

# Islam and Orthodox Theology in Arabic: The »Melkite« Tradition from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries

At a now uncertain date, probably in the early thirteenth century, the »Melkite« bishop of Sidon, one Paul of Antioch, wrote a brief apology in Arabic to defend the truth and integrity of Orthodox Christianity<sup>1</sup>. A notable feature of the apology is that Paul wrote it in the form of a »Letter to a Muslim Friend«, an unnamed Muslim acquaintance in Sidon. And in the letter Paul quoted numerous passages from the Qurʾān, arguing that a right interpretation of them not only did not impugn Christian faith, as they were often interpreted to do, but could be seen actually to support it. Paul ingeniously put his arguments in the probably fictional guise of a report of his conversations with some learned Byzantines on a recent trip abroad, »into the homelands of the Romans, to Constantinople, the country of Amalfi, some Frankish provinces, and Rome,« as he put it. The learned Byzantines, he said, queried him about those passages from the Qurʾān, which they thought could be read not only to exempt Christians from the call to Islam, and relieve them of the charge of infidelity or unbelief, but which could be positively interpreted even to support Orthodox Christian faith. At the end of the letter, as he completed the report of his conversations, Paul wrote:

»This is what I learned from the people whom I saw and with whom I conversed, along with what they argued in favour of their position. If what they have related is sound, to God be the praise and the benefit, since He will have made quarrelling cease between His servants the Christians and the Muslims; may God guard them all. And if it is not sound, may my honourable brother and estimable friend explain it to me, and may God extend His protection and grant him longevity, so that I might notify them of that and see what they will have to say about it<sup>2</sup>«.

It did not take long after the publication of Paul's apologetic tract for Muslim scholars to explain wherein Paul's presentation of the learned Byzantines' reasoning was in their view in fact unsound. In due course, no less a Muslim figure than Taqī ad-Dīn Ibn Taymīya (1263-1328) wrote a refutation of an expanded edition of Paul's letter<sup>3</sup>. And from that point onward into the Mamlūk era, Muslim anti-Christian rhetoric

seems to have hardened, while Christian theology in Arabic by that time had reached the apogee of its development, and Paul of Antioch was standing on its pinnacle. For our purpose here is not to concentrate just on Paul's famous »Letter to a Muslim Friend«. Rather, the purpose is to look back from the vantage point of Paul of Antioch's career as a »Melkite« theologian, writing perhaps at the turn from the twelfth to the thirteenth century, to observe the development of Orthodox theology in Arabic to that point from its beginnings in the eighth century.

Paul of Antioch's contribution to Orthodox theology in Arabic extends well beyond just the famous »Letter to a Muslim Friend«. In fact, he composed important treatises on a number of the principal topics in traditional Arab Christian thought, including works in which from a philosophical perspective he defended Christianity from the charge of polytheism, gave an account of the reasons that have led both Gentiles and Jews to profess Christian faith, described the creedal differences between the several Christian communities living in the Islamic world of his day, and provided for a Muslim inquirer a brief statement on monotheism (*at-tawhīd*) and its compatibility with the Christian profession of the doctrine of the union (*al-ittihād*) of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. In addition to these works, which most scholars think are authentically his, a number of other texts are ascribed to him in the manuscript tradition, at least three of which, on philosophical themes, including an important one on free-will, are almost certainly also his in my opinion. And in all of these compositions certain features come to the fore that one might describe as typical of »Melkite« theological writing in Arabic from its beginnings in the eighth century. It is the purpose of this essay to highlight a number of these features in selected earlier texts written by »Melkites«, and to show how in the ensemble they describe the literary profile of the Arab Orthodox Christians living in the Oriental Patriarchates in pre-Ottoman times. But first we must say a word about the meaning of the terms »Melkite« and »Arab Orthodox« Christian.

1 Thomas, Paul of Antioch 78-82.

2 Paul d'Antioche 83.

3 The Letter from the People of Cyprus; Michel, Theologian's Response.

4 Griffith, Muslims and Church Councils; Griffith, Arab Christian.

Muslim writers in the early Islamic period customarily spoke of the several Christian communities living in their midst as the »Melkites«, the »Jacobites«, and the »Nestorians«. These are names that had their origins among the Christians themselves, and they were all normally first used by the confessional adversaries of the communities to which they were applied. The so far earliest use of the epithet »Melkite(s)« (*malakī*, pl. *malakīyūn/īn*) known to me as describing those who accepted the teachings of the Orthodox Church's ecumenical councils appears in a polemical text written in Arabic by the »Jacobite«, Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidma Abū Rā'īṭa (d. c. 851) against the theological views of his principal adversary, whom he calls the »Melkite«, Theodore Abū Qurra (c. 755-c. 830). Abū Rā'īṭa faults Abū Qurra for following the teachings of St Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662) and for accepting the doctrinal decisions of the sixth ecumenical council, Constantinople III (680/681), as well as the earlier Council of Chalcedon (451), councils that adversaries like Abū Rā'īṭa charged were called by mere »kings« or »emperors« (*mulūk*) and not by the appropriate religious authorities. This charge against the »Melkites« of constructing their creed in accordance with the decisions of councils called by Byzantine emperors was also taken up by Muslim polemicists, and in response Theodore Abū Qurra wrote a treatise in defense of the »Melkite« position already at the turn of the ninth century<sup>4</sup>. So following these leads one might say that the epithet »Melkite« properly so called was originally meant to apply to an Arabic-speaking Christian, living in the World of Islam, who professed the faith of the councils of Byzantine Orthodoxy, i. e., someone who in later parlance could be said to have accepted the Synodikon of Orthodoxy<sup>5</sup>. For this reason one might just as well refer to such a person as an Arab Orthodox Christian, especially since in modern times the name »Melkite« has come to be used more often than not to refer only to those Orthodox Christian communities in the Arabic-speaking world who after 1724 came into communion with the Roman Catholic Church<sup>6</sup>. But Paul of Antioch was very much a »Melkite« in the original sense of the term; he spoke and wrote in Arabic, he lived in the World of Islam, and he professed the faith of the »Synodikon of Orthodoxy«.

Paul of Antioch's Arabic writings, deeply informed as they are with Islamicate thought and expression as well as with Arabic philosophy and Orthodox Christian theology, provide an ideal perspective from which to look back in intellectual history to the ways in which »Melkite« Christians living in Byzantium's Oriental Patriarchates came to respond to the religious and civil hegemony of the Arab Muslims<sup>7</sup>. One glimpse at any one of Paul's texts is all it takes to perceive

his ready fluency in the Islamic Arabic idiom of his time and place, not to mention his familiarity with the Qur'ān. One might say that linguistically Paul's theological discourse displays an unmistakable Islamo-Christian character, typical of »Melkite« writing prior to the thirteenth century. For, already by early Umayyad times the heretofore Greek-speaking »Melkite« elites, albeit that they were liturgically bilingual in the Orient, had already adopted the Arabic language for both ecclesiastical and civil purposes. And practically speaking, from early in the ninth century until well into the eleventh century, unlike the »Jacobites« and »Nestorians«, the »Melkites« in the Oriental Patriarchates were effectively cut off by Islamic dominance from easy access to their ecclesiastical and conciliar center of gravity, Byzantium, and the Church of Constantinople in particular. The cosmopolitan monastic communities of Jerusalem, the Judean desert, and the Sinai, where Greek church books were already being translated into the local Christian Palestinian Aramaic, quickly became the intellectual center for a newly Arabic-speaking, Chalcedonian Orthodoxy, a prominence that would by the eleventh century have passed to Antioch when Constantinople once again for a season came to rule there. But by that time the Arab Orthodox Church had already come to be.

In the monastic communities of Jerusalem and environs the Greek-speaking, proto-»Melkites«, scholars such as Patriarch Sophronios of Jerusalem (c. 560-638), Anastasios of Sinai (d. c. 700), and St John of Damascus (c. 655-c. 750), had already by the middle of the eighth century given definitive expression in their works to the Orthodoxy that would be declared normative in the Synodikon of Orthodoxy. And it was there too that Arab Orthodoxy was born. It began already in the eighth century as a wide-ranging translation movement that produced Arabic versions of portions of the Bible from both Greek and Syriac, particularly the Gospels, the Epistles and the Psalms. In fact, the »Melkites« were the first Christians to translate the Bible into Arabic; they began to do so already in the eighth century<sup>8</sup>. They also made translations of lives of the saints, of works of the Orthodox Fathers and not least translations of important philosophical texts, such as Aristotle's »Prior Analytics« and the Philosopher's masterpiece, »On the Soul« or *De Anima*<sup>9</sup>. It was within the broad horizon of this ecclesiastical translation movement that »Melkite« writers began to compose original theological works in Arabic. The earliest theologian regularly to write in Arabic whose name we know was Theodore Abū Qurra, born in Edessa, monk of Jerusalem, and sometime bishop of Ḥarrān in Syria. His mother tongue seems to have been Syriac, but he was fluent in Greek and he wrote some major works in Arabic, in

5 On the emergence of a distinctively »Melkite« community, see Griffith, *Byzantium and the Christians*; Griffith, *Christological Controversies*; Griffith, *Church of Jerusalem*.

6 See Haddad, *Syrian Christians*; Haddad, *Conversion of Eastern Orthodox Christians*. See these matters also discussed, with further bibliographical references, in Griffith, *Church in the Shadow* 129-140.

7 On this broader topic, see Griffith, *Melkites and the Muslims*.

8 Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*.

9 Unfortunately, scholars have paid little attention to the abundant archive of these texts translated into Arabic in early Islamic times, a neglect that obscures the fuller picture of Arab Christian adaptation to life under Islamic hegemony. For a quick overview of this vast translation literature, see Graf, *Literatur*, especially vol. 1.

large part following in the path of St John of Damascus, but astutely also in response to developments in contemporary Islamic thinking<sup>10</sup>. But while his is the earliest name we know, Abū Qurra was not actually the earliest theologian to write originally in Arabic.

The earliest known »Melkite« theological text that bears within it some indication of the date of its composition is anonymous. It was written in Arabic by a »Melkite« Christian, who included in it an attestation to the date of its composition. The text is preserved in an old parchment manuscript from Sinai (Sinai Arabic MS 154), which also contains an Arabic version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles. The original editor and translator, Margaret Dunlop Gibson, called this work, »On the Triune Nature of God«<sup>11</sup>. At one point in the text the now unknown author, speaking of the stable endurance of Christianity against all odds, even up to his own day, wrote: »If this religion were not truly from God it would not have stood so unshakably for seven hundred and forty-six years«<sup>12</sup>. If we reckon the beginning of the Christian era from the beginning of the year of the Incarnation, according to the computation system of the Alexandrian world era, which Palestinian scribes were likely to use prior to the tenth century, we arrive at a date not too far removed from 755 CE for the composition of the treatise<sup>13</sup>.

The feature that immediately strikes the modern reader of the treatise »On the Triune Nature of God« is one that it shares with the treatises of Paul of Antioch and those of other »Melkite« writers, namely its Qur'ānic and overall Islamicate Arabic idiom. The whole treatise is suffused with echoes of the Qur'ān, and not just in quotations and allusions to verses here and there but even in its diction and style. It will repay us to take a more extended look at this feature of the work.

In the poetical introduction to the treatise, by allusion and choice of words and phrases the author already echoed the diction and style of the Qur'ān<sup>14</sup>. As Mark Swanson has rightly remarked, »The text simply is profoundly Qur'ānic«<sup>15</sup>. One can see it even in English translation, as in this brief passage from the opening prayer:

»We ask you, O God, by your mercy and your power,  
to put us among those who know your truth,  
follow your will, and avoid your wrath,  
[who] praise your beautiful names, (Q VII:180)  
and speak of your exalted similes. (cf. Q XXX:27)  
You are the compassionate One,  
the merciful, the most compassionate;  
You are seated on the throne, (Q VII:54)  
You are higher than creatures;  
You fill up all things<sup>16</sup>«

Shortly after this prayer, the author makes a statement that may well serve as an expression of his purpose in composing his work. Again, the attentive reader can hear the Qur'ānic overtones clearly. The author says,

»We praise you, O God, and we adore you and we glorify you in your creative Word and your holy, life-giving Spirit, one God, and one Lord, and one Creator. We do not separate God from his Word and his Spirit. God showed his power and his light in the Law and the Prophets, and the Psalms and the Gospel, that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God and one Lord. We will show this, God willing, in those revealed scriptures, to anyone who wants insight, understands things, recognizes the truth, and opens his breast to believe in God and his scriptures<sup>17</sup>«.

One notices straightaway the author's intention to make his case for Christian teaching from the scriptures; he names the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel, scriptures that are named as they are named in the Qur'ān. Moreover, in emphasizing God, his Word, and his Spirit, the author recalls the Qur'ān's own mention of these three names in the often quoted phrase, »The Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, his word that he imparted to Mary, and a spirit from him« (IV *an-Nisā'* 171). What is more, the author is willing to include explicit citations from the Qur'ān among the scripture passages he quotes in testimony to the credibility of the Christian doctrine. On the one hand, addressing the Arabic-speaking, Christian readers who were his primary audience, the author speaks of what »we find in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Gospel,« in support of the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. On the other hand, several times he rhetorically addresses Muslims; he speaks of what »you will find ... in the Qur'ān,« and he goes on to cite a passage or a pastiche of quotations from several *sūras*, in support of the doctrines, in behalf of the veracity of which he has been quoting or alluding to scriptural evidence from passages and narratives from the Old or New Testaments<sup>18</sup>. For example, at one point in the argument, in search of testimonies to a certain plurality in the being of the one God, the author turns to the scriptures for citations of passages in which God speaks in the first person plural. Having quoted a number of such passages, he goes on to say:

»You will find it also in the Qur'ān that ›We created man in misery (Q XC:4)‹, and ›We have opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down‹ (Q LIV:11), and have said, ›And now you come unto Us alone, as We created you at first. (VI:94) It also says, ›Believe in God, and in his Word; and also in the Holy Spirit‹. (cf. Q IV:171) The Holy Spirit is even the one who brings it down (i. e., the Qur'ān) as ›a mercy and a

10 Lamoreaux, Theodore Abū Qurra 439-448.

11 Gibson, *An Arabic Version*.

12 See this portion of the text, unaccountably left out by Gibson, published in Samir, *Arab Apology*.

13 See the discussion of the dating in Swanson, *Considerations for the Dating*.

14 Samir, *Arab Apology* 69f.; Swanson, *Beyond Prooftexting* 305-308.

15 Swanson, *Beyond Prooftexting* 308.

16 Adapted from the text and translation in Samir, *Arab Apology* 67f.

17 Gibson, *An Arabic Version* 3 (English), 75 (Arabic). Here the English translation has been adapted from Gibson's version.

18 Gibson, *An Arabic Version*, 5f. (English), 77f. (Arabic). See the passage quoted and discussed in Griffith, *Church in the Shadow* 55.

guidance from thy Lord» (Q XVI:64, 102). But why should I prove it from this (i. e., the Qurʾān) and bring enlightenment, when we find in the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel, and you find it in the Qurʾān, that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God and one Lord? You have said that you believe in God and his Word and the Holy Spirit, so do not reproach us, O men, that we believe in God and his Word and his Spirit: we worship God in his Word and his Spirit, one God and one Lord and one Creator. God has made it clear in all of the scriptures that this is the way it is in right guidance and true religion<sup>19</sup>.

Evidently in this passage the Christian author is addressing himself directly, at least in part, to readers of the Qurʾān as well as to the devotees of the Christian Bible. He speaks of what »we find in the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel«, and of what »you find [...] in the Qurʾān«. One also notices in this passage the prominence of the author's references to God, his Word, and his Spirit, and how they provide a continual evocation of *sūrat IV an-Nisāʾ* 171. Like almost every Arab Christian apologetic writer after him, the author of »On the Triune Nature of God« takes this verse as Qurʾānic testimony to the reality that the one God is in fact possessed of Word and Spirit and that they are He, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit, three persons, one God, as the Christians confess.

In a further passage, the author of On the Triune Nature of God takes advantage of another verse in the Qurʾān to explain how it came about that by the action of the Holy Spirit, God's Word, the Son of God, became incarnate and was clothed, even veiled (*iḥṭāʿaba*)<sup>20</sup>, in Mary's human nature. »Thus,« he says, »God was veiled (*iḥṭāʿaba*) in a man without sin«<sup>21</sup>. The »veiling« language here once again evokes a particular passage in the Qurʾān: »God speaks with man only by way of revelation, or from behind a veil (*hiḡāb*, or he sends a messenger and he reveals by his permission what he wishes.« (XLII *aṣ-Ṣūrā* 51) The author of our treatise likens Jesus' humanity to the veil, from behind which the Qurʾān says God might speak to man.

Subsequently a number of later »Melkite« authors similarly allude to or quote from this passage from the Qurʾān in their explanations of the doctrine of the incarnation, extending from the ninth century into the thirteenth century, including Paul of Antioch in his »Letter to a Muslim Friend«<sup>22</sup>. Curiously, one does not find »Jacobite« or so-called »Nestorian« writers in Arabic much interested in this verse, suggesting that reference to it became something of a tradition in »Melkite« apologetics. But all the early Arab Christian writers frequently

quoted from and alluded to the Qurʾān, sometimes inexactly, as if from memory, and they regularly echoed its words and phrases in their ordinary discourse<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, it seems to have been a »Melkite« specialty to build whole apologetic arguments on selected passages from the Qurʾān, taking advantage of their readers' familiarity with the Islamic scripture and using its words and phrases for the evidentiary potential and probative value they had even among the Arabic-speaking Christians, now fully at home in the World of Islam. But of course »Melkites« were also well aware of the problems they had with the Arabic Qurʾān. Their very familiarity with the Muslim scripture and with Islamic traditions about its collection and inimitability allowed them also to argue forcibly against its claim to be an acceptable divine revelation, albeit that they were ready to quote from it liberally for apologetic purposes. In this connection one thinks the most readily of the sharp but knowledgeable critique of Muslim claims for the Qurʾān in the anonymous Christian apologetic work now called the *al-Hāšimī/al-Kindī* »Correspondence«, a text that arguably just might have had »Melkite« origins<sup>24</sup>.

In addition to the thoroughly Arabic, even Qurʾānic cast of the language often found in »Melkite« theological texts, and their writers' readiness to quote passages from the Muslim scripture for apologetic or even polemical purposes, another important strain in »Melkite« writing in Arabic is its participation in the religious and philosophical discourse of the wider, Arabic-speaking, learned community of the early Islamic period, extending all the way to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Indeed Christian intellectuals, and not a few »Melkites« among them, who worked within the purview of Baghdad and environs in the era of the so-called Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Early Abbasid times<sup>25</sup>, made major contributions to the formation of this tradition. And Paul of Antioch like the other »Melkite« writers of note was very conscious of writing within this intellectual horizon. While he was certainly aware of the Byzantine heritage of his theological tradition, and could even summon the inspiration of St Gregory of Nazianzus (329/330-389/390) for his writing<sup>26</sup>, Paul was very much *au courant* with the currents of Muslim thought in his time. He most often referred to it in reference to those whom he normally called simply »the philosophers« (*al-falāsifa*), or »the practitioners of philosophy« (*al-muta-falsifīn*). And in these contexts Paul often mentioned that he was in his own thinking, at least for apologetic purposes, proceeding according to the strict dictates of reason (*al-ʿaql*), which he often characterized as »the soundest touchstone and measure« of the truth<sup>27</sup>. It was a premise dear to the

19 Translation adapted from Gibson, *An Arabic Version* 5 f. (English), 77 f. (Arabic).

20 Gibson, *An Arabic Version* 11 (English), 83 (Arabic).

21 Gibson, *An Arabic Version* 13 (English), 85 (Arabic).

22 See the passages cited in Swanson, *Beyond Proof-texting* 298-302. See also Griffith, *Answer for the Shaykh*, especially 288 and 292. See the Qurʾān passage quoted in the »Letter to a Muslim Friend« in Paul d'Antioche, 72 f. (Arabic), 179 (French).

23 Pietruschka, *Koranzitate in christlichen Apologien*. See also the brief study by Swanson, *A Frivolous God?*

24 For information on this text see Bottini, *Apology of al-Kindī*.

25 Gutas, *Greek Thought*.

26 In the preface to his »Abbreviated Rational Treatise«, Paul cited a line from one of St Gregory's acrostic poems. See Paul d'Antioche 2 (Arabic), 124 with n. 4 (French). One should note here that Arabic translations of texts attributed St Gregory of Nazianzus were made by »Melkites« as early as the tenth century, Graf, *Literatur* 1 330-332. See also Jacques Grand'Henry.

27 Paul d'Antioche 41 (Arabic), 154 (French).

hearts of the Baghdad philosophers of the tenth and eleventh centuries, including the Christians among them. But that was not all; Paul of Antioch was also heir to the uses the earlier Arab Christian apologists had made of certain aspects of the Islamic *kalām* tradition, which was itself a largely apologetic enterprise, intended to clarify and defend the basic reasonableness of Islamic faith. And by Paul's day, albeit that *kalām* reasoning was driven in many instances by the principles of theoretical Arabic grammar, it had also by the tenth century become suffused with originally Greek logical and philosophical principles. So Paul could readily envision a Muslim interlocutor appealing to the authority of »our philosophers and our *mutakallimūn*« in his challenge to the veracity of the doctrines defended by Christian apologists<sup>28</sup>.

»Melkite« writers from Theodore Abū Qurra to Paul of Antioch typically patterned the topical outline of their apologetic treatises on the model of contemporary Muslim *kalām* texts<sup>29</sup>, especially those concerned with the topics of *at-tawḥīd*, the proclamation of the one-ness of God. This structural pattern can still be seen in the sequence of topics in two of Paul of Antioch's works in particular, his so-called »Abbreviated Rational Treatise« and his »Explanation of the Case that Requires the Gentiles, along with the Jews, to Enter the Christian Religion«<sup>30</sup>. Christians of course had their doctrine of the Trinity to defend in this context, and it is in connection with this topic in particular that we find perhaps the most enduring legacy of the grammar-based thinking of the Muslim *mutakallimūn* in Christian theology in Arabic.

From the time of Theodore Abū Qurra onward, the »Melkite«, »Jacobite« and »Nestorian« theologians who wrote in Arabic almost all adopted the apologetic strategy of clarifying the Greek and Syriac vocabulary of their commonly held Nicene, Trinitarian, confessional formula in Arabic terms used by the Muslim *mutakallimūn* in their discussions of the divine attributes. While not all Christian writers adopted this approach<sup>31</sup>, it was a popular one among »Melkites« and many employed it. The immediate problem for the Christians was how to explain the significance of the Greek term »hypostasis«, as it was used in the Trinitarian formula, »one God in three hypostases«. Arabic-speaking Christian writers coined the Arabic term *uqnūm* (pl. *aqānīm*), actually a transcription of the Syriac term *qnūmā* (pl. *qnūmê*), as equivalent in meaning to the Greek term »hypostasis« in the Trinitarian formula. But it was a foreign word in Arabic, and its meaning was not evident. For this reason, Christian apologists writing in Arabic quickly looked for Arabic words or phrases they might use to define this technical term in their theology. Over the years from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, »Melkite« writers

and other Christians used a variety of Arabic terms as helps in the effort of translation, but none of them alone proved to be very satisfactory<sup>32</sup>. So most writers, Paul of Antioch included, in their efforts to communicate the significance of their speaking of the three »hypostases« of the one God turned for contextual help to the current conversations among the Muslim *mutakallimūn* about the implications of attributing to God the divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*) to be found in the Qur'ān, »the beautiful names of God« (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*). These conversations among the Muslims concerned the status in being of the referents of the attributes (*ṣifāt*) applied to God, the subject of whom the attributes were predicated<sup>33</sup>. For example, the attribute »knowing« (*'ilm*), when predicated of a subject, was taken according to the rules of theoretical Arabic grammar to bespeak an »act of knowing« (*'ilm*) present in the subject of which it is predicated. So to say that God is »knowing«, for example, is to say that God is in some way possessed of an »act of knowing«. Some Muslim thinkers found this implication of the divine attribute problematic because it seems to compromise the affirmation of God's utter one-ness (*at-tawḥīd*); it suggests that God's »act of knowing« somehow has an existence alongside God and thereby bespeaks a certain divine plurality. Confronting this problem, Muslim *mutakallimūn* explored various ways to deal with it, including the elaboration of a grammar-based, systematic theory of semantics in the matter of the divine attributes, as well as a technical vocabulary designed to express the several moments in the predication of a descriptive attribute of its subject and the semantic implications regarding the subject's state or states of being in view of the predication of the several attributes<sup>34</sup>. Christian apologists found this line of thinking hermeneutically useful as a contextual background for their explanations of the significance of their doctrine of the three hypostases in the one God.

Christian *mutakallimūn*, noting the Muslims' distinction between the divine attributes of essence (*ṣifāt aḍ-ḍāt* or *ṣifāt an-nafs*) and those of action (*ṣifāt al-fi'l*), argued that the essential divine attributes, seven in the traditional Muslim view, all presupposed for the possibility of their true predication, the previous predication of the divine entity of two essential or substantive attributes in particular. While other Christian writers sometimes used different terms<sup>35</sup>, Paul of Antioch, like most »Melkites«, spoke most often in this connection of God as the being (*aš-šay'*) of whom the sine qua non attributes »living« (*ḥayy*) and »rational« (*nāṭiq*) must be predicated, bespeaking »life« (*ḥayā*) and »rationality« (*an-nuṭq*) as actively present in the divine being, before one can meaningfully or truthfully predicate the other attributes of

28 Paul d'Antioche 39 (Arabic), 149 (French).

29 Some scholars have seen a debt on the part of the Muslim *mutakallimūn* to the proto-»Melkite«, St John of Damascus, in the matter of structuring the apologetic discourse on the existence and one-ness of the Creator God: Pines, *Traits of Christian Theological*.

30 Paul d'Antioche 1-33, 34-58 (Arabic); 123-146, 147-168 (French).

31 Griffith, *Christian Theology in Islamic Terms*.

32 Haddad, *La Trinité*, especially the chart on 183.

33 Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*.

34 Gimaret, *Les noms divins en Islam*; Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*.

35 See in this connection the chart in Haddad, *La Trinité* 232 f.

God. He then explains that in the Christian view, the being of God, His rationality and His life, bespeak the three substantive *aqānīm*, i. e., the three hypostases of the one God, that one might think of in Arabic as three subsistent individualities (*a'yān*), three particularities (*hawāṣṣ*), or even three energies (*quwan*), that the Christian thinks of as the three »substantive attributes« (*ṣifāt ḡawhariya*) or hypostases of the one God. By the time Paul of Antioch was writing his apologetic treatises, the Arabic term »attribute« (*ṣifa*) by itself had come in Trinitarian contexts to stand as a virtual synonym for *uqnūm*, i. e., hypostasis<sup>36</sup>.

It is important for the reader of Paul of Antioch's treatises and those of the other »Melkite« writers who used the *kalām's* attribute language in their apologies for the doctrine of the Trinity to understand that the exercise was meant to clarify the language of the traditional, confessional formula in Arabic. And while it was intended to convince Arabic-speakers of the credibility and rationality of the Christian doctrine, it was not meant to prove outright what Christians took to be the revealed article of faith, nor did the apologists intend completely to map the reasoning behind their creedal language onto the systematic, Islamic understandings of the divine attributes, albeit that in later Christian Arabic discourse, the Arabic term *ṣifa* did for all practical purposes come to be the standard equivalent among Christians for the Greek term »hypostasis«. The purpose was to purchase a measure of understanding in the Arabic-speaking milieu for a traditional Christian technical vocabulary by using language already in vogue in Arabic to address a comparable problem in God-talk.

In a similar vein, in the effort to show that it is not simply contradictory to say that something is both one and three at the same time, Arabic-speaking »Melkites« and other Christians also regularly included in their treatises on the Trinity, even in the most sophisticated of them, some mention of the traditional, patristic analogies with facts in created nature to make the point; a favorite was the example of the sun, its light, and its heat, a staple feature in the Syriac tradition with which most of them were familiar<sup>37</sup>. Needless to say, Muslims were not convinced by either the *kalām* arguments or the patristic analogies and they were voluble in their objections already in early Islamic times<sup>38</sup>, not to mention Ibn Taymīya's spirited rebuttal of Paul of Antioch's arguments as the bishop voiced them in his »Letter to a Muslim Friend«<sup>39</sup>. And it is interesting that in modern times, some Arabic-speaking theo-

logians in the Coptic Orthodox Church, where the *kalām* language had also become the standard idiom in Trinitarian theology, have pushed for its abandonment on the grounds that it is neither biblical nor traditional language in their church<sup>40</sup>.

While »Melkite« apologetic discourse in the Arabic-speaking, Islamic milieu came to be heavily patterned on the *kalām* model current among the Muslim *mutakallimūn* already in Abbasid times, and their religious idiom in general was from the beginning heavily indebted to the Qur'ān's vocabulary and style as we have seen, there was yet another, perhaps even more pervasive feature in »Melkite« intellectual life that defined the Arab Orthodox Church more effectively than these developments, important as they were. It was two-fold: the composition of historical accounts of the life of the Byzantine Orthodox Church and the place of the Arabic-speaking »Melkites« within it; and the on-going translation movement current from the ninth century until well into Paul of Antioch's time and long afterward.

From the beginning, the »Melkites« were attentive to the history of the Byzantine church councils in which the orthodoxy they professed was solemnly defined, most often in response to the heterodox teachings of the adversaries of the positions espoused by the councils. Theodore Abū Qurra, for example, spoke regularly of the »orthodoxy of the six councils«<sup>41</sup>, and he wrote a treatise in Arabic dedicated to defending their doctrinal authority, naming the adversaries and describing their views. An interesting aspect of the treatise is that it appears to have Muslim polemic against the »Melkites« as much in view as the objections of »Jacobites« or »Nestorians«<sup>42</sup>. This history of the development of doctrine, as one might call it, became a standard feature of »Melkite« creeds in Arabic composed at later times and it became an important element in the definition of »Melkite« identity in the Arabic-speaking milieu<sup>43</sup>.

The earliest »Melkite« historian properly so called to write in Arabic was Sa'īd ibn Batriq (877-940)<sup>44</sup>, who as the »Melkite« patriarch of Alexandria from 933 until his death in 940 was known as Eutychios of Alexandria<sup>45</sup>. Eutychios' »Annals«, as his major work has come to be called because of its annalistic style, seems originally to have borne the title »The String of Pearls«. In the earliest form in which it has come down to us<sup>46</sup>, Eutychios recounted Christian and Muslim history in a manner that highlights his apologetic purpose both to situate the »Melkites« historically and to defend the truth

36 See Paul's discussion in Paul d'Antioche 16-21 (Arabic), 136-139 (French); 36-40 (Arabic), 149-154 (French).

37 See in this connection Beck, Ephraems Trinitäts Lehre.

38 Thomas, Doctrine of the Trinity; Swanson, Ibn Taymiyya.

39 See the texts cited in n. 3 above. Even earlier than Ibn Taymiyya's refutation of the expanded edition of Paul's »Letter to a Muslim Friend«, another Muslim scholar had refuted the »Letter« point by point, see al-Qarāfi 21-73.

40 Swanson, Hypostase Attributes.

41 In due course the »Melkites« also included the seventh ecumenical council, Nicea II in 787, among the councils of Orthodoxy, but the practice of affirming the »six councils« lasted until modern times. In the »Melkite« collections of

canons in Arabic from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, only seven of the twenty-one MSS mention the seventh council, see Darblade, Collection canonique 154f.

42 Griffith, Muslims and Church Councils.

43 Griffith, Arab Christian.

44 The earlier, proto-»Melkite« historian, Theophilus of Edessa (695-785), wrote in Syriac; Agapios of Manbiḡ referred to him explicitly in his work. See Agapius, Kitāb al-'Unvan 8 (1912), 525; see the full reference in n. 48 below. See Theophilus of Edessa.

45 Simonsohn, Sa'īd ibn Batriq.

46 Eutychios von Alexandrien, Annalenwerk.

of their doctrine<sup>47</sup>. In later times, after Eutychios' nephew in Antioch, Yaḥyā ibn Sa'īd, continued the narrative to the year 1028, the »Annals« were considerably expanded to include much more information than it had in its earliest edition; it had earlier extended from the age of Adam until Islamic times, coming to a close in the year 938<sup>48</sup>. The continuation and updating of the text is a testimony to its continuing importance in reaffirming the »Melkite« ecclesiastical identity in the World of Islam<sup>49</sup>.

Eutychios, as important as his work was, was not the only »Melkite« historian in our period. Contemporary with him was his fellow »Melkite«, Agapios, or Maḥbūb ibn Qusṭanṭīn, the bishop of Manbiḡ, i.e., Syriac Mabbūg and Greek Hieropolis, in Syria<sup>50</sup>. Like Eutychios in Egypt, Agapios found it opportune to compose a world history in Arabic. The name of his book is *Kitāb al-'Unwān*<sup>51</sup>. Agapios explained that his purpose was to produce in Arabic the sort of book that was called a »Chronicon« in Greek. In the form in which it has reached modern readers, Agapius' history extends only as far as the caliphate of al-Mahdī (776). Both Agapios and Eutychios used *hiḡra* dates after their accounts of the rise of Islam. Their readers are then presumed to be more familiar with events associated with Muslim rule in their homelands than they would have been with the current religious and political history of Byzantium. So by contrast with the detailed account of events in Byzantium before the rise of Islam, and especially the theological movements, disputes, and ecumenical councils, the references to Byzantium and her affairs become more sparse in these chronicles as their accounts of events in the reigns of the caliphs unfolded. Even such a major religious controversy as was stirred up over the issue of iconoclasm in Byzantium received but scant attention from these two »Melkite« chroniclers, who lived under Muslim rule less than a century following the last of the iconoclast emperors<sup>52</sup>. This focus of their attention on affairs within the caliphate testifies to the strong, local sense of »Melkite« identity prior to the thirteenth century in the Oriental Patriarchates vis-à-vis their co-religionists in Constantinople. Paul of Antioch was very much at home in this world, albeit that, unlike some of his ancestors in the community, he was very much in contact with Constantinople; a new era was in the offing, but now the »Melkite« identity was secure.

From its beginnings in the monasteries of Palestine in the ninth century until its culmination in the patriarchate of Antioch in modern times, a vast translation movement was undertaken by »Melkites«, usually from Greek into Arabic.

Altogether it included Arabic versions of the Bible, translations of saints' lives, legal texts, liturgical texts, theological treatises, and philosophical tracts, to mention only books of interest to churchmen. The academic study of these materials is in its infancy<sup>53</sup>. But enough work has been done to make it clear that »Melkite« theology and Orthodox church life in the Arabic-speaking milieu was not limited to the apologetic treatises composed originally in Arabic that have received the most scholarly attention in recent years. As was the case with the intellectual and cultural life in contemporary Baghdad in Abbasid times, so too among the »Melkites« and the other Christian communities in the Arab world, the role of translation was a paramount factor in the community-building process. It is important to remember in this connection that other than the Qur'ān, the Arabic-speaking Jews, Christians, and even the Muslims, altogether had nothing much of a literary nature to inherit in Arabic to aid them in building their intellectual and religious culture in that language in early Islamic times. Translation of a necessity played a larger role in the process than was the case in other times and places.

Already in pre-Islamic times, proto-»Melkites« in the Jerusalem milieu had translated the scriptures used in the liturgy from Greek into Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and beginning already in the mid-eighth century these same scriptures, principally the Gospels, were being translated from both Syriac and Greek into Arabic<sup>54</sup>. Similarly, canonical texts necessary for the daily life of the church quickly found their way into Arabic translation by the ninth century<sup>55</sup>, as did the lives of the monastic saints of Palestine, composed originally in Greek in the sixth century by Cyril of Scythopolis, the champion of Chalcedonian orthodoxy in the monastic communities of Palestine<sup>56</sup>. The same may be said for theology; already in the ninth century works attributed to St Basil and St Gregory of Nazianzus became available in Arabic translation<sup>57</sup>. So by way of the translation into Arabic of the works of the traditional fathers of Byzantine Orthodoxy, not to mention the work of the proto-»Melkite«, St John of Damascus, even in times when sustained contact with Constantinople was impossible for the Oriental Patriarchates, »Melkite« life and thought in the World of Islam was never limited just to what Arabophone writers were able to compose originally in the language of the caliphate, most of which, like the Arabic works of Paul of Antioch, were primarily concerned with the community's interface with Islam.

As important as it was, translation was nevertheless seldom a straightforward affair. Even in this genre of Christian

47 Griffith, *Apologetics*.

48 The full text of the expanded edition was published by Cheikho (Eutychios, *Historia Universalis*). See the discussion in Breydy, *Études sur Sa'īd ibn Baṭriq*. One must make allowance for the extreme tendentiousness of this work, in spite of which it contains valuable information.

49 In this connection, see now the important study by Simonsohn, *The Biblical Narrative*.

50 Swanson, *Maḥbūb ibn Qusṭanṭīn al-Manbijī*.

51 See the Arabic edition Cheikho, *Agapius Episcopus*; and the Arabic edition with a French translation Agapius, *Kitāb al-'Unwan*.

52 For more on this matter, see Griffith, *Eutychios of Alexandria*.

53 See the survey in Graf, *Literatur*, vol. 1, which takes account of translations made into Arabic by members of all the Christian communities in the Arabic-speaking milieu, but an overwhelming number of them are done by »Melkites« in the area of ecclesiastical literature.

54 Griffith, *From Aramaic to Arabic*; Griffith, *Bible*.

55 Pahlitzsch, *Procheiros Nomos*.

56 Griffith, *The Signs and Wonders*.

57 Grēgorios Nazianzēnos.

Arabic literature, the ever-present horizon of life in the Islamic world exerted its influence. An interesting example may be seen in the »Life of Theodore of Edessa«<sup>58</sup>. The text was composed originally in Greek, probably in the monastery of Mar Saba sometime in the middle of the ninth century, where it was soon also translated into Arabic and somewhat later into Georgian. Outwardly the story is modeled on the well-known career of Theodore Abū Qurra (c. 755 - c. 830), but in its essence it is a martyrology, featuring accounts of the sufferings of those like Michael the Sabaïte who chose death over conversion to Islam<sup>59</sup>. Most dramatically in this vein, in the setting of Theodore's call to be the »Melkite« bishop in Baghdad, the text includes a recension of the legend of the conversion to Christianity of a Muslim caliph, al-Ma'mūn (813-833)<sup>60</sup>, under the tutelage of Theodore of Edessa, and the subsequent martyrdom of the caliph, who was quickly included in the list of the neo-martyrs venerated in the »Melkite« community<sup>61</sup>. A remarkable feature of the story as we find it in the two languages, Greek and Arabic, is that the Greek author (or was it a later Greek redactor?) seems almost to have envisioned readers with a Constantinopolitan frame of mind, while the Arabic redactor clearly envisioned readers living in the Islamic milieu as his audience; he tailored his presentation to their situation, altering, expanding and otherwise shaping the text to their situation. One finds this feature in other translations of Greek texts into Arabic, but here is not the place to pursue the story.

As we look back at the long trajectory of »Melkite« theology from the perspective of the works of Paul of Antioch that have come down to us, we find a certain maturity in the apologetic texts he wrote in Arabic, likely with both Christian and Muslim readers in mind. They are abbreviated texts, as he himself speaks of them; he seems to have thought that the intellectual tradition he represented was sufficiently well-known to his audience that it would be sufficient for him to

recall it only schematically. All the features of the customary »Melkite« religious discourse in Arabic are there: the Islamic cast to the language, the familiar structure and idiom of the *'ilm al-kalām*, along with traces of the Baghdādī Christian philosophical turn in apologetics, and hints of the influence of the Orthodox Church's translated Byzantine heritage. The Arabic-speaking Paul of Antioch seems still to have been looking to the centres of Arabic learning for inspiration, in his day they were still Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo. He lived in coastal Syria in Ayyubid times; even the Crusaders seem to have abandoned the area by his day. But a big change was on the horizon for the »Melkites« and other Christians living in the Oriental Patriarchates.

Under the Mamluks, who came to power after the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258, along with intermittent persecutions of Christians, especially in Egypt, in the first half of the fourteenth century, and the increasing pressure from the early thirteenth century onward of Muslim, anti-Christian polemic, some of it, as we have seen, in direct response to the work of Paul of Antioch, the stage was set for a change of intellectual *qibla* for the »Melkites«. They seem to have turned their antennae increasingly toward Constantinople and the West, with an upsurge in Antioch of Arabic translations of Greek theological literature and a willingness to accept directives for local reform from the Ecumenical Patriarch. Already in the twelfth century, Theodore Balsamon (d. c. 1195), sometime patriarch of Antioch resident in Constantinople, in his responsa to queries emanating from the Oriental Patriarchates had been encouraging reform on the part of the »Melkites«, with a view to accommodating themselves ever more faithfully to the usages of the patriarchate of Constantinople<sup>62</sup>. But through it all the »Melkites« continued to be the Arab Orthodox Church, a situation that endures to our own day, albeit with many difficulties and hardship deriving from both ecclesiastical and civil tensions. But that is a story for another day.

58 For further information and bibliography see Griffith, Theodora of Edessa.

59 Peeters, S. Michel le sabaïte; Blanchard, Saint Michel; Griffith, Michael, the Martyr and Monk.

60 Swanson, al-Ma'mūn Tradition.

61 Griffith, Christians, Muslims and Neo-Martyrs; Swanson, The Martyrdom of 'Abd al-Masih.

62 See Pahlitzsch, Greek – Syriac – Arabic 503-505.



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## Summary / Zusammenfassung

### Islam and Orthodox Theology in Arabic: The »Melkite« Tradition from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries

The »Melkite« or »Arab Orthodox« community of Christians who have been at home in the World of Islam since its origins were among the earliest to adopt the Arabic language for ecclesiastical purposes. Beginning already in the middle of the eighth century and extending as far as the early Ottoman period, »Melkite« scholars not only produced translations of the Bible and much other early Christian literature into Arabic, philosophers and theologians among them also composed original texts in Arabic. The present essay highlights and describes certain features that are typical of »Melkite« theological writing in Arabic from its inception in the now anonymous, eighth century text called by its modern editor, »On the Triune Nature of God«, up to the time of the bishop, Paul of Antioch in the thirteenth century, author of a well-known »Letter to a Muslim Friend« and numerous other works. Special features in »Melkite« theological texts include the use of Qur'ānic and Islamicate Arabic idiom, quotations from the Qur'ān, and the adoption of the topical outline of the contemporary Islamic *kalām* in their apologetic treatises.

### Islam und orthodoxe Theologie auf Arabisch: Die Tradition der »Melkiten« vom 9. bis 13. Jahrhundert

Die »melkitische« oder »arabisch-orthodoxe« Gemeinschaft der Christen, die seit ihren Anfängen in der islamischen Welt zu Hause waren, gehörte zu den ersten, die die arabische Sprache für den kirchlichen Bedarf übernahmen. Von der Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts an bis in die frühosmanische Zeit hinein übersetzten »melkitische« Gelehrte nicht nur die Bibel und eine Vielzahl anderer frühchristlicher Texte ins Arabische. Darüber hinaus verfassten melkitische Philosophen und Theologen auch arabische Texte. Der vorliegende Aufsatz beleuchtet und beschreibt bestimmte Merkmale, die typisch für das »melkitische« theologische Schreiben in arabischer Sprache sind, von der Entstehung des heute anonymen Textes des 8. Jahrhunderts, der von seinem modernen Herausgeber den Titel »Über die dreieinige Natur Gottes« erhalten hat, bis zur Zeit des Bischof Paulos von Antiochien im dreizehnten Jahrhundert, Autor des bekannten »Briefs an einen muslimischen Freund« und zahlreicher anderer Werke. Zu den besonderen Merkmalen in den »melkitischen« theologischen Texten gehören die Verwendung der eigentümlichen arabischen Sprache des Korans bzw. des Islam, Zitate aus dem Koran und die Übernahme der topischen Darstellung des zeitgenössischen islamischen *kalām* in ihren apologetischen Abhandlungen.