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“I Trust the Gospel and All Its Contents”: *The Disputation of Jirji the Monk* and Medieval Islamic Knowledge of the Bible

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In 1217, a Melchite monk from a monastery to the southwest of Antioch engaged three scholars and holy men of Islam in a religious debate in the presence of the emir al-Zafir, son of the famous Saladin. The monk, known as “Jirji,” anglicized in some texts as “Georgi,” hoped to prove that Christianity was the better religion: he discusses Christ’s salvific nature, which proves His divinity. In comparison, he claimed Mohammad’s character is less reputable, which leads Christianity to reject Mohammad as a prophet; in addition, Jirji asserted that the Qur’an actually proves the truth of Christianity, particularly in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity. The debate is an interesting example of interaction between these two religious groups at a time when Crusades from the West were typically bringing Muslims and both Eastern and Western Christians into much more hostile exchanges. Jirji’s successes at defending Christianity against the Muslims, and his clever arguments against Islam, seem to have been a very popular read among Coptic Christians, who had six manuscripts of the *Disputation* dating at least to the seventeenth century.¹ The narrative, written as part of a genre of Christian literature dedicated to defending the truth of Christianity, succeeds in bolstering the religion, always an important goal for Christians, but particularly during an era of crusades. Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the debate, though, is the relative ease the opponents have in understanding each other. On the one side, Jirji shows a significant knowledge of Islam and of its prophet, leading one to wonder at his familiarity with the Qur’an and with the Muslim community. Equally striking, though, is the level of Muslim familiarity with Christianity, particularly with biblical texts. Nowhere in the disputation does a Muslim scholar ask for additional information regarding

¹ “Jirji al-Sim’ani,” Claremont Coptic Encyclopedia.

Christian scripture, and one even goes as far as saying “I trust the Gospel and all its contents,”² revealing a different familiarity with and even respect for the other religion. In looking closer at Islam, in fact, we see that “the *suras* [verses] of the Qur’an dating from the Meccan period reveal a certain familiarity with Jewish and Christian lore,”³ a familiarity which becomes important with regard to Islam’s desire to legitimate itself and to understand and argue against the other monotheistic religions it came in contact with, beginning in its early history.

The matter of the Bible at this point in history, though, deserves some discussion. At the time that Mohammad was preaching Islam, no official biblical canon had been established yet by any Christian sect. While there was a certain amount of agreement about which things were important, particularly the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, a variety of other materials, including various epistles of the early Church, were far more contentious. Similarly, the Old Testament had its own variants: Judaism had a series of important texts, including the Torah, *al-Tawrat* in Arabic, and the later prophets, including Isaiah and Jeremiah. Mainstream Judaism disagreed with the Samaritans, who acknowledged the importance of the Torah but almost none of the prophets. This led to the existence of two different forms of the Old Testament, both of which were completely separate from the Christian scriptures. In the wake of this sea of potential scriptures, Mohammad introduced the Qur’an, which claimed to be the exact word of God as revealed to Mohammad, which completed, and sometimes abrogated, earlier revelations. The question became, though, which version of these revelations should be used to understand the role of Islam. Rather than learning various scriptures from various religious groups in their entirety, it seems that it was the various stories told within the various faith traditions that became more important for Islam—in effect, Islam was less concerned with the theological underpinnings of these religions and more concerned with their lore, which could be used to legitimate Islam as the final revelation. And Islam was fortunate: there was also no lack of Christians and Jews who wanted to share their stories, as “members of both monotheistic faiths seem to have been quite eager to provide information about the contents of their scriptures.”⁴ Islamic leaders became more and more familiar with the stories the different faiths told even as Muslims became more and more suspicious of the theologies those stories were used to bolster.

Very important to the transmission of lore was the place these religions held within Islamic society; both religious groups occupied special positions within the

² “A Christian/Moslem Debate of the 12th Century,” Fordham Internet Medieval Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/christ-muslim-debate.asp>

³ Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden; New York; Koln: E. J. Brill, 1996), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Islamic worldview. Unlike the pagan Arabs that early Muslims encountered and fought, Jews and Christians became known as *ahl al-kitab*, “‘People of the Book’ or ‘Scripture People.’”⁵ The *ahl al-kitab* were to be treated with some degree of respect, allowed to live within Islam with a certain degree of religious freedom because of the importance of their scriptures. Jewish and Christian scripture held some small form of legitimacy within Islamic society, because, as we shall see, according to Islam, Jewish and Christian scripture points inevitably to Mohammad: indeed, “in the Qur’an itself, God says to the Muslims: ‘If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who were reading scripture before you.’”⁶ It became important very early for Islam to interact with these other faith communities: only by interacting could they understand these people of different faiths and bring them to Islam.

Arabic knowledge of Judaism and Christianity actually dates to before the rise of Islam. Within the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant, Jewish and Christian communities had been well established: Judaism was centered around Jerusalem, and after the destruction of the Temple and the beginning of the Diaspora, Jews expanded throughout the Mediterranean. The Acts of the Apostles refers to “Jews who are Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Cyrene, Rome, Crete, and Arabia. The largest Jewish centers of the Diaspora were in Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, the three largest cities of the Roman Empire.”⁷ Similarly, Christianity had spread throughout the Middle East, with Antioch being one of the central patriarchal sees in the early Church: in fact, “the Antiochene order came to dominate the Church of the Province of Arabia where the many congregations that had formed worshipped in Greek,”⁸ although Greek would also be joined by Syriac and Aramaic as the languages of the early Arab Christians. The first converts to Islam would have interacted with Christians and Jews who lived in Arabia, beginning early in their history in Mecca, when Muslim traders “were in contact with the Christians of Syria through commercial relations.”⁹ Trade interaction would have continued between Muslims and non-Muslims living outside of the land of Islam, but within Islamic territories, Muslim and non-Muslim contact began to take on a

⁵ Sidney Griffith, “Arguing from Scripture: the Bible in the Christian/Muslim encounter in the Middle Ages,” in *Scripture and Pluralism: reading the Bible in the religiously plural worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed., Thomas J. Heffernan and Thomas E. Burman (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005), 30.

⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷ J. L. McKenzie, “Diaspora, Jewish,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 4 (Detroit: Gale, 2003).

⁸ J. S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1979), 43.

⁹ Ibid., 258.

different shape. Even as Mohammad and his early successors, the caliphs, brought more territory under the command of Islam, Jews and Christians, who as we have seen were living in those territories, remained there. As a result, Islamic society developed in a situation where people who did not adhere to their religion lived within their territory. The level of interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims living in Muslim lands was cautiously regulated in the laws of Islam: according to the Pact of Umar, a law code established by the Caliph Umar, Christians and Jews living in conquered territory, who were known as *dhimmis*, had special restrictions on public displays of their religions, and particularly against teaching any Muslim about Christianity or Judaism: *dhimmis* swore “that we will not make a show of the Christian [or Jewish] religion nor invite any one to embrace it; that we will not prevent any of our kinsmen from embracing Islam, if they so desire.”¹⁰ In addition, *dhimmis* paid a special tax, the *jizya*, in deference to the new rulers of the land. While these rules could be restrictive to Christians and Jews, they also prove that Islamic society was attempting to create a social order that permitted the inclusion of non-Muslims rather than expelling them.

In fact, the rules established over the *dhimmis* actually may have spurred the beginnings of linguistic interaction between Christians, Jews, and Muslims; the Umayyad caliph al-Walid (705-715) ordered that all official records were to be kept in Arabic. Prior to this, while the Arabs would primarily have used Arabic, Christians and Jews would have used their own languages: Jews would have used Hebrew, while Christians in the Middle East used a variety of languages, including Aramaic, Persian, Ethiopic, and Syriac. In fact, each of these languages left their own lasting impression on Islamic literature, since “the vocabulary of the Qur’an contains numerous loan words from [each of those languages] . . . the dominant influence is naturally Syriac, since this was the Semitic language with which the Arabs were most closely in touch”¹¹ Al-Walid’s decision to make Arabic the main language of record-keeping brought about resentment on the part of Christians. In turn, “Christians first responded to the challenge of Islam in writing, first in Greek and Syriac, but very soon in Arabic.”¹² As Greek and Syriac slowly retired from even the private sphere, Christians defending their own faith had to adopt a language which their attackers would understand: soon enough, Arabic became the chief language the Christians themselves spoke. “There was an analogous movement among the Jews”¹³ to adopt the language which was being used throughout their towns and the part of the world they lived in. Both Judaism

¹⁰ “Pact of Umar.” <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/jews-umar.asp>

¹¹ Trimmingham, *Christianity Among Arabs*, 266.

¹² Sidney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 102.

¹³ Ibid.

and Christianity developed their own dialects within Arabic: Judaism created Judeo-Arabic, which is written with the Hebrew script but “accords with the cognate letters in Arabic script.”¹⁴ Christians developed a “Christian Arabic,” a much less consistent form of the language, which drew less from Classical Arabic, the form of Arabic that developed codified rules underneath the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, and more from Middle Arabic, which directly preceded Classical Arabic. For both faith groups, the languages they had been speaking for centuries fell out of usage, and they had to adopt the new lingua franca in order to continue the sort of lives they had grown used to.

In addition to the development of the *dhimma* as a community of non-Muslims under Muslim rule, Islam also identified other significant groups of Christians in their world: “from the onset of Islamic history . . . Christian communities played a significant role in the development of Arab Islamic society.”¹⁵ The first group, the *nasārā*, comprised “the Christians mentioned in the Qur’an and with whom Muhammad . . . was acquainted. Subsequently, the term referred as well to the indigenous Christian population living under Muslim rule and protection.”¹⁶ The *nasāra* are thus a part of Islam’s heritage—Christians who contributed at least in some way to the development of the religion. The antithesis of the *nasāra* was the *rûm*, a term that “primarily refers to the Byzantines who were at once an enemy of Islam and a source of supply of some of the craftsmen and artisans of its building program . . . although the *rûm* were the enemy, they merited the respect of Muslims in general.”¹⁷ Unlike the *nasāra*, the *rûm* were clearly outsiders; at the same time, understanding the scriptures of the *rûm* could be valuable, if the Christians could be brought to Islam. Much later than the Islamic encounter with the *rûm* was the rise of the *ifranj*, or “Franks,” the people the Arabs began to meet following the conquest of Iberia in the eighth century. The view the Arab sources took of this group “was that of a people not dissimilar from other remote barbarians, lacking in sophistication as well as in the creativity of either the Byzantines or the indigenous Christians.”¹⁸ Each of these groups, dissimilar as they were, demonstrate the nuanced view the Arab sources took of the various Christians in their world. Some were meant to be protected, others scoffed at, and still others respected and mistrusted at the same time. The various values and threats these groups posed to Islam would ultimately shape the Islamic use of Christian scriptures.

¹⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹⁵ Hanna E. Kassis, “A Bible for the Masses in the Middle Ages: Translating the Bible in Medieval Muslim Spain,” *Annual of Medieval Studies at the CEU* 8 (2002): 208.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Equally early in its history, Islam needed to develop a view of different groups of Jews. They could sometimes fill the role of a “rival power,” like Byzantium or Francia. One example is the kingdom of Himyar, which, in the sixth century, was ruled by a Jewish king, Yusuf Dhu Nuwas, who “engaged in a military action against the city of Najran that resulted in the tragic deaths of numerous Christians.”¹⁹ However, Jews usually occupied a position within early Islamic society, as a protected people, rather than as a rival group of outsiders. They could be found throughout Arabia, “in the oasis communities of Khaybar as well as in Yathrib (Medina), where they were known by their tribal identities”²⁰ Mohammad’s stay in Yathrib was the first time that he interacted with a larger Jewish community, rather than individuals he had met around Mecca; while interacting with them, “his knowledge of their beliefs, customs, and traditional lore—if not their scripture—grew commensurately.”²¹ However, much to his disappointment, the Jews rejected Mohammed’s prophethood as well as his claims that the Torah pointed to him and his legitimacy. This, combined with their siding with the Meccans against Mohammad, caused relations between Jews and the early Muslims to deteriorate. In the wake of these problems, Mohammad seems to have ordered his secretary, Zayd b. Thabit, to learn the *kitab al-Yahud*, or “book of the Jews.” While there is significant scholarly debate about what exactly this entails,²² the fact that Mohammad recognized that he would need greater knowledge of Hebrew scriptures in order to improve relations with Jews and eventually bring them to Islam is quite telling with regard to Mohammad’s universalist view of Islam; in addition, Mohammad “discourage[d] believers from consulting the *ahl al-kitab* on their scriptures.”²³ Thus, it fell only to the scholars to study and understand other religions, by studying their scripture and traditions. As the Islamic conquests continued, Jews and Christians alike fell under the law of the *dhimmi*, protected within the Islamic community but also unable to publicly express their religion, unable to preach their faith to Muslims, and required to pay the *jizya*.

As we have seen, perhaps the most significant source for Islamic understanding of the scriptures of the *ahl al-kitab* is the Qur’an itself. “The Qur’an is very conscious of the Bible and sometimes presents itself as offering once again a revelation previously sent down in the Torah and the Gospel,”²⁴ thus giving Muslims a lesson in the religions that preceded their own every time they

¹⁹ Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*, 10.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Adang, *Muslim Writers*, 4.

²² See Ibid., 6-7.

²³ Ibid., 7.

²⁴ Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*, 54.

encountered their own scripture. While it may have been impossible for the Qur'an to give a theology lesson in the teachings of Christianity and Judaism, this was not the intention anyway. For the Islamic world, these stories were not solely the property of Judaism or Christianity, but also of Islam, which believes the earlier prophets, like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Christ, pointed to Mohammed and the beginnings of Islam, and so were important in understanding God's revelation to His people—thus, they were every bit as much a part of the story of Islam as they were of other faiths. It was important for Muslims to recognize their own history and lore within the history and lore of the scriptures of the *ahl al-kitab*. However, “for all its obviously high degree of biblical awareness, the Qur'an virtually never actually *quotes* the Bible.”²⁵ Often, it has oblique references to Jewish and Christian scriptures, which are frequently not in a form that would be immediately recognizable to Jews or Christians. For example, while still not attempting to represent Jewish teaching, the Qur'an stays close to the Jewish understanding of the Exodus: regarding Moses, the Qur'an “proceeds to recount in some detail Moses' and Aaron's dealings with Pharaoh and the subsequent exodus from Egypt,”²⁶ as well as the reception of the Law, which God says “We wrote for him in the Tablets about everything.”²⁷ Likewise, the representation of Abraham's early history is very similar to the Jewish telling, following “Abraham's rejection of the gods of his father and his ancestors . . . [but] nowhere are there actual quotations from the Bible.”²⁸ It is particularly in the representation of the Gospels that the Qur'an deviates significantly from the traditional Christian story, which comes as no surprise: any reference to Jesus' divinity is absent from the Qur'anic telling, which presents Jesus as a loyal prophet of God, not as the Second Person of the Trinity. In fact, “the Gospel that the Qur'an confirms is not the Gospel as Christians recognized it . . . rather, following the model of its own distinctive prophetology, the Qur'an speaks of the Gospel as a scripture God gave to Jesus.”²⁹ Jesus is a particularly interesting personage within the Qur'an, which names him some twenty-five times, calls him sinless, and gives him the title “Messiah” eleven times. Nevertheless, he is not any greater than the rest of the prophets he is listed among, and completely lacks the divine nature he has in the Christian Gospels. In fact, the Qur'an expressly states that “the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, is only God's messenger, His word that God put into Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not say ‘three,’”³⁰ clearly attempting to

²⁵ Ibid., 55.

²⁶ Ibid., 66.

²⁷ Ibid., 58.

²⁸ Ibid., 66.

²⁹ Ibid., 58.

³⁰ Ibid., 87.

undermine the Christian teaching of the Trinity. Never named the Son of God, Jesus is only spoken of as the son of Mary, no more divine than any other human.

It is in this role, as Mary's son, that Jesus may have his most important role within Qur'anic literature: if we look at the narrative of the Qur'an, we can "notice that it in fact focuses rather more attention on Mary than on Jesus."³¹ According to David Marshall, associate professor of the Christian-Muslim relations at Duke Divinity School, Mohammad perhaps did not see Jesus as a crucial figure early in Islam, whereas Mary represented something both the Prophet and his followers could understand: "the fact that Jesus features in only one extended narrative from the whole Meccan period is a strong indication that . . . he did not, at this stage, represent an especially relevant model to Mohammad."³² Certainly, Jesus was a prophet of God, but, like so many of the stories of the Qur'an (and, indeed, of Jewish and Christian scripture), Jesus's story is one of being a messenger of God sent to the unbelievers in an attempt to bring them back to God, and who is ultimately rejected by those unbelievers. Indeed, we can see a certain similarity with Lot, who cautioned Sodom and Gomorrah of their impending destruction, or Moses' warnings to Pharaoh of the plagues of Egypt. Mary, on the other hand, reflected something which the early Muslim community, and Mohammad in particular, may have felt: "Mary experiences rejection and vilification by her *own* people because of this divine initiative singling her out for a special task,"³³ not unlike Mohammad himself, when he was rejected by the Quraysh. The story of the Nativity has Mary withdrawing to a faraway place where she gives birth to Jesus and is provided with food from heaven, strongly reminiscent of the story of Ishmael and Hagar and their own journey after being cast out by Sarah. It is not difficult to see some similarities with Mohammad's flight from Mecca and his relatives—doubtless, Mohammad and his earliest followers would have been able to commiserate with righteous Mary's rejection by her own people. Up until this point in the story, Christians would have been able to recognize the traditional narrative, with only fairly minor differences from the Nativity Christians were familiar with; however, the drama is only ended by a miracle, where "the infant Jesus speaks from the cradle, thereby implicitly vindicating his righteous mother and shaming her detractors."³⁴ Even though the story is ultimately changed, the early Muslim community valued the Nativity narrative enough to keep at least the concept as part of their traditions.

³¹ David Marshall, "Christianity in the Qur'an," in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 5.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., emphasis added.

³⁴ Ibid.

In other places, the Qur'an references the ways of life of the Christians in early Islamic Arabia. The view of Christian life is actually quite varied, often discussing divisions within the Christian community. For example, the bishops and monks are seen as consumers of "the property of the people in vanity, and divert [the people] from the way of God. Those who treasure up gold and silver and do not expend it in the way of God—Give them tidings of a painful chastisement!"³⁵ Much like the earlier pagan Roman historians, and the later Protestant reformers, early Islamic leaders held that the bishops and monks were parasitical, taking from society without contributing back to it. On the other hand, the Christian idea of monasticism was held with some esteem: "as for the monastic state they framed it for themselves . . . simply out of a desire to please God . . ." although this respect is still somewhat grudging, and ends with the sting "though they did not, however, manage it aright."³⁶ By and large, though, the references to Christianity and Judaism, as established religious communities, are scant: the text remains concerned with presenting the stories those faiths told in an Islamic light.

In addition to the Qur'an, the *hadith* literature, or the sayings and actions of Mohammed, reveal Muslim attitudes towards aspects of Christian and Jewish scripture. Again, the goal of the *hadith* is not to accurately reflect the teachings of the other religions; Islam is not concerned with defending other religions, which, no matter how right, are still ultimately incorrect. Indeed, much of the *hadith*'s sections regarding Christianity assert that Christians are wrong: wanting to ensure that Muslims did not fall to worshiping Mohammad, "Umar said that he heard Muhammad say 'Do not extol me as the Christians extolled the son of Mary....'"³⁷ Likewise, the *hadith* agrees that monks are reprehensible, although it focuses more on their decision to remain celibate: Mohammad "judged celibacy to be reprehensible . . . Muhammad said 'We have no directive regarding monasticism . . . the monasticism of this people is struggle (*jihad*) in the way of God.'" ³⁸ However, some strong similarities between the *hadith* and the Bible nonetheless remain, similarities, which are difficult to ignore. For example, Mohammad tells a parable of workers hired to do a day's work for a day's wages. They worked until noon, after which they went to the master, complained about the work, and left without completing their task and without their wages. The master hired another group of laborers to work, promising them the same wages as the first. This second group worked until mid-afternoon, then, like their predecessors, also left without completing their work or receiving their wages. The master went to a third group,

³⁵ Trimingham, *Christianity Among Arabs*, 265.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Marston Speight, "Christians in the Hadith Literature," in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York; St. Martin's Press, 2001), 37.

³⁸ Ibid., 36.

who completed all of the work and received the wages of all three groups. The similarity between this story of workers and their wages and the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, found in Matthew 20:1-16, is particularly striking. While it is far from fair to say that because these passages are so similar, the later one derives from the earlier, the fact that they are so similar, and knowing of Mohammad's familiarity with Christian lore, makes it tempting to suggest that he did at least plan for the similarity.

Eventually, copies of Jewish and Christian scripture began to appear in the Islamic world in Arabic. However, it was not usually Muslims making the translations: instead, "Bible translations into Arabic were usually made by Jews and Christians for the use of Jews and Christians."³⁹ The various versions depended on the group translating: "not surprisingly, the Gospels seem to have been among the earliest biblical texts translated by Arabic-speaking Christians,"⁴⁰ but the Christians also translated popular versions of the Torah, *al-Tawrat* in Arabic, and the Psalms as well.⁴¹ Jewish translations, on the other hand, "were not for the purpose of official, liturgical proclamation in the vernacular . . . they functioned, rather, as means to interpretation and commentary."⁴² While Christians used the Arab versions of their texts in their liturgy, Jews used these translations for discussion, while retaining Hebrew as the language of worship.

Of particular note is the fact that in dealing with Jewish and Christian texts, Islamic scholars would sometimes come across a passage which they did not understand. In order to improve their understanding, they "consulted Jews and Christians orally and received different ad hoc translations of specific verses, even from the same person."⁴³ While these various translations and forms would sometimes lead to frequent and long-standing mistakes within future texts, it also shows desire on the part of Muslims to understand, even to the point of seeking out the *ahl al-kitab* and asking for their insight. Furthermore, doubtless those Jews and Christians would have shared their experience discussing their religious texts with Muslims with their coreligionists; as a result, the stories of Muslims discussing the Bible with a clearly educated background would not have been so hard to believe.

These translations of the Bible into Arabic were certainly fueled in part by the changes in the linguistic landscape that have already been noted: Arabic had replaced Greek, Aramaic and Syriac as the language of the land. However, Sidney Griffith, professor of Semitic Languages and Literatures at the Catholic University

³⁹ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Biblical Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 115.

⁴⁰ Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*, 113.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴³ Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds*, 119.

of America, also proposes an additional impetus for translation: as Jews and Christians became more familiar with the Qur'an, they recognized that it tells similar stories to their own sacred scriptures, but with several notable differences. "One might imagine that it did not take the Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians long to take exception to the Qur'an's prophetology and to its interpretation of many aspects of the Bible stories,"⁴⁴ especially where the Qur'an seems to attempt to "correct" Jewish and Christian "misconceptions," such as the divinity of Christ. These communities, despite being heavily Arabized and relegated to lower status within society, took the opportunity to "set the biblical record straight in Arabic."⁴⁵ The knowledge Muslims had regarding the Bible shows that they may have had some success with this.

It was in this environment that Jirji the Monk encountered al-Zafir and the holy men of his court. In establishing the disputation, the narrator explains the background of Jirji, only referred to as "the Monk" in the text: "Among the followers of the Abbot [of St. Simon the Fisherman] was an old monk who was very versed in knowledge. He spoke very well, too. Everybody liked to listen to him. He entered the convent in his childhood and profited of the books there; he acquired the virtues and good manners of the monks."⁴⁶ After we meet the hero of the story, we immediately proceed to his meeting with the Prince, who asks the Monk questions about monastic life. One does not get the sense, however, that the Prince asks because he does not know, but rather out of disbelief—"O monk, don't you eat any meat? . . . Don't you get married?"⁴⁷ The Prince seems more shocked at the Monk's responses: his answer to the second question would be particularly bad for the Prince, since in the *hadith* Mohammad himself speaks out against unnecessary celibacy, and excoriates monks for holding to needless laws, even if they are only trying to please God. The Monk has a ready response to the questions, though, applauding the asceticism of the monasteries, to which the Prince responds positively, even if not convinced. He then calls for his theologians to come, and, giving ample room for back-handed compliments, asks them "How do you like [the Monk's] appearance? One of them called Abu-Zaher, from Baghdad, said, 'May I be made your ransom, O Prince, he has a smiling mouth and a handsome face. How regretful that he is Christian.'"⁴⁸ After this, the debate starts.

The scholar Abu-Salamah Ibn Saad, known in the text as the Moslem, points out that Muslims revere and honor Christ and rank him as the most important

⁴⁴ Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*, 126.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "Christian/Moslem Debate"

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

prophet other than Mohammad. Christians, on the other hand, do not revere Mohammad at all. In effect, Muslims acknowledge the importance of Jesus, both historically and religiously, while Christians reject Mohammad entirely. In his responses, the Monk uses traditions common to both religions: he asks whether God created all creatures on Earth, as well as all people on the Earth. There is no scriptural passage here, no question whether Genesis is accurate, only whether God created all creatures and people of the Earth. In this code switching, the Monk makes it easy for the Moslem to agree with him—in fact, it would be heresy for him to disagree. The Monk immediately finishes his attempt to speak the same language as his interlocutors, though, and asserts that, since God wants the salvation of the entire Earth, He would have sent His messengers to the whole world, and thus it only falls to the faithful to determine which messengers are real messengers of God's. The true messengers receive “a power from God to confirm His message,” and this power includes “to make miracles, to speak various languages and avoid worldly things,” powers given to the Apostles of Christ.⁴⁹ Clearly, the Moslem must be familiar enough with the stories of the Apostles to be able to follow the Monk's claim—he does not question the miracles of the Apostles, nor their ability to speak various languages. Indeed, the Monk points out that the proof of the power of the Apostles is evident in the world: “at any direction you look, east, west, south or north, you find the devotion to Christ at the farthest regions of the world. No one region is empty of it Do you have, Abu-Salamah, any doubt on those . . . things?” to which the Moslem replies “This is evident, without any doubt.”⁵⁰

The next section of the discussion moves into one of the major aspects of Islamic understanding of non-Muslim scriptures: that of alteration. According to Islamic teaching, Jews and Christians altered the Bible in order to use it to prove their own views—which explains the variations between non-Muslim and Muslim texts. Indeed, the Moslem, immediately after saying that he accepted the truth of the Gospel, complains that the Christians “altered it to be as you wanted.”⁵¹ In order to defend the legitimacy of the Gospels, the Monk has to give a brief history lesson: “how many years had passed from the Christ until Mohammad? I give the answer: from Christ to Mohammad, six hundred and some more years passed.”⁵² The Monk explains that, in all that time, and with the incredible extent of Christianity—which the Moslem does not dispute, but in fact says that there were more Christians then “than there are now”—there would have been no way

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

for all of the Christian communities throughout the world, with their various languages, to all change the Gospels. Sadly, the text does not continue along this track: it would have been fascinating to see what a Muslim scholar would have argued against this logistical problem in order to maintain the idea that Christians had fabricated their Gospels. Instead, they move on to the problem of Mohammad's integrity, a section where the Monk continues to reveal his own familiarity with Islam. In this section, though, the Moslem draws some interesting parallels between Mohammad and Jesus, at least according to the Islamic tradition: "Don't you know, Monk, that Mohammad governed the Arabs, and that he is God's Prophet and Messenger, because he guided Ishmail's descendants and passed them from the idolatry to the worship of the Living God, like what did Christ and his Apostles?"⁵³ Clearly, the Moslem has some knowledge of the deeds of Christ and the Apostles, even if that knowledge seems rather simple: even medieval Christians could hardly say that the Jewish community which Christ was preaching to was guilty of idol worship. However, the critical thing for Islam was showing that Mohammad fit into the prophetic mold, coming to unbelievers and bringing them to God. The Monk refuses to accept this interpretation, naturally, and explains why Christians, and, for many of the same reasons, Jews, reject Mohammad, focusing largely on his violence and his desire for women. It is fortunate for him that he remains under the Prince's protection, otherwise the scholars could doubtless grow angry with his insults to their greatest prophet. Later, while discussing prayer, the Moslem asks "Don't you pray, you Christians, on your Christ?"⁵⁴ The format of the question, like the questions the Prince posed earlier, shows that the asker already has an answer, and needs the other person to validate that answer; in this situation, though, the Monk has to disagree, saying "Absolutely not! On the contrary we pray to him, because he is our God and Creator and he accepts the prayer of his servants if they do, and forgives their faults."⁵⁵ Immediately, the Moslem responds with "What an evident blasphemy and bad idea!"⁵⁶ The Moslem already knew that the Monk would explain his view of the Trinity, which, in the Islamic understanding, denies the oneness of God. The only way that the Moslem could have known about the Christian view of Christ, though, was to have interacted with them, to have read what they wrote and heard what they said about Jesus; rather than assuming that Christians naturally held the same views as him, he had seen that Christianity taught something completely different from Islam.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

The disputation ends when the Monk compels the Moslem to agree that both Islam and Christianity recognize God, as well as His Word, which, in Christianity, is Christ, and His Spirit, or the Holy Spirit. While the Moslem only agrees to admit that he believes in God, in God's Word, and God's Spirit, the Prince laughs, seeing that the Moslem has agreed with the Monk's statement: "The Prince was laying down. He then stood up, glanced to the Moslem, laughed and told him—'Abu-Salamah, the Monk Christianized you and introduced you to the Christian's religion; you are then Christian.'"⁵⁷ This is perhaps the most troublesome aspect of the source: ultimately, it comes from a Christian perspective, and is part of a larger genre of Christians defending their faith. However, the *Disputation of Jirji* shows that Christians knew that Muslims had encountered the Bible in some fashion, and were familiar enough with it to argue against Christians using it. Indeed, as we have seen, Muslims turned to Christians and Jews in order to ask their help in interpreting scriptures. Clearly, the fact that Arabs were familiar with the Bible was well-known even outside the Middle East.

Beginning in the early history of the Middle East, even before the rise of Islam, Jewish and Christian sacred scriptures were being disseminated at an astounding pace, to the point where the earliest adherents of Islam would have encountered many of them, and used aspects of them in their own scripture. Islam was concerned with legitimating itself, by drawing a lineage from the earliest prophets of Judaism and Christianity, but presenting them in an Islamic light. The Qur'an became the first point where Muslims could encounter Jewish and Christian sacred lore. As the multiplicity of languages in the Middle East became replaced with an Arabic hegemony, and Christians and Jews found themselves subject peoples under the banner of Islam, the need for Arabic translations of non-Muslim scriptures increased, as did Muslim knowledge of those scriptures. Ultimately, the Arabic world, both attempting to establish a working social order which included non-Muslims as well as hoping to bring those non-Muslims into Islam, found itself needing to understand the scriptures of Jews and Christians. This knowledge became particularly important as a means of interacting with Jews and Christians, as the proceedings of the *Disputation of Jirji the Monk* give evidence to: just as Jirji uses his knowledge of Islam to present his case against it, his opponent the Moslem uses his knowledge of Christian scripture to dispute Christian teaching and attempt to prove the validity of his own faith.

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⁵⁷ Ibid.

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