WHY A VOLUME ON MEDIEVAL CHRISTIAN ARABIC TEXTS?

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According to Muslim historiography, in the seventh century of our era, a prophet named Muḥammad appeared among the Arabs in the western region of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Hijaz. After receiving divine revelations, he began to proclaim his religious message in various locations in Arabia, particularly in Mecca and Medina where he reportedly lived until his death in 632. He was celebrated as the Arabian prophet, who received a divine scripture, described by Muslims as a clear Arabic Qur'ān. Muslim historical accounts describe Muḥammad as a skillful commander who led and commissioned over 70 military expeditions, targeting pagans, Jews, and even some Arab Christian tribes in the frontier with the Byzantine Empire.¹ Unlike the picture painted in Muslim traditions, non-Muslim contemporary or near-contemporary accounts paint him in other ways, including shepherd, king, conqueror, false prophet, and lustful Arab.² While scholars have voiced skepticism regarding various elements in the Muslim traditional narrative, especially due to their

¹ See Wāqidī, Maghāzi, where he lists seventy-four expeditions. Watt, Muḥammad at Medina, 2.
late compilation and apparent contradiction, the reality is that, after Muhammmad’s death, Arab Muslim armies—under his successors, known as caliphs—swept the Middle East and North Africa. Within a century after his death, Muslims ruled not only the entirety of that which is known today as the Middle East and North Africa, but also controlled vast territories all the way from China to West Africa and Spain.

These Muslim rulers became an elite minority, ruling over the conquered population. Their faith—Islam—did not emerge in a vacuum, but was arguably formed and gradually developed in conversation with other centuries-old dominant religions in the region, particularly Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Their language—Arabic—soon became a language of prestige among the conquered people. While the language itself was known in various locations in the conquered lands, especially in the Near East among Arab tribes—many of whom were Christian—it eventually became the dominant language in the Muslim empire. In a gradual and natural process, non-Arabs adopted and used Arabic in order to retain their positions and receive promotions within the Arab administration. While local languages never completely disappeared, eventually Arabic became the language of everyday discourse, government, and culture. Christians in the conquered lands began to use Arabic to articulate their faith, defend its tenets, and even question Islamic doctrines and claims. This resulted in a growing list of Arabic texts written by Christian thinkers which served as religious apologetic or polemic works.

In our day, we are fortunate to have access to a wealth of Christian Arabic texts, including some from the earliest centuries of Islam. These texts are the heart of this book. They provide

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answers to important questions: How did Arabic-speaking Christians respond to the Islamic claims against the Bible, the Trinity, and the incarnation? How did these Christians view Islam, Muḥammad, and the Qurʾān? How did these medieval theologians employ the language of the conquerors, Arabic, to defend their faith and its tenets? How did these Arabic-speaking Christians explain the divinity of Jesus? To what extent were Christians able to advance the Christian belief of a Triune God in opposition to the Islamic view of strict monotheism? Can today’s Church, particularly in the West, benefit in any way from the earliest arguments articulated, developed, and advanced by these medieval Arabic-speaking Christians? These questions, and many more, are at the heart of this important volume.

The study of medieval Christian Arabic texts interacting with Islam is a steadily growing scholarly field. Christian literature in Arabic dates back at least thirteen centuries and embraces diverse genres, including theological, apologetic, and polemical treatises. More than ever before, scholars are realizing the potential and great wealth in this material, as evidenced in the growing number of studies focusing on the topic. Arguably, medieval Christian Arabic texts are excellent sources of study in various academic subjects, including early Islamic history, Christian-Muslim relations, Islamic Studies, Islamic historiography, Patristics, and Arabic and Islamic philosophy, among others. The field continues to grow because there are numerous unedited Christian Arabic texts, covering a variety of fascinating topics, that await deeper analysis and study.

This volume seeks to examine nine key medieval Arabic-speaking Christian figures. It discusses their responses to Islamic criticisms, aiming to provide interested students—both under-

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4 For instance, see the valuable studies by Noble and Treiger, eds., *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World*; Pratt, ed., *The Character of Christian-Muslim Encounter*; Beaumont, ed., *Arab Christians and the Qurʾān*; also the recent study Thomas, ed., *The Bloomsbury Reader in Christian-Muslim Relations, 600–1500*. 
graduate and graduate—with an accessible resource that includes historical background for each figure, major arguments they posed, and partial translations of their works. Although specialist bibliographic works on Christian Arabic texts do exist, these can either be intimidating in their detail and size, or written in non-English research languages (e.g., German and French), and are therefore out of the reach of many students interested in gaining a basic orientation in the field. This volume is decidedly easy to read. It aims to provide an entry point for students interested in the history of Christian-Muslim encounters and in Middle Eastern Christianity more generally. If this volume introduces the reader to Christian thinkers who tackled Islamic claims and wrote in Arabic, as it is really aimed, it will have succeeded in its overarching goal. It is a sincere hope that this volume stimulates further research by pointing to various scholarly desiderata relating to the Christian thinkers under study. I hope that the reading of this book will make some of the most important voices of medieval Arabic-speaking Christianity—and their contributions to the Christian-Muslim theological encounter—more easily and widely accessible in the English-speaking university context.

The first chapter of this volume provides background for the use of Arabic by Christians in the Middle East. Foundational to the entire volume, this chapter sets the historical context with a special emphasis on the importance of Arabic as a Christian language and, more importantly, as a language used by Christians before the advent of Islam. In this chapter, Jack B. Tannous of Princeton University—a historian par excellence—challenges the popular assumption that Arabic is an Islamic language to which non-Muslims are, so to speak, aliens and strangers. Relying on a variety of primary sources and engaging ample secondary studies, Tannous argues that Christians used and wrote Arabic over a broad geographic area before the rise of Islam. He then takes up the long-debated question of whether some portion of the Bible was translated into Arabic before the rise of Islam. Looking at the Qurʾān itself, Tannous takes us on a journey in what is arguably the earliest text of Islam and shows one of its most remarkable literary features: its intimate famili-
arity with the Bible and the biblical tradition. The current dominant scholarly position has been that the Qurʾān was the first Arabic book, but Tannous’s arguments demonstrate that the case should be seen as far from settled. Even if there was no translation of the Bible into Arabic before the rise of Islam, says Tannous, the fact remains that Arabic was one of the oldest Christian languages in the world, and Arabic has a Christian history that is actually longer than its Islamic history. Some of Tannous’s arguments will likely prove controversial; for this reason, his chapter can be read alongside other treatments of this topic with great profit as an exercise in understanding scholarly argumentation and disagreement. Because he touches on many different aspects of the history of Christian Arabic, the bibliography for his chapter can also serve as a useful starting point for students looking to delve further into various aspects of Christian Arabic studies.

Chapter 2 introduces our first Christian thinker in this volume: Theodore Abū Qurrah (d. ca. 825). He was born around 750, most likely in the city of Edessa. When he later became the Orthodox bishop of Harran, he devoted himself to the care of his Christian flock and to the defense of Christianity against rival beliefs, including Judaism and Islam. He began his writing career at a time when the number of Christians converting to Islam was growing and the use of Arabic was becoming more common. Through his writings, he addressed these challenges. This fascinating Christian figure is studied in this volume by John C. Lamoreaux, Department of Religious Studies, Southern Methodist University. Lamoreaux is a well-known expert in the field, with various published studies on Abū Qurrah. He begins with a brief biography, followed by an overview of his extant works, before focusing on Abū Qurrah’s defense of Christianity against the rival claims of Islam. In particular, Lamoreaux emphasizes Abū Qurrah’s attempt to fashion a kind of natural theology, whereby the truth claims of the various religious traditions of the early medieval Near East could be adjudicated, such that Christians, Muslims, Jews, and others might be able to argue productively with one another over theological questions. Lamoreaux’s chapter helps us see Abū Qurrah’s unique zeal to
defend the Christology of Chalcedon against its Christian detractors, whether Monophysites, Nestorians, or Monothelites. Finally, Lamoreaux provides an English translation of Abū Qurrah’s “Parable of the Hidden King.”

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on a particularly important Arab Christian theologian: ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, who flourished in the ninth century and is thought to have died around ca. 830. We know very little about al-Kindī’s life, yet we may deduce that he was an Arab Christian from the tribe of Kinda who worked in the ʿAbbāsid caliphal court. He was knowledgeable in Islamic texts, particularly the Qur’ān. His life, significance, and arguments deserve detailed analyses and exploration. This is why our volume devotes two chapters to him. In these two chapters, Mourad Takawi, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas, examines al-Kindī and his important work, al-Risāla (The Epistle). Takawi introduces us to a unique Arabic text—a ninth-century exchange between the Muslim patrician ʿAbdullāh al-Hāshimī and his fellow courtier, the Christian ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī. In Chapter 3, Takawi begins his examination of the exchange by explaining the cultural, historical, and intellectual context in Baghdad under the ʿAbbāsids of the time. Focusing on the important concluding section of al-Risāla, Takawi discusses al-Kindī’s exposition of the Christian faith. Takawi pays close attention to al-Kindī’s emphasis on identifying himself as a member of a dwindling Arab nobility—a claim that, Takawi observes, shapes the apologetic agenda and language of al-Risāla. This same claim, argues Takawi, sets al-Kindī apart from his contemporary Arabic-speaking Christian thinkers. Moreover, in this chapter we encounter al-Kindī’s distinctive presentation of the Christian faith in an Arabic idiom—a vision of Christianity from the perspective of an Arab devotee of the faith. The chapter concludes with a translation of parts of al-Kindī’s concluding section of al-Risāla. In Chapter 4, Takawi continues the study of excerpts of al-Kindī’s Risāla. The focus is on al-Kindī’s arguments on discerning the true religion and his critique of Islam. Takawi studies important Arabic Muslim terms used by al-Kindī, such as qitāl fī sabīl Allāh (fighting in Allah’s path) and ghazw (raiding,
conquering). He demonstrates al-Kindi’s detailed refusal to espouse war in the name of religion and sheds light on peculiar aspects of al-Kindi’s response to his Muslim challenger. The chapter concludes with another translation of an important section of al-Kindi’s Risāla which demonstrates his unique approach and arguments, distinguishing him from other contemporary Christian apologies.

Chapter 5 focuses on our third Christian thinker in this volume, Abū Rā‘iṭa al-Takritī (d. 835). A contemporary of Abū Qurrah and al-Kindi, Abū Rā‘iṭa was one of the first Arabic-speaking Christian theologians whose name was known, as he marked an early transition of Syriac speakers to Arabic. Abū Rā‘iṭa was a Miaphysite lay theologian who flourished in the well-known Christian city of Takrit (in modern day Iraq), which was a hub of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Like his contemporaries, Abū Rā‘iṭa realized the increasing challenges presented by Islam in the ninth century. Sandra T. Keating of Providence College is an expert scholar on Abū Rā‘iṭa’s life and thought, with many published studies on him. She introduces him as a renowned thinker who was sought by various Christian groups to provide clear and concise responses to the challenges posed by Islamic charges against the faith. Keating focuses on Abū Rā‘iṭa’s overall project of translating Christian terms and concepts—particularly relating to the Trinity and incarnation—into the Arabic language, which was heavily colored by the vocabulary of the Qur’ān. She emphasizes how Abū Rā‘iṭa recognized the need to give a “reasonable” burhān (proof) which would be convincing and compelling to Muslims as he defended Christian doctrines against charges of irrationality. In her chapter, we learn about Abū Rā‘iṭa’s treatment of the Qur’ān’s claim that the Bible has been corrupted, as she explains his philosophical concepts and diligent attempts at establishing common ground with his Muslim challengers. Throughout her chapter, Keating provides translations of short passages from Abū Rā‘iṭa’s writings, highlighting examples of his strategies and arguments. These examples will put the development of theological ideas of this early medieval period in context.
Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the important theologian ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī (d. ca. 850). He flourished in the first half of the ninth century, though his birth or death dates are unknown. Since he is called “al-Baṣrī,” we deduce he was from Baṣra (in today’s Iraq)—an important city under the ʿAbbāsids, intellectually, culturally, and theologically, especially during their Golden Age. A younger contemporary of Abū Qurrah and Abū Rā‘īṭa, ʿAmmār was an East Syrian Dyophysite scholar of the Church of the East (Nestorian). He developed a keen interest in translating and explaining crucial Christian doctrines in his Islamic milieu. ʿAmmār’s works and arguments, particularly his defense of the incarnation of God’s Word, deserve detailed examination; thus he appears in two chapters in this volume. Two of his important works reached us, Kitāb al-Masā’il wa-l-ajwiba (The Book of Questions and Answers) and Kitāb al-Burhān (The Book of the Proof). Mark Beaumont, research associate at London School of Theology, is one of the best experts on the life and works of ʿAmmār. In these two chapters, Beaumont covers major areas of ʿAmmār’s two known works. In Chapter 6, Beaumont begins by introducing the historical context, with a brief discussion of ʿAmmār’s works. He then focuses on ʿAmmār’s Kitāb al-Burhān, and explains how this work uniquely develops apologetic arguments in light of Muslim attitudes toward Christian beliefs. In Chapter 7, Beaumont concentrates on ʿAmmār’s Kitāb al-Masā’il wa-l-ajwiba, and explains ʿAmmār’s handling of fifty-one questions about the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. In both chapters, Beaumont studies ʿAmmār’s answers to difficult questions posed against Christianity. We learn of ʿAmmār’s compelling arguments for how the eternal and transcendent God become time-bound and limited. We encounter ʿAmmār’s defense of the plausibility of the Christian belief that the Messiah gave himself as an offering for others. For Beaumont, ʿAmmār’s works are the most detailed defense of the incarnation by a Christian writing in Arabic in the early Islamic period. Both chapters conclude with a translation of parts of ʿAmmār’s work.

In chapter 8, we move the discussion to the tenth century and to the Copts of Egypt, as we study the works and arguments
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of Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (ca. 910–987). Arguably, Sāwīrus (known in English as Severus) was the first major Coptic apologist to theologize in Arabic, introducing Coptic ecclesiastic and liturgical literature to the Copts using the language of the Muslims. In this chapter, Egyptian Coptic researcher Mina Yousef introduces us to Severus, his historical context, his unique apologetic arguments, and his important work the Kitāb miṣbāḥ al-ʿaql (The Lamp of the Intellect). Yousef emphasizes the role Severus played among the Copts, not only to respond to challenges posed by Islam, but also to distinguish the beliefs of the Coptic Church—particularly around the union of the two natures of Christ in one—from those of the Chalcedonian Church. Yousef studies Severus’ arguments on Christ and examines his views on the incarnation. For Yousef, the analysis of Severus’ Kitāb miṣbāḥ al-ʿaql reflects his straightforward yet profound arguments, which address both the religiously educated and uneducated in his Coptic flock. The chapter concludes with a translation of Severus’ Arabic work, where he discusses Christology, defends the incarnation, and explains the divinity and humanity of Christ, highlighting his Coptic Christian views concerning the Resurrection and the Judgement Day.

Chapter 9 takes us back to Baghdad and introduces a man of many talents, the Baghdadi Jacobite logician, philosopher, and translator ʿĪsā ibn Isḥāq ibn Zurʿa (943–1008). Clint Hackenburg, a talented researcher and translator of Christian Arabic texts, studies several of the apologetic and polemical writings of Ibn Zurʿa, particularly comparing them with the works of Ibn Zurʿa’s well-known teacher, Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī (d. 974). After setting the historical context, Hackenburg demonstrates the prowess of Ibn Zurʿa as a theologian and intellectual who regularly engaged Christians and non-Christians—including Jews and Muslims—in philosophical and religious discussions. Hackenburg focuses on Ibn Zurʿa’s philosophical arguments regarding four major Christian-Muslim controversies: the Trinity, the anthropomorphic descriptions of God, the Christian rejection of Muḥammad’s prophetic office, and the person of Christ. In discussing these major topics, Hackenburg compares Ibn Zurʿa’s critique of Islam to his critique of Judaism. Additionally, we
learn of the uniqueness of Ibn Zur‘a’s arguments, as Hackenburg compares them with those of three of his Jacobite predecessors. Through this comparison, Hackenburg is doing us a great favor, as he distinguishes Ibn Zur‘a and his works, removing him from the shadow of his mentor, Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī, and other prolific Jacobite theologians. Hackenburg’s chapter concludes with a complete translation of Ibn Zur‘a’s short refutation of a Muslim treatise, which attests to Ibn Zur‘a’s philosophical and apologetical competence.

In chapter 10, we study a unique example of an Egyptian Muslim convert to Christianity as he assesses Islam. Būluṣ ibn Rajā’ (ca. 950–1015) was born in a Muslim family to an Arab Muslim faqīh (jurist). From an early age, Ibn Rajā’ became an expert in Islamic texts, including the Qur‘ān, its commentaries, and the Ḥadīth. He gained knowledge of Islam under important jurists of his day; however, in his mid-twenties, he reportedly encountered Christ and converted to Christianity. David Bertaina, University of Illinois Springfield, takes us on a splendid journey through the life, thought, and works of this convert. Bertaina begins the chapter by describing the historical context of Ibn Rajā’, especially his family’s Islamic status, his journey from Islam to Christianity, and his adherence to the Coptic Christian faith. After describing the works of Ibn Rajā’ and the influence of Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (who is discussed in chapter 8), Bertaina focuses on the important work of Ibn Rajā’, Kitāb al-Wādīḥ bi-l-ḥaqq (The Truthful Exposer). In analyzing this work, Bertaina explains the strategy Ibn Rajā’ used in dealing with Islam and its claims. We learn that Ibn Rajā’ relied on his unique knowledge of Islamic texts—including the Qur‘ān and the Ḥadīth—to question and critique his former religion, by showing inconsistencies and contradictions in texts which Muslims of his day considered authoritative. Bertaina discusses key themes in Kitāb al-Wādīḥ bi-al-ḥaqq, such as the Incantation, the Trinity, the corruption of scriptures, and the character and deeds of Muḥammad. The chapter concludes with an examination of the impact of the work and arguments of Ibn Rajā’, suggestions for possible future research on him, and a translation of sections of his work Kitāb al-Wādīḥ bi-al-ḥaqq.
In chapter 11, we explore the life and works of the Bagh-dadi monk, scholar, and physician Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Ṭayyib (d. ca. 1043). Like ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī, Ibn al-Ṭayyib was from the Church of the East (Nestorian). Michael F. Kuhn, Associate Professor at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, Beirut, Lebanon, introduces us to the legacy and unique contribution of Ibn al-Ṭayyib. After describing the historical and sectarian background of Ibn al-Ṭayyib's career and writing, Kuhn emphasizes his contribution to preserving the Syriac exegetical heritage and his important role in the translation movement that Arabicized much of the Greek intellectual heritage and thereby fueled the ʿAbbāsid renaissance. Kuhn distinguishes Ibn al-Ṭayyib's arguments and approach from Christians who preceded him within his own Church of the East and other eastern ecclesial families. Kuhn explains Ibn al-Ṭayyib's approach and highlights the desire of the monk-scholar to safeguard his Church of the East flock through his theological treatises. Kuhn then focuses on elements in these treatises. He demonstrates that Ibn al-Ṭayyib not only developed the work of his Christian forebears, by articulating a cogent and succinct Trinitarian formulation, but also advanced unique arguments in connection with the Islamic theology of his day. Kuhn emphasizes, in particular, Ibn al-Ṭayyib's discussions of Allah's attributes and their division into attributes of essence and action. The chapter concludes with a translation of one of Ibn al-Ṭayyib's works, highlighting aspects of his Trinitarian formulation.

In chapter 12, the final chapter in the volume, Michael Kuhn introduces another important figure from the Church of the East, Elias of Nisibis (d. 1046). A contemporary of Ibn al-Ṭayyib, Elias contributed to Muslim-Christian relations in the eleventh century. Kuhn emphasizes Elias' Christology, especially in relation to the Church of the East's position of Dyophysitism. Moreover, he explores the works of Elias, especially his seven Sessions, which he wrote in correspondence with the caliphal Muslim minister. Kuhn argues that Elias' Sessions provide one of the friendliest examples of Muslim-Christian debates from the medieval period. He demonstrates not only Elias' creative attempts to convince his Muslim interlocutor that Christians are
not polytheists, but also his responses to common Islamic misunderstandings of the Christian Trinity and Christology. In this chapter, we learn some possible reasons for the success of the Sessions, as Kuhn evaluates unique textual claims in them, such as the claim that the Muslim minister received a supernatural healing from Christian monastics and that he had been persecuted by the Fatimid Caliph al-Hākim. To explain Elias’ didactic reasoning and highlight his Church of the East Christology, Kuhn provides a translation of pertinent sections of Elias’ Sessions.

Finally, a word on the style and structure of the volume is important. The footnotes include abbreviated bibliographical references (author and the first few words of the title). For the full-length citation, the reader is invited to consult the bibliography at the end of each chapter. The chapters are decidedly scholarly yet accessible. At its heart, the volume is written in a way which seeks to be suitable for students of all levels. In each chapter discussing a Christian theologian, there is a translation section to provide access in English to Christian Arabic texts of the theologian under study. Some of these translations appear in English for the first time. The goal is to offer an accessible primary source for researchers. Through these translations and their analyses, it is a hope that this volume would serve as a reader in medieval Arabic-language Christian writings—a tremendous gift to western academia. While we sought to make the volume accessible, we still decided to use transliterations of Arabic names and terms. This was a stylistic choice, as we thought it was important to allow students a window into scholarly writing. Thus, instead of simply writing “Muhammad” and “Quran,” we use “Muḥammad” and “Qurʾān.” This use of diacritics to preserve Arabic names aims to encourage students to familiarize themselves with scholarly writing. While this use of transliteration can be burdensome for some students, especially those unfamiliar with Arabic, we view this volume as introductory, and hope it opens doors for a more scholarly interaction around these medieval Arabic-speaking Christians in the future. The ultimate hope behind this collection of articles is to provide graduate and undergraduate students, in English-speaking
schools and universities, a chance to both learn about the wealth of medieval Christian Arabic texts and to study the varied arguments of the theologians who wrote them. Through this volume, we seek to raise awareness of key Eastern Christians who interacted with Islam and Islamic claims, and to highlight their major arguments and varying approaches to Islam. It is hoped that these chapters provide the readers with pointers on possible future research.

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