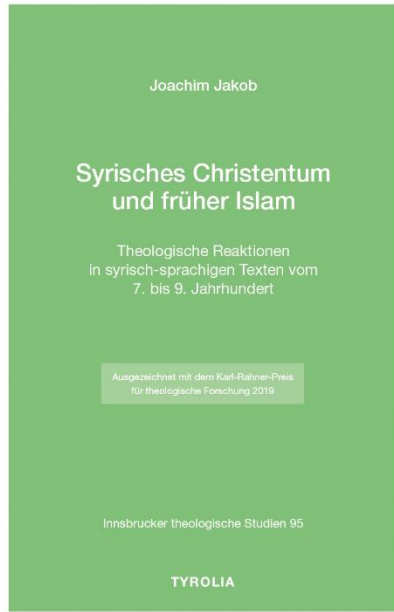


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Joachim JAKOB

*Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam: Theologische Reaktionen in syrisch-sprachigen Texten vom 7. bis 9. Jahrhundert*

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Joachim Jakob's book *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam: Theologische Reaktionen in syrisch-sprachigen Texten vom 7. bis 9. Jahrhundert* (in English: *Syriac Christianity and Early Islam: Theological Reactions in Syriac Written Texts from the Seventh to the Ninth Century*) analyzes a wide range of Syriac sources in exploring Christian theological responses to early Islam. Jakob focuses on the developments of the theological positions of East and West Syrian writers as well as on the connections of the relevant Syriac texts with contemporary Islamic theology. This comprehensive book is essential reading not only for scholars of Syriac Christianity, but also for those interested in interreligious encounters and Christian-Muslim relations more broadly.

Jakob's book examines a largely unexplored topic—the theological reactions of East and West Syrian Christian religious elites to Islam. While there is a considerable number of studies

analyzing Arabic Christian sources on this topic, such as those by Sara Leila Husseini,<sup>1</sup> Mark Beaumont,<sup>2</sup> and Najib George Awad,<sup>3</sup> comparable works dealing with Syriac texts remain fragmented. For instance, Michael Philip Penn's *When Christians First Met Muslims* (2015) provides English translations of excerpts of Syriac texts dating until the year 750 CE, with introductions preceding the translations. His other book on the topic, published that same year, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*, is an introduction and aims at making Syriac sources available to a wider audience; detailed analysis of theological differences between Christianity and Islam as depicted in Syriac texts is beyond the scope of the book. By contrast, Sidney H. Griffith analyzes some theological issues in the tractates of some Syrian authors from the seventh century, yet his studies are not comprehensive.<sup>4</sup> Jakob's book seeks to change this state of research, by focusing on one topic across numerous Syriac texts. He thereby expands our horizons by offering a deep historical-theological analysis of how Syrian writers reacted to early Islam and how they employed some concepts of Islamic theology in conveying and defending their own theological doctrines and practices.

Jakob inquires into the sources of East ("Nestorians") and West (Miaphysite, "Jacobites") Syrian Christians specifically. Since those Christians opposed the official Church of

<sup>1</sup> Sara Leila Husseini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God: Three Christian Scholars and Their Engagement with Islamic Thought (9<sup>th</sup> Century C. E)* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims: A Critical Analysis of Christian Presentations of Christ for Muslims from the Ninth and Twentieth Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005); Beaumont, "Muslim Readings of John's Gospel in the Abbasid Period," *ICMR* 19 (2008): 179–197.

<sup>3</sup> Najib George Awad, *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms: A Study of Theodore Abu Qurrah's Theology in Its Islamic Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015); Najib George Awad, "'If His Crucifixion Was Figurative as You Claim, Then So Be It': How Two Christian Mutakallims from the Abbasid Era Used *an-Nisā* 4:157–158 in Dialogues with Muslims," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 68 (2016): 53–80.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Griffith, "Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: From Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)," in Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner (eds.), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter (WMAS 4)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1992), 251–273; Griffith, "Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bēt Hālē and a Muslim Emir," *Hugoye* 3 (2000): 29–54; Griffith, "Muḥammad and the Monk Baḥīrā: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times," *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995): 146–174.

the Eastern Roman Empire, Jakob surmises that they would not favor Byzantium over the Muslim Arab conquerors.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for him, it is particularly worthwhile to investigate their reactions to the Arab occupation. Jakob convincingly argues that Syriac East and West Christians sought to define the role of the new Muslim rulers historically and theologically, describing them as heralds of the apocalypse. Since they could account for the Arab Muslim invasion in terms of their own apocalyptic concerns, seventh century Syrian Christians, among whom apocalyptic expectations were predominant, did not feel the need to engage with the invaders and their objections to Christianity. By contrast, with the Muslims still in power in the eighth and ninth centuries, Syriac Christians now reacted to the Islamic objections to Christian doctrines and especially to the accusations of polytheism (*shirk*). They sought to defend the Trinity and Christology, partly in a creative manner. For example, Jakob shows that Syriac Christians used the Islamic doctrine of the divine attributes to explain and justify the Christian teaching of the Trinity. Furthermore, they cited only parts of Q al-Nisā' 4:171, namely the phrases *kalimatuhu* ("His word") and *rūḥ minhu* ("a spirit from Him"), which in their view confirmed that Jesus indeed was God's Spirit and the Son of God.

The book consists of two large sections which follow the introduction and a brief analysis of the relevant sources. These two sections are chronologically ordered and split into thirteen chapters. Whereas the first section considers Syriac sources from the seventh century, the second section deals with Syriac texts from the eighth and ninth centuries. The first section demonstrates that Syrian Christians were not interested in the religion of the conquerors and did not debate with Muslims in the seventh century. The second section and

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<sup>5</sup> Jakob freely oscillates in his use of "Muslims" and "Arabs" in the first chapters of the book, relating to the seventh century; I will therefore do so likewise here.

thus the larger part of the book demonstrates the extent to which this attitude changed, and traces the debates of Christians with their Muslim rulers in the subsequent centuries.

The book deals extensively with Muslim-Christian theological disputations, as the first pages reveal. Jakob begins his study by quoting Q al-'Ankabūt 29:46, the instruction of the Qur'ān to dispute (*tujādilū*) with the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) in a good manner. Yet Jakob is able only to indirectly infer the arguments used by Muslims in their debates with Christians. In the book's introduction (Chapter 1), Jakob correctly argues that the texts he examines, which were written from the Syriac perspective, address the members of own community exclusively. They sought to strengthen Christians in belief and to set clearer boundaries between Christian and Muslim communities. The Syrian authors also intended to inform their fellow Christians about the Muslim arguments against Christianity and prepare them to dispute with Muslims.

Following the general introduction, Jakob introduces and briefly analyzes the Syriac sources pertinent to his study in a separate chapter (Chapter 2). He offers an impressive list of works which includes apocalyptic works, chronicles, letters, disputations, and theological tractates. Jakob summarizes the historical background of each of these, the lives of their authors, and the contents of the Syriac sources.

Only after this summary, in the first section (Chapter 3 to 6), does Jakob delve into the actual subject of the study, starting with the works from the seventh century. Jakob relates that while the Patriarch of the Church of the East, Isho'yahb III, and the Chronicle of Khuzestan do not explain why God bestowed the Muslims power over the Christians, other Syriac works—beginning with the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephraem—do provide an explanation. Seeking to make sense of the Muslim conquest, these writers interpreted the sinfulness of their

community as the cause for their troubles and the conquest as a punishment inflicted upon them. Jakob demonstrates that early Syriac works, e.g., the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius and the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles, expected an imminent end of the world, with some of them awaiting a Christian emperor who would save Christians from Muslims. Syrian Christians saw Arabs as heralds of the Antichrist. As some Christian Syrian authors in this period regarded Arabs as inferior to them, they did not wish to engage in controversy with them. Yet, as Jakob appropriately emphasizes, the author of the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius prohibits every engagement of his fellow Christians with Muslims out of fear of conversions, rather than due to the inferiority of Arabs.

Analyzing relevant Syriac sources of the seventh century, Jakob correctly suggests that the writers had very limited knowledge of formative Islamic theology: some texts consider the religion of Arabs to be Abrahamic and to be in conversation with the Hebrew Bible because these Syrian sources show awareness that Jesus was not perceived by Muslims to be the Redeemer. Still, Patriarch Isho'yahb III argued, in an intra-Christian controversy with the West Syrian Christians, that East Syrian Christology would be better reconciled with the Muslim understanding of Jesus. According to Isho'yahb III, Muslims would easily understand that the Miaphysites were wrong and would not support them. Yet, as West and East Syrian Christians eventually came to acknowledge that the Arabs remained in power and that the apocalyptic prophecies had not come to fruition, they began composing disputations providing suitable apologetic replies to Islamic objections.

The second section of the book moves to the theological responses to early Islam, with Chapter 7 as an introduction to the second section. Here Jakob explains very briefly what the pertinent sources from the eighth and ninth centuries to the study are. He aims at analyzing

these sources in their historical context. Jakob highlights the significance of Islamic theology emerging in the realm of the Abbasid dynasty. In particular, the Mu'tazilah and their way of doing scholastic theology (*ilm al-kalām*) are of paramount importance for Jakob.

Chapter 8 examines the historical context from which the Syrian texts stem. Jakob summarizes the rise of the Mu'tazilah in the Abbasid Empire, their dialectical methods, and their development of speculative theology. While introducing the main concepts relevant to his study, Jakob pays due attention to the significance of religious disputations taking place at court. He argues that one should view the Syriac texts in light of the Abbasid culture of disputation. Syriac-speaking Christians accommodated themselves to the Islamic way of doing scholastic theology. Syrian writers engaged in disputations with Muslim theologians by taking up some images and concepts already known from the pre-Islamic period as well as from Islamic speculative theology. They adapted pertinent Syrian pre-Islamic traditions to their contemporary theological thought.

Chapter 9 then turns to Syriac depictions of Muslims as the “new Jews,” viewing Islam as an Abrahamic religion<sup>6</sup> close to Judaism. Syriac-speaking writers of the eighth and ninth centuries connected the religion of the Arabs, in Jakob’s phrasing, with the monotheism of the Old Testament just as their fellow Christians from the seventh century had done. Yet many later writers further elaborated on this image. Syrian Christians of the eighth and ninth centuries widely believed that the Muslims and the Jews, now frequently referred to as “the old Jews,” shared similar religious beliefs. In this chapter, Jakob also analyzes the assumption of some Syrian writers that a Jew corrupted the “Ur-Koran,” i.e., the original Qur’ān, to explain

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<sup>6</sup> “Abrahamic religion” is Jakob’s terminology. The Syriac texts themselves employ the phrases “a religion of the Old Testament” and “believing in the manner of Jews.”

why Christian teachings were distorted in the holy book of Islam. Jakob mentions only a single differing view; he quotes the *Apologetic Treatise* of Nonnus of Nisibis, a Miaphysite theologian, who in contrast to all other Syrian writers argued for the closeness of Christianity and Islam (rather than Judaism and Islam). In this tractate, Nonnus recognized that the Jews reject Christ, while the Muslims at least view Jesus in a positive light.

Chapter 10 investigates a highly controversial issue among Muslims and Christians—the doctrine of the Trinity. By first analyzing the relevant Qur'anic verses, Jakob inquires into the objections of Muslims regarding the teaching that one God can incorporate three persons. Subsequently, he explores Syrian apologetic tracts. Jakob persuasively demonstrates that the arguments of Syrian writers vary depending on the aims of the respective author, the period of the emergence of a text, and the social context of both the writer and the readers. For example, Jakob shows that we can sort out what Patriarch Timotheus knew about the Muslim objections to Christian theology by analyzing the disputations in which he engaged with Muslim theologians in Baghdad. Accordingly, Jakob argues that the works of Timotheus and Nonnus of Nisibis in particular reveal good knowledge of Islamic theology.

Jakob shows that Syrian writers offered their explanations of the Trinity based on Scripture, pre-Islamic Syrian traditions, rational arguments, and some doctrines of Islamic speculative theology. They quoted passages and verses from the Hebrew Bible as well as the Qur'ān in order to undermine the Islamic positions. For example, some Syrian Christians interpreted God's speaking in the plural in the Old Testament as an indication of the Trinity. In their Christological reading of certain phrases, Q 4:171 also referred to the Son of God and His Spirit. Furthermore, Syriac-speaking authors employed metaphors which served as analogies for the Trinity. Taking up the pre-Islamic tradition of Ephrem the Syrian, they compared God

the Father with the sun, its light with Jesus as His son, and its warmth with the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, Timotheus and Nonnus of Nisibis carried over the doctrine of the divine attributes to the teaching of the Trinity. For them, God manifested through the divine attributes analogous to the Logos and the Holy Spirit. In discussing why God manifested Himself in three and not more persons, both authors concluded that “three” constituted the perfect number and sought to provide rational arguments for its justification.

In continuing the discussion of the issue of the Trinity, Chapter 11 considers Syrian Christian responses to Muslim objections to Jesus as the Son of God. Jakob demonstrates that Christian apologists were fully aware of Muslim arguments against Christology, the doctrine of the incarnation, and the veneration of Christ. Despite this knowledge, East Syrian writers in particular seemed to be convinced that Nestorian Christology better fit the Islamic teaching on Jesus than the Miaphysite stance of the West Syrians. Nonnus of Nisibis used some salient divine attributes of God to prove that, since Jesus possessed them, he must have been God as well. Christ was not the only begotten Son in a literal sense, because God never had a wife. Thus, the trinitarian God was not comparable to polytheistic deities.

Jakob deftly analyzes further arguments of the Syriac-speaking writers: According to Timotheus, Christians did not venerate a human being, but God who became flesh. God was worthy of veneration together with His “Speech” and His Spirit, which co-existed with Him throughout all eternity. The East Syrian Patriarch is familiar with the Muslim debate about the created or uncreated nature of the Qur’ān and divine speech, and he apparently opposes the Mu‘tazilah who argued for the Qur’ān’s createdness. Again, in contrast to the statement of the Qur’ān (3:49) insisting on God’s ultimate control, Timotheus interprets the wonders done by Jesus as a sign of Jesus’s own will; Christ would not need God’s permission in order to work



wonders. Syriac-speaking authors also argued against the Muslim accusations of the corruption of the holy scriptures. As Timotheus argues, although the Jews and Christians were competing religious communities, the fact that they shared the same Old Testament, without any changes, disproved the Muslim claim of its corruption. In the view of Syrian Christians, as the New Testament reflected the prophecies of the Old Testament, it was an uncorrupted Scripture too.

In Chapter 12, Jakob summarizes the content of the second section, while Chapter 13 concludes the book and outlines its findings. As Jakob shows, whereas most Syrian writers until the first half of the eighth century were not familiar with Islamic doctrines, this situation changed beginning in the second half of the eighth century. The enduring Islamic appropriation of the conquered territories elicited a Christian apologetic and polemical response to early Islamic theology. Jakob demonstrates that these replies take the form of dialogues and display considerable interest in Islamic theology. Jakob rightly stresses the importance of the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology in these disputations. In facing religious challenges coming from Muslims and discussing their objections to Christianity, Syrian authors sought to defend the tenets and practices of the Christian faith. Their main purpose was to prevent fellow Christians from becoming attracted to Islam and subsequently converting.

Although Jakob's book is well researched and includes an impressive number of references, it is apparent that the book is written by a scholar rather unfamiliar with the current state of Qur'ānic and Islamic Studies. Jakob misses works that are commonly known and related to these fields more generally. For example, I would have expected references to

some essential articles in his discussion of the term *ḥanīf* (93–94)<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, Jakob mentions briefly—in a single sentence only—that Q 4:157–159 denies the crucifixion of Christ (422), suggesting that he does not seem to be aware that the interpretation of these verses is a controversial issue in Qur'ānic Studies.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, Jakob wrongly states that the Christians are not referred to as *mushrikūn* (associators) in the Qur'ān, since only “Arab polytheists” would appear as such (285). Yet further on, he argues that at least the later *sūrahs* frame the Christian doctrine of Jesus as the Son of God as close to *shirk* (423). In this discussion Jakob does not cite Q Āl 'Imrān 3:64 and the more clearly phrased Q al-Mā'idah 5:72–73, which identify the Christians as “associators.” Thus, despite Jakob's claim, it is not the later Muslims who accused the Christians of *shirk*; this anti-Christian polemic is already anchored in the Qur'ān. Later Muslims merely took up the objections of the Qur'ān in their disputations with Christianity.

These predominantly minor criticisms, however, should not distract from the value of the work. Jakob's book fills important gaps in the scholarship of Syriac Christianity and interreligious studies and readers in both fields will greatly benefit from it. It is moreover an essential work for the scholars of Qur'ānic Studies and early Islamic history wishing to elaborate on early Christian perceptions of the Qur'ān and of formative Islamic theology as well as Christian depictions of Muslim Arabs, more broadly. Scholars of early Islamic history also will be able to draw on Jakob's insights to investigate a larger historical and religious context of the early Islamic Empire.

Ana Davitashvili  
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<sup>7</sup> See Uri, Rubin, “*Ḥanīfiyya* and Ka'ba: an Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of *dīn Ibrāhīm*,” *JSAI* 13 (1990): 85–112; François de Blois, “*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanīf* (εθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” *BSOAS* 65 (2002): 1–30.

<sup>8</sup> See Gabriel S. Reynolds, “The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?” *BSOAS* 72 (2012): 237–258.