made to expound on the possible influence of the various Christological notions circulating in the Hijaz during the sixth and seventh centuries on the composition of the Qur'ān. Research conducted on such a topic suffers from the inevitable shortcomings that impose themselves on any inquiry concerned with events that transpired many centuries ago. Bias, conjecture and speculation, the paucity of sources and the nature of these sources are but a few of the hurdles encountered by those who set out to shed light on these issues. However, should these very real impediments, in addition to the delicate nature of these subjects, discourage research into these topics?

In the first chapter, we discussed the emergence of Arabia into the world of Late Antiquity and Muhammad's encounter with Judaeo-Christian beliefs. We determined that the diffusion of Judaeo-Christian beliefs in the Hijaz resulted from the encroachment of the Sassanian and Byzantine empires as well as through transboundary commerce. Further research has to determine which of the two has been more conducive to the dissemination of Judaeo-Christian beliefs in the Hijaz or if both have equally furthered the propagation of these ancient Abrahamic notions in the hinterlands of Arabia. The second chapter, we devoted to a survey of the then existent religious communities in the Hijaz in order to contest the idea of a deserted Arabia and to challenge the notion that only the Churches on the periphery of Arabia had impressed themselves on the Hijaz. In the third chapter, we discussed the Christology of the Jewish Christian and Christian groups known to be present in and on the periphery of the Hijaz, such as the Ebionites. But who is to say that the Jewish Christian and Christian groups we discussed were the only groups dwelling in the Arabian desert? Perhaps other religious groups, neglected or not mentioned by the sources, inhabited the Hijaz. Perhaps the Christology of the groups described in the preceding chapters differed significantly between the various regions of Arabia. The final chapter, undoubtedly the most contentious, concerns the possible Christological foundation of several Qur'ānic verses related to the nature of Christ. Remarkably, the handful of authors who have examined this topic – Crone being the notable exception – appear to reject out of hand the notion that the surahs with a noticeable Christological foundation ought to be discussed in light of the Jewish Christian and Christian sects that may have resided in the Hijaz. This is a fact that remains utterly baffling, since the similarities between the Jewish Christian tradition and the Qur'ān are striking. Why not engage in an interdisciplinary study to clarify the Qur'ānic verses concerned with the nature of Jesus Christ? Why not consult the wealth of early and modern Christian theological material on both the 'conventional' Christian groups and 'exotic' sects to obtain a comprehensive overview of the nature of these groups? To truly advance and gain understanding of the historical background of these elusive Qur'ānic verses, we must draw on material on both sides of the

spectrum. Only then will we be able to clarify the transposition of ideas between the Abrahamic traditions.

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