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

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

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

2) E.g. Ibn Hazm (383-456/994-1064), one of the earliest and perhaps the best known of such Muslim biblical “exegeters”. For a recent survey of these discussions, see M. ACCAD, «The gospels in the Muslim discourse of the ninth to the fourteenth centuries. An exegetical inventory table» (parts 1-4), in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations 14/1-4 (2003), pages vary by issue.
the Qurʾān, similar efforts on the part of Christians (and Jews) living within the Islamic world have not been as widely studied (at least in western scholarship). As Christians and Jews living within the Islamic world appear to have been forbidden from examining the Qurʾān at an early period, the sparse references to similar cross-confessional examination of the Qurʾān is perhaps not surprising. But the lacunae in the documentation of such efforts do not mean that they were non-existent.

1. QURʾĀNIC “CORRUPTION” (TAHΡĪF AL-QURʾĀN)

Early Arab Christian use of and familiarity with the qurʾānic text has been demonstrated – particularly by Khalil, and a convincing argument has


4) One factor in the paucity of western research on this aspect of the history of the relations among the Abrahamic religions is the tendency of scholars of Islam (the majority of Arabists) to focus on Muslim authors, and the unfamiliarity of most scholars of Christianity with Arabic – or many languages of the Christian east. For an example of eastern Christian scholarship on the subject, see P. Khoury, al-Tauhīb al-musalīyy il-Qurʾān min al-qarn al-thānī min badd al-qarn al-thānī ’ashar, Juchit, 2002. My thanks to Ibrahim Hanna for bringing this work to my attention.


6) Cf. S. KHALIL, “The earliest Arabic apology for Christianity (c. 750),” in id. and J.S. NIELSEN (eds.), Christian Arabic apologetics..., pp. 57-114; M. SWANSON, “Beyond prooftexting. Approaches to the Qurʾān in some early Arabic Christian apologists”, in The Muslim world 88 (1998), 297-319. Although Christians came to write in Arabic at least by the first half of the 8th century (i.e. 200/800), our knowledge of the extent of their familiarity with the qurʾānic text – as well as the “canonical” form of that text – is still rather shadowy. Following Khalil, the “father” of Christian Arab studies, a number of scholars have brought attention to the familiarity of Christians who wrote in Arabic with the text of the Qurʾān. See, among others, S.H. GRIFFITH, “The Qurʾān in Arab Christian texts. The development of an apologetical argument. Abū Qurrārah in the maghīs of al-Maʾmūn”, in PhO 24 (1999), pp. 299-335, as well as that of E. Plioti on al-Kindī (see below, n. 18); D. THOMAS and R. EBIED (eds.), Muslim-Christian polemic during the Crusades. The letter from the people of Cyprus and Ibn ʿAbī Ṭālib al-Dinkaṭī’s response, Leiden, 2005. In Syria, J. Amar has worked on the writings of Dionysius Bar Salībī, and R. Ebiid is bringing to light the works of Bar Hebraeus, while A. Mingana already in the early 20th century published the dialogue of the Nestorian Catholicos
been made for a direct Christian influence on theological trends in Islam in the first 'Abbāsid century (i.e. 132-235/750-850). Presuming such an environment of inter-confessional interaction, the following will explore an unusual charge of scriptural corruption (tahrīf) leveled at the Qur'ān that is attributed to a Rūm Orthodox bishop of Harrān in the early 'Abbāsid period. Due to the allusive nature of the Christian text, the charge only makes sense when read in the light of classical Islamic works of Qur'ān exegesis (tafsīr). But, conversely, the Christian text may help us obtain an insight on the approaches to the canonical text of the Qur'ān that existed in the formative period of classical Islamic civilization.

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

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

8) Although «[i]t is as yet no completely satisfactory general history of the growth and development of the Islamic 'ilm al-kalām...» (cf. S. Griffith, Faith and reason, 1 n. 1), [q]'he has every reason to believe that the Islamic 'ilm al-kalām originally grew out of the early participation of Muslims in the styles of scholarly discussion Christian academicians and intellectuals employed in the Greco-Syrian milieu of the Christian centres of learning in the oriental patriarchates [ibid., p. 2] cf. also the following, cited by Griffith, J. Van Es, «Disputationspraxis in der islamischen Theologie, eine vorläufige Skizze», in Revue des ètudes islamiques 44 (1976), pp. 23-60; M. Cook, «The origins of Kalām», in BSOAS 43 (1980), pp. 32-43.

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

9) John Burton (The collection of the Qur'ān, Cambridge 1977) and, more recently, The sources of Islamic law. Islamic theories of abrogation, Edinburgh 1990) proffers an interesting suggestion that places the codification of the Qur'ānic text even earlier than the Muslim account: within the lifetime of Muhammad. According to Burton's thesis, the traditional Mus-
even epigraphic traces and recent finds of early Qurʾānic manuscripts – such as those in the mosque of Sanʿāʾ – do not yield significant textual variants on the so-called `Uthmānic codex in use today). The more radical examples of modern revisionist scholarship, however, question the place and date of this process – and some even express skepticism as to the original “Arabic” nature of the Qurʾān.

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

lim placement of the codification of the qurʾānic text after the death of Muhammad allowed for legal exegetical “wiggle room”.


11) e.g. G. LÜLING, *Über den Ur-Qurʾān. Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophentexte in der Qurʾān*, Erlangen, 1974 (1993), in which the words of the qurʾānic text are sometimes altered to better fit the author’s thesis that underlying the Qurʾān is a Christian hymnic composition; Eng. trans. *A challenge to Islam for reformation*, Delhi, 2003; C. LUXENBURG, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Koransprache*, Berlin, 2000; here, the argument is sometimes professed that certain of the “difficult” (Arabic) qurʾānic terms are better understood (and, at times, rewritten), as Syriac lexemes. For a recent overview of these theses, see e.g. C. GILLOT, *Un non-musulman cultivé et un chercheur occidental face au Coran*, on [http://www.up.univ-lyon1.fr/oriental/abrhis/pages/publications/articles/autogillot.htm](http://www.up.univ-lyon1.fr/oriental/abrhis/pages/publications/articles/autogillot.htm).

12) e.g. Q 2:42, 39, 75-9; 3:71, 78; 4:46; 5:13, 44; 6:91; 7:162.

Khārijis or Mu'tazila.  

While this charge is similar to the Shi'i claim that the Sunnis suppressed certain passages — particularly those that mentioned 'Ali or the imāms — or slightly altered the reading of certain words in the received text of the Qurān (e.g. replacing a'immā, leaders, with umma, community), it must be noted that (at least since the 4th/10th century) the Imāmī Shi'i claim only that passages have been omitted. They do NOT claim that the accepted canonical/codified text of the Qurān contains any passages that should not be there. And, although some scholarly attention has been devoted to the Shi'i claims of Sunni distortion of the original Qurān, to date little attention has been paid to other Muslim or early Christian Arab discussions about the "established" qur'ānic text. Although the tone of early Christian discussions of

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14) Khārijis would say that the twelfth sūra, Yusuf, is not part of the Qurān as it is a love story — similar to the rejection of the Song of Songs on the part of certain Jewish and Christian groups (my thanks to Prof. Neuwirth for drawing my attention to the former point, and to Prof. I. Shahid, for this last point). See below for discussion of Mu'tazila claims that the received text of the Qurān has been tampered with.

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

16) My thanks to David Thomas for prompting the clarification of this comparison with Shi'i charges of scriptural corruption. See M.M. BAR-ASHER, "Shī'ism and the Qurān", in J.D. MCAULIFFE, Encyclopaedia of the Qurān, Leiden, 2004, IV, pp. 593-604, for further discussion of Shi'i claims that the Uthmanic codex in the possession of the Sunnis, while incomplete, does not contain falsifications. See also E. KOHLBERG, "Some notes on the Imāmīte attitude to the Qurān", in S.M. STERN, A. HOURANI, and V. BROWN (eds.), Islamic philosophy and the classical tradition. Essays presented to Richard Walzer, Oxford, 1972, pp. 209-25; H. MODARRESI, "Early debates on the integrity of the Qurān. A brief survey", in Studia Islamica 77 (1993), pp. 5-39.

17) Although arguably more work could be done on Shi'i claims of qur'ānic corruption prior to the fourth/tenth century. See BAR-ASHER, "Shī'ism and the Qurān", for a current bibliography of such scholarship.

18) For some Muslim concerns, see e.g. I. GOLDBLATT, Introduction to Islamic theology and law, trans. A. and R. HAMORI, Princeton, 1981; cf. also E. FRANCESCA, "Khārijis", in J.D. MCAULIFFE (ed.), Encyclopaedia of the Qurān, Leiden, 2003, III, pp. 84-90; S. SCHMIDT-TKE, "Mu'tazila", in J.D. MCAULIFFE (ed.), Encyclopaedia of the Qurān, Leiden, 2003, III, pp. 466-71. The relevant passages found in the early third/ninth (?) century correspondence between [the Nestorian] 'Abd al-Mašīh b. Ishaq al-Kindī and the Muslim 'Abdallāh b. Isma'īl al-Hashimī, is perhaps the earliest of such Christian discussions. (Although the text is presented as a correspondence between a Christian and a Muslim in the court of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn, it is apparent from the detail of the Christian side that both parts are a Christian composition; cf. GAUDEUL, Encounters, I, pp. 53-7, for a brief discussion of this text; cf. also the forthcoming work of E. Platt on al-Kindī.) S.H. GRIFFITH ("The prophet Muhammad. His scripture and his message according to the Christian apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the 1st Abbasid century", in La vie du prophète Mahomet. Colloque de Strasbourg [Octobre 1980], Paris, 1983, pp. 99-146) alludes to al-Kindī's discussion as one of the earliest attestations to the process of the codification of the Qurān — although he cautions against using it
the Qurʾān is often hostile, some texts from the Rum Orthodox community (the first Christians to write in Arabic) adopt a conciliatory tone. For example, at least two early texts from this community allude to the Qurʾān as “among the books of God” (min kutub Allāh) and use the Qurʾān as frequently as they do the Bible to prove the truth of Christian doctrines.

2. ABŪ QURRA’S CHARGE OF TAHİR AL-QURʾĀN

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


19) In the words of Khalil (The earliest Arab apology for Christianity, pp. 110-11): «...according to the documents in our possession, the Arabic Christian theology probably originated in Palestine in Melkite circles... I will assign to this same period the numerous apologies of Theodore Abū Quarra, and the apologetic section of the anonymous *Summa theologica entitled fāsim wa ṣuyūḥ al-ʾimām*.


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

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

23) E.g. the divinity/humanity of Christ; his conception and crucifixion; the unity/trinity nature of God. While the structure (and some themes) of such argumentation follows that of Syriac Christian arguments against Judaism [see esp. J. Neusner, *Apharadat and Judaism. The Christian-Jewish argument in fourth-century Iran*, Leiden, 1971], the Christian Arabic apologies also address those Qurʾānic verses that touch on Christological and
debate, Abū Quorra addresses the charge that the Bible has been corrupted with an enigmatic accusation that touches upon qur'ānic passages that are unlikely participants in Christian-Muslim debates:

“If you knew the certain truth, you would know that your scripture is the one that is corrupted (distorted; huwa alladhī ḥurrīfā).”

The Iraqi said, “How is that, O Abū Quorra?”

“You will certainly know it, if God, exalted be he, so wills. Tell me, O Muslim, whether you [O Muslim] speak a lie against your lord in that he says, ‘We have given you abundance [1],’ so pray to your lord and slaughter [a sacrifice] [2]. The one who hates you is the one without offspring. [3]” (Q 108:1-3) Tell me, O Muslim, who is this enemy, the one without offspring (al-‘abtār)? Also, where it says, ‘Perish the hands of Abū Lahab, perish’ [4]. Neither what he has nor what he has acquired enriches him.

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

Abū Quorra said, “You [corrupt/distort] your own scripture, O Muslim, glory be to God almighty. How worthless is your opinion, how insignificant your thinking, how blind your heart, and how weak your argument, for you demean your own scripture. You give the lie to the sayings of your own prophet when he says, ‘You will find the People of the Gospel making judgments by what was sent down to them from their lord. Among them are priests and monks and they do not act arrogantly. They are closest in affection to those who believe’ (cf. Q 5:47, 62). Your scripture calls us believers, but you name us infidels (kāfirūn), polytheists (muṣrikūn), ‘corrupters’ (distorters: muḥarrīn). You mean to blame us falsely and you hope thereby to be saved from blame.’ Note Abū Quorra’s selective reading (if not willful misreading) of certain passages when he invokes the Qur’ān in support of Christianity. For qur’ānic verses that express a different opinion of Christians and Christianity than that which Abū Quorra wishes to emphasize, cf. e.g. Q 3:17-18, 72-3. For discussion of Christians as the qur’ānic muṣrikūn see G. R. HAWTING, The idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam, From polemic to history, Cambridge, 1999.

24) Shâ’rūkha; in the Uthmānī codex, this word is read “shāʾnūkha”; but cf. e.g. the variant readings listed in A. ‘UMAR and ‘A. al-‘Ā. S. MUKRAM, Muṣam al-qrīʿāt al-qur’ānīyya, 8 vols., Kuwait, 1992, VIII, 253.

25) Ṭabbaṭ yadā Abī Lahab wā-ṭabbaṭ, rather than the ṭabbaṭ yadā Abī Lahab wa-Ṭabbaṭ of the Uthmānī codex. Although no similar canonical variants are recorded, the “perishing” of Abī Lahab indicated by the third masculine singular perfect ṭabbaṭ in the Uthmānī codex was problematic for later [theologically-tinged] exegetical discussions on this verse. For an overview of the exegetical problems with the “Uthmānī ṭabbaṭ,” see U. RUBIN, “Abī Lahab and Sura CXL,” in A. RIPPIN (ed.), The Qur’an. Style and contents, Ashgate, 2001, pp. 269-86, esp. 274-8 (cf. also the ṭabbaṭ of Muqāṭū b. Sulaymān [d. 150/767], al-Thālabi [d. 472/1083], al-Rāzī [d. 606/1210] and al-Qurṭubī [d. 671/1272], ad loc.).

26) In the Uthmānī codex, this verse reads: mā ẓaghūn aḥū ṭabbaṭ wa-mā ṭabbaṭ (“neither his wealth [ṭabbaṭ] nor what he has acquired enriches him”). In Dick’s edition of Tāhkid, this passage is rendered: mā ẓaghūn aḥū ṭabbaṭ wa-mā ṭabbaṭ wa-mā ṭabbaṭ. The insertion of an additional waw after the verbal phrase encourages the reading of [wa]-mā ṭabbaṭ, “[neither] what he has” – instead of mā ṭabbaṭ, “his wealth”. No such variants are recorded.
[2]...[3] His wife [is] a carrier of firewood. [4] A rope of palm fiber will be upon her foot\(^{28}\). [5] (Q.111:1-5) This is something bearing no resemblance to inspiration and revelation. It is not true that your messenger said any of this\(^{29}\).

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

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

3. ISLAMIC EXEGESIS OF Q 108 AND 111

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

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27) Abū Qurra omits the third verse of the ‘Uthmānic version of this sūra: “He will enter a fire of burning flame” (sayyādā nāran ‘lḥāta lḥabīn). As this verse is understood to foretell Abu Lahab’s eschatological punishment, and as it became one of the crux interreta, pointing to the “miraculous” predictive value of this sūra, its omission is noteworthy. See below for further discussion of the arguments for the miraculous nature of this chapter.

28) Instead of “her foot” (rizhilāh), the ‘Uthmānic codex reads “her neck” (jīdilāh).

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

30) See notes 24-28 above. My thanks to Professor Angelika Neuwirth for encouraging the comparison with the known variant readings of the Qur’ān. As the variations noted in Dick’s edition of Abū Qurra’s text do not conform to any of the known variant readings and serve no obvious theological agenda, it seems most likely that his citation errors have no intended polemical purpose, but are rather merely the result of the vagaries of human memory. Another detail worthy of note is that throughout the debate, sūra is spelled with a sād and not a sīn, a peculiarity also reflected in some early works on the Qur’ān emerging from Spain (cf. BURMAN, Religious polemic, pp. 87-8).
ingly, Abū Qurra is more concerned with the identity of al-ābatār than with a definition of al-kawthar. The next passage that Abū Qurra quotes, Q 111, is traditionally understood as a curse on one of Muḥammad’s uncles who did not heed his prophecy.31

While both of these passages came to be used by Muslim exegetes to "prove" the miraculous or inimitable nature of the Qurʿān, “heterodox” strains in the Islamic tradition also reflect doubts as to the inimitable merits of these two chapters: Within a century after the death of Abū Qurra, Ibn al-Rawandi (d. ca. 298/910-11), records a tradition that claims that there is “better than” Q 108:1.32 Although possibly a “freethinker” (zindiq)33 at his death, early in his life this elusive figure was a proponent of the Muʿtazila, the so-called “rationalist” Muslim theological trend that by the fourth/tenth century was considered heterodox. Other such “rationalist” Muʿtazillis rejected “those parts of the Qurʿān in which the prophet utters curses against his enemies”34 as being part of the holy book revealed by God. According to them, God could not have called passages such as Q 111 “a noble Qurʿān on a well-guarded tablet” (Q 85:21-2).35

31) For a recent discussion of scholarship on this sūra, see Rubín, “Abū Lahab”.
32) Sūrat al-Kawthar is frequently put forth as proof that people cannot produce anything comparable to even the shortest sūra [cf. C. Gilliot, “Le Coran. Fruit d’un travail collectif?”, in D. Desmet, G. de Callatay and J. Van Reeth (eds.), Al-kibāb. La sacréité du texte dans le monde de l’Islam. Actes du Symposium International tenu à Louvain-la-Neuve du 29 mai au 1 juin 2002, Brussels, 2003, pp. 185-231, esp. pp. 220-2]. For example, al-Qarabī (d. 671/1272) praises the predictive value, knowledge of the unseen and style of these 3 verses. He also comments Q 111 for its ‘miraculous’ predictive value, i.e. of Abū Lahab’s unbelief and ultimate fate [Thabr, ad loc.; cf. also al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035), Thabr, ad loc.].
33) Cf. Van Ess, TG, vi, 472-3. For a brief discussion (and a recent ‘revisionist’ reading) of this “troublesome” chapter, see Gilliot, Non-musulman, p. 5, sect. 6: “La lecture syro-araméenne du Coran”.
37) Referencing al-Raẓī’s [d. 606/1210] taṣāfī, U. Rubín (Abū Lahab), p. 274 n. 36) argues that Q 111:1 seems to be the main reason for the Muʿtazila’s rejection of our sūra because it excludes from the outset any possibility of repentance on the part of Abū Lahab… This point has not yet been explained by Western scholars [Fischer, Barth, Goldziher, all of
The conflicting traditions relating to these chapters indicate a history of tumultuous and varied interpretation. But Islamic tradition is not forthcoming as to the reasons for or nuances of the varied interpretations. Might a Christian Arabic text – such as Abū Quarra's debate – that presumably was not subject to the dictates of what came to be Islamic orthodoxy, enable us to gain insight to the history of this interpretative tradition?  

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

1. The question, *man ḥawā hādhā l-‘adurwi al-abtar?* (“Who is this enemy, the one cut off/without offspring?”)  
2. His conjunction of Q 108 and 111 as proof of Qur'anic corruption. 

Abū Quorra's question “Who is this enemy, the abtar?” indicates that al-abtar, rather than al-kawthar, may have been a crux interpretum for Q 108:3. While exegesis on Q 108 devotes much space to definitions of al-kawthar, it is fairly unanimous in its identification of al-abtar: ‘Aṣṣ b. Wathir, a Quraishi vehemently opposed to Muhammad. But, a lone tradition in al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1210) tafsir brings us to the second point – the conjunction of Q 108 and 111 as proof of Qur'anic corruption. 

For al-Rāzī, an encyclopedic and highly logical exegete who has preserved much Mu'tazila material in his arguments, records a minority understanding of al-abtar as Abū Lahab, the individual explicitly cursed in Q 111. Abū Quorra’s debate, which takes place in the court of the well-known proponents cited by Rubin, who dealt with the Mu'tazili attitude towards our suras. In this context, it is interesting to note that al-Qurtubi (d. 671/1272) addresses the question of whether the passage could have been in the *ummat al-kitab* – but with a twist: he reports an objection that the *ummat al-kitab* could not contain reference to something not yet created, and responds that there is another example: God wrote the Torah before he created Adam – but Adam is still mentioned in the Torah (cf. Qurtubi, Taṣrīḥ; ad loc.).

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

39) Although our suras do not appear, compare the similar charges in al-Kindī’s “Apology”, as discussed in Griffith, *The prophet Muhammad.* 

40) See Schmidtke, “Mu'tazila”, pp. 469-71, for other such exegetes who have preserved Mu'tazili material.
ponent of the Mu'tazilīs, the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Ma'mūn, may help establish the background for al-Rāzī's minority understanding of al-abtar in Q 108:3 as Abū Lahab, and also the conflicting interpretive tradition on Q 108 and 111.

4. POLITICS AND EXEGESIS?

For, although they trace their roots to the late Umayyad period (Wāsīl b. 'Aţā', d. 131/728-9), the "glory-days" of the Mu'tazila were in the first 'Abbāsid century, in Baghdad. Like their predecessors, the Umayyads, the 'Abbāsid caliphate claimed their legitimacy to rule the Muslim community in part because of their familial ties to Muḥammad (both dynasties claimed to be of the "people of the house" from the tribe of Quraysh). But, in contrast to the Umayyads, the 'Abbāsids narrowed the definition of "people of the house" to the clan of Hāshim, the descendants of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the paternal grandfather of Muḥammad. This limiting of the "people of the house" could include the descendants of Fāţima and 'Alī, but exclude the Umayyad lineage.

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

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

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42) See SHARON, Umayyads, p. 150, for a family tree detailing the main branches of the Quraysh and the differences between 'Abbāsid and Umayyad understandings of ahl al-bayt.
ruption indicates one aspect of this reaction: Q 111 (and, seemingly, other Qur’anic passages that could be interpreted as denigrating the Hashimi relatives of the prophet) were not part of the original revelation to Muḥammad.

For if Q 108 and 111 were at some point understood to refer to the same person – an uncle of Muhammad who rejected Muhammad’s prophecy – this Qur’anic condemnation of a Hashimi may have been used by Umayyads to show that (Hashimi) kinship to the Prophet was not sufficient guarantee of piety/virtue, and thus ‛Ali and his descendants could not claim the right to rule the Muslim community on that basis. Similarly, detractors of the ‛Abbāsids could also use the verse(s) to show that ‛Abbāsid – i.e. Hashimi – kinship to the Prophet was not a guarantor of virtue (nor, therefore, of ‘good’ or ‘virtuous’ leadership).

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

43) Cf. AL-TĀHIZ, al-Rayān wa-taḥbīn, Cairo, 1975, 4 vols. in 2, II, p. 326: ‘Muʿāwiya said one day, ‘O people of Shām, have you heard the saying of God – blessed and exalted – in his book {tābbat yadd Abī Lahāb wa-taḥbū}?’ They said ‘Yes’. He said ‘Verily Abū Lahab was his uncle’. And he said... ‘Have you heard the saying of God great and mighty {wa-nunratina ḥammātiyya l-ḥataba}?’ They said ‘Yes’. He said ‘Verily she was his aunt’...’.

44) My thanks to Professor Shahid for first drawing this point to my attention, by his suggestion that the curse on Abū Lahab, in contradistinction to Abū Qurra’s claim, actually supports arguments for an early dating of the passage – but to an Umayyad, rather than Ṭūmānī provenance. An oblique argument against Q 111’s being understood as an Umayyad invention is the curse on Abū Lahab’s wife. She was herself another Qurashi – but the sister of Abū Sulaym, the father of Muʿāwiya (the first ‘Umayyad’). But, due to the predominance of tracing kinship through male lineage [Shāhis are a notable exception, as they insist on the descent from Muhammad through his daughter Fāṭima] even in the light of their own alī al-bayt claims, this aspect of Q 111 would likely not have posed problems for the Umayyads. That the passage did not trouble the Umayyads is supported by its emergence as a ‘problematic’ chapter only in ‛Abbāsid times; to my knowledge, Abū Qurra’s allusion is the earliest such indication of any doubt as to the legitimacy of its placement in the Qur’ānic codex.
more firmly entrenched, these imperfect and/or contingent verses had to be understood as perfect and uncreated; hence, the origin of the arguments for the faḍīla, i.e. exceeding virtues, of these “difficult” chapters.

5. CONCLUSION

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

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

45) Although the exegetical works of the following mutassirūn were consulted, but did not yield this understanding of al-abtar: Muqāṭil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767); al-Tabar (d. 310/923); al-Tha‘lab (d. 427/1035); al-Zamakhshar (d. 538/1144); al-Qurban (d. 671/1272), the degree of connection between Q 108 and 111 is in need of further study – at a
read in the light of the political situation of the early third/ninth century, the
time period from which we have the first indications of doubt as to the suit-
ability of these chapters for a divine revelation, a political, rather than solely
theological, background to the debate emerges.

Although discussion on the actual contents of the Qur‘an appears to
have been, from the beginning, a primarily Muslim concern possibly
grounded in politics, the writings of Christians from the early ‘Abbāsid pe-
riod reflect knowledge of this discussion, and employ elements thereof that
suit their own polemical or apologetic purposes. There is therefore hope that
examination of the works of the first Christians to write in Arabic might con-
tinue to inform our understanding of the early Muslim approaches to the
Qur‘an. And, even taking into account the (intentional or accidental) misrep-
sentations of their opponents’ views, as the Christian writings were not
subject to the strictures of what came to be the accepted position of Muslim
“orthodoxy,” such works may very well preserve a record of Islamic “het-
erodoxy” that is more varied than that found in even the most comprehensive
of the encyclopedic tafsīr.

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textual, as well as conceptual level. For, while al-Rāzī lists this as only one of several under-
standings, and a minority one at that (Rāzī, Taṣrīḥ, ad Q. 108:3; fifth variant), Professor Sha-
hid has suggested to me that suras 108 and 111 may have originally been one sura if al-Rāzī’s
comment about al-abtār being Abū Lahab is correct. The change in the rhyme scheme is par-
alleled in Q. 93 (Ṣūrat al-Duḥā). See the argument in I. SHAHID, «Two Qur’ānic suras. Al-Fil
and Quraysh», in W. Al-Qūšī (ed.), Studia Arabica et Islamica. Festschrift for Ihsān ‘Abbās,
Beirut, 1981, pp. 429-36, for a similar conjoining of two other disparate suras (Q. 105 and
106).
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