Developing the Doctrine of the Trinity in an Islamic Milieu:
Early Arabic Christian Contributions to Trinitarian Theology

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During the eighth and ninth centuries, in the Islamic empire governed from ‘Abbāsid Baghdad, a new body of Christian literature appeared: theological treatises written in Arabic rather than in Syriac or Greek, and composed with the express purpose of articulating Christian doctrine in conscious dialogue with the religious discourse of the surrounding Islamic milieu. A number of these treatises sought to defend and further develop Trinitarian doctrine by drawing upon the terminology and conceptual range of the Qur’ān, contemporary Muslim debates about the relationship between the divine attributes and the oneness of God, and the Islamic appropriation of Greek philosophical concepts, particularly those of Aristotelian metaphysics. The earliest such treatise is *Fi taḥlī l-Allāh al-wāḥid*, a work of anonymous authorship from approximately the middle of the eighth century, which is also considered the earliest known Arabic Christian apologia on any subject. Other important writings on the subject include those of the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurrah (c. 750-c. 820), the Jacobite Habīb ibn Ḥidman Abū Rāʾīṭah (c. 770-c. 835), and Ammār āl-Baṣrī (fl. c. 830), an adherent of the Church of the East.

An important theme in these Trinitarian writings is the use of the terms Word and Spirit in reference to God in the Qur’ānic text. Another is the question, then beginning to be important in internecine Muslim theological debates, of how God can be one and yet
be described with multiple attributes. A third is the question of how a human attribute, such as begetting, could exist at all unless there is a corresponding attribute in God. In each of these areas of exploration, the Arabic Christian authors here considered seek to demonstrate that only Trinitarian doctrine fully satisfies the language of the Qur’ān itself, the Islamic emphasis on God’s transcendence, and the demands of a rigorous metaphysical account. One striking characteristic of this body of Arabic Christian apologetical literature is its approach of using the very elements of Islamic discourse that were perceived as most opposed to Christian doctrine (for example, Qur’ānic “proof texts” against the Trinity) as evidence for Trinitarian doctrine.
This dissertation by Thomas W. Ricks fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in theology approved by Sidney Griffith as Director, by William Loewe as Co-director, and by John Galvin as Reader.

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Introduction

During the eighth and ninth centuries A.D., in the Islamic empire governed from ‘Abbāsid Baghdad, three great cultural and social forces converged to produce a new body of Christian literature: theological treatises written in Arabic rather than in Syriac or Greek, and composed with the express purpose of articulating Christian doctrine in conscious dialogue with the religious discourse of the surrounding Islamic milieu. The first of these cultural forces was the new character of the expansive Islamic empire, which brought with it Arabic as the new lingua franca, new incentives for conversion to Islam, and to some degree greater freedom for Christian communities that lay outside the orbit of Constantinopolitan Orthodoxy. The second was the ascendancy of Greek philosophical concepts within the Arab world as a result of the great translation movement. This movement to bring the major works of Greek philosophy, medicine, and science into the heart of Arab culture created a situation in which Aristotelian translators and commentators were in demand in the most fashionable intellectual circles and in the courts of political power of ‘Abbāsid Baghdad. The fervent desire for the works of Greek antiquity, and especially, for Aristotelian philosophy, brought Christians and Muslims into near proximity and frequent collaboration with each other. The third force was the emerging debate within Islam about how to understand the divine attributes in light of both the implications of Arabic grammar and the Muslim doctrine of āl-taḥād, or a conception of monotheism so absolute as to preclude any kind of plurality in the divinity.
A New Social Reality in the Islamic Empire

The rise of the Islamic empire, followed by the removal of its seat of government from Harran to Damascus in 661, and then from Damascus to Baghdad in 762, brought sweeping social changes for large populations of people stretched over enormous swaths of territory. These changes were hardly limited to religious considerations, instead involving virtually every facet of daily life. As Dimitri Gutas puts it in his book *Greek Thought, Arab Culture*,

Egypt and the Fertile Crescent were reunited with Persia and India politically, administratively, and most important, economically, for the first time since Alexander the Great…. The great economic and cultural divide that separated the civilized world for a thousand years prior to the rise of Islam, the frontier between the East and the West formed by the two great rivers that created antagonistic powers on either side, ceased to exist. This allowed for the free flow of raw materials and manufactured goods, agricultural products and luxury items, people and services, techniques and skills, and ideas, methods, and modes of thought.¹

This development means that in a relatively short time the Arabophone Muslim community changed from being a demographically small and geographically somewhat isolated people to being the masters of a vast, cosmopolitan, and culturally diverse empire with a wide range of ethnic, linguistic, and confessional identities. Significant numbers of Christians were included among the inhabitants of the newly polyglot caliphate; in fact, Sidney Griffith notes that

… after the consolidation of the Islamic conquest … perhaps fifty percent of the world’s confessing Christians … found themselves living under Muslim rule. Conversely, during … the very centuries during which the classical Islamic culture was coming into its own, the Muslims themselves

still did not make up the absolute majority of the population everywhere in
the caliphate, not even in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, where
by the end of the ninth century the largest populations of the speakers of
Arabic lived.2

Thus the stage was set for the creation of a cultural milieu in which the presence of each
major faith community, Christian and Muslim, would be a significant factor in the
development of the other’s religious discourse. For the Muslims this meant, in part, the
appropriation of a rich heritage of philosophical tools, already long established in
Christian usage, for the propagation of Islam, as well as the administration of a empire in
which many subjects of the professional and intellectual classes did not share the caliph’s
religion. For the Christians, the task set before them consisted of preserving a faith
tradition in wholly new political circumstances as well as articulating and defending the
intellectual integrity of that faith in a world shaped by the increasing cultural hegemony
of the Arabic language to the detriment of Greek and Syriac.

Richard Frank points out that the Arabic language itself was not a mundane or
purely pragmatic factor in the cultural interchange and mutual influence that took place
over the next few centuries, but instead was a key factor due in large part to its status in
Islam:

In no culture, perhaps, has speech and the eloquent use of language been
so praised and admired or the language itself more cherished and
studied…. Common Islamic dogma, founded in the Koran itself, has it that
while the miracle of Moses – the signs and wonders worked through him
by God to confirm his mission – had the form and character of magic and

2 Sidney Griffith, The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam
that of Jesus the form and character of medicine and healing, that of Muhammad was language.³

Indeed, so profound was the influence of the Arabic language in which the Qur’ān was given, and so directly was its language associated with the action of God to reveal His will and His design of true religion, that the individual verses of the text were given the name ā'yah, the Arabic term for “signs” which also applied to the miracles that would confirm the legitimacy of a true prophet’s ministry.

Thus Christians in the Islamic empire faced a double linguistic challenge. On the one hand, there was the practical need, if their communities were not to become linguistic relics, to accommodate the new quotidian reality by being able to express Christian doctrine in Arabic. As far as is known, this was a largely new project, because no extant pre-Islamic Arabic Christian literature exists. This fact includes the absence of any Arabic translation of the Bible or liturgical text. Arabic-speaking Christian communities, then, needed quite badly what might be called an “indigenous theological vocabulary” in order to engage with Islam in a way that was terminologically accessible. This was not always an easy task, since the use of Greek terminology had been so formative in the early development of Christian doctrine. The translation of technical terms always introduces the possibility of “conceptual shifts” as terms lose some of their original resonance or take on differing nuances.

On the other hand, the cultural and religious milieu in which such a task would be taken up was hardly linguistically neutral. As Griffith puts it, by the time Christians were seriously engaged in the work of creating an apologetical literature in Arabic, … the religious lexicon in Arabic had already been co-opted by Islam, and unlike the earlier situation in pre-Islamic Arabia, the newly Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians outside of Arabia in the ninth and tenth centuries in the conquered territories were faced with the imperative of translating their teachings into and commending their faith in a religious vocabulary that had now become suffused with explicitly Islamic connotations….4

As will be shown, one of the more ingenious aspects of the early Christian Arabic apologetical literature was to turn this distinct disadvantage into a rich mine of source material. Rather than shrinking from the task of articulating and defending Christian doctrine in a language that already had such religious significance for a different faith, the first generation of Arabophone Christian controversialists often drew upon Islamic materials, including Qur’ānic “proof texts,” Qur’ānic terminology, Islamic theological emphases, and internal Muslim debates about the divine attributes and their relationship to the divine oneness, in order to build their case for Trinitarian doctrine.

Another important factor in Christian-Muslim interaction during this period was the enhanced incentive to convert to Islam that developed in the eighth century. The Umayyad caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd āl-Āziz, who reigned from 717 to 720, had actively promoted the equality of converts to Islam with native Arab Muslims, in terms of both social standing and opportunity for political advancement. Following the ‘Abbāsid revolution and the shift of power first to Damascus and then to Baghdad, large numbers

4 Griffith, Shadow, 19-20.
of well-established scholarly and professional families found themselves in the position
of having a different religion than the ruling elite at the very time that upward mobility
began to be linked with conversion to Islam. Gutas cites as typical examples of the period
the Wahb and āl-Jarrāḥ families, both of which produced numerous scholars and state
officials during the ninth century, and whose rise to prominence coincided roughly with
their conversion to Islam.\footnote{Gutas, 131-32.} Given this social dynamic, leaders of the Christian
communities must have felt tremendous pressure to produce arguments for Christian
document that were intellectually attractive enough to prevent the defection of their best
and brightest to the religion of the caliph.

Another new circumstance that contributed to the development of the Christian
Arabic apologetical literature was the social standing of the non-Chalcedonian Christian
communities. These Syriac-speaking Christians, conversant in the achievements of Greek
philosophy but entrenched in a strong tradition of theological scholarship quite apart from
the world of Constantinopolitan Orthodoxy, had been politically and socially
marginalized while their communities were under Byzantine rule. With the advent of the
Muslim empire, a sphere of scholarly enterprise and interaction with broader geographic
parameters and greater political neutrality was created. Gutas describes the situation in
this way:

\begin{quote}
With the advent of Islam, all these centers \[i.e., \text{the centers of eastern Christian scholarship}\] were united politically and administratively, and, most important, scholars from all of them could pursue their studies and interact with each other without the need to pay heed to any official version of ‘orthodoxy,’ whatever the religion. We thus see throughout the region and through the seventh and eighth centuries numerous
\end{quote}
“international” scholars active in their respective fields and working with different languages.\textsuperscript{6}

As will be shown, this is an apt description of some of the authors who contributed significantly to the nascent Christian Arabic literature about the Trinity. Since one of these authors, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī, was an adherent of the Church of the East, and another, Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rā’īṭah, was a Jacobite Christian, a brief examination of these communities is in order.

\textbf{The Church of the East and the Jacobite Community}

The Church of the East has traditionally but erroneously been referred to in Western literature as the “Nestorian” church, and in modern times has adopted the appellation Assyrian Church of the East. The precise origins of this ecclesial community lie hidden in the mists of primitive ecclesiastical history. By the third century, there was a sufficiently large Persian Christian population that Persian historians recount some persecutions, mainly of those who had converted from Zoroastrianism to Christianity. By and large, though, Persian Christians fared rather better than their Roman brethren until the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313. Ironically, the improved situation of Roman Christians proved ill for those in Persia, mainly because Constantine imprudently wrote to the Persian king requesting that he treat the Christians within his domain well, but doing so in terms that suggested that Constantine considered himself the ruler of all those who belonged to the Christian faith. This in turn led to a suspicion that perhaps the Persian Christians were not loyal citizens, a fearful suspicion at a time when

\textsuperscript{6} Gutas, 15.
Persia had been struggling with Rome for control of its border territories for over three hundred years.

This political reality led to significant difficulties in keeping up any kind of regular communication between the Christian communities of Persia and those of the Roman Empire. Still, it is recorded that one “Bishop John of the Church of Greater Persia and the Churches of the East” attended the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and signed its creed. The Church of the East has always affirmed the second ecumenical council, that of Constantinople (381), as well, but by the time of the Council of Ephesus (431), significant differences of theological expression had emerged. In contrast to the Alexandrian theological tradition, with its strong emphasis upon the unity of Christ, the Persian tradition emphasized the reality of the two natures of Christ, human and divine. This emphasis led to the Church of the East’s refusal to accept the title bestowed on the Blessed Virgin Mary by the Council of Ephesus – *theotokos*, or “Mother of God.” While it must be emphasized that the Persian church certainly did not deny the divinity of Christ – the essential reason for the title bestowed by the council – the title seemed to Persian Christians to blur the reality of the two natures of Christ in a way that was almost Eutychian, suggesting that the human nature was subsumed into the divine, and which was therefore unacceptable. Persian Christians also saw the council as something of a Roman imposition. The next blow to unity between the West and the Church of the East came in 449, when the metropolitan of Persia adopted the title, “patriarch of the East,” in clear contradistinction to the title used by the Roman bishop. The final blow to unity

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7 For the normative text of this creed, see Denziger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, edition xxxv (Freiburg: Herder, 1973), #150.
came with the Chalcedonian Christological definition of hypostatic union.\(^8\) The term hypostasis was typically rendered in Syriac as qnome, but Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler argue in their comprehensive study of the Church of the East that this community’s use of qnome could be understood as the particular “individuation” or “concretization” of a nature, rather than as the nature itself.\(^9\) Understood this way, the Chalcedonian definition was incomprehensible from the Persian point of view.

This rejection of the Chalcedonian definition brings up the important question: is the Church of the East truly “Nestorian”? In their own histories, members of this church have always objected to the title, noting that Nestorius was Greek-speaking, and therefore outside the orbit of Syriac Christianity. They also insist that it makes no sense to call their church by the name of a person who belonged to the church of Constantinople, rather than being the Persian patriarch. More to the point, the Christology of the Church of the East was put in its final form by Babai the Great in the early sixth century. Babai’s teaching clearly affirms both the single personhood and the two natures of Christ; by any reasonable standard, it is an orthodox definition that is not substantively at odds with the Chalcedonian definition. For this reason, it must be affirmed that the Church of the East is not, in fact, Nestorian.

The history of the Jacobite church can also be traced to the disagreement over the Chalcedonian definition. Unlike the Church of the East, which held that the definition

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\(^8\) For the normative text of the Chalcedonian Christological definition, see Denziger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, edition xxxv (Freiburg: Herder, 1973), #302.

failed sufficiently to emphasize the distinction of the two natures of Christ, some Syriac-speaking Christian communities objected that the definition, with its reference to two natures, was in fact Nestorian, and therefore heterodox. Again, it must be remembered that the Greek term *hypostasis* was typically rendered in Syriac as *qnome*, which has a slightly different connotation than the Greek. It seems to indicate two different individuations or concretizations, and therefore it is quite understandable that some Syriac-speaking Christians would find it Nestorian. Those who objected to the Chalcedonian definition on these grounds came to be called “monophysite” Christians, for their alleged insistence upon the “one nature” of Christ.

For some time after the council, this theological (or perhaps terminological) controversy did not formally divide the Christian communities that lay within the Roman sphere of influence. Eventually, however, the efforts of the emperor Justinian to enforce the Chalcedonian definition during the early sixth century caused the theological controversy to become a political one as well. The “monophysite” patriarch of Alexandria ordained Jacob Baradaeus as the first “monophysite” bishop in a territory where there was already a Chalcedonian bishop.\(^\text{10}\) This was the first appearance in Christian history of a double-hierarchy based on differing confessions, and it is this “Jacob” for whom the Jacobite church is named. Jacob made great efforts to establish a strong “monophysite” presence within his territory. Throughout a long reign from his ordination to the episcopate in 542 until his death in 578, he traveled constantly, ordaining priests and deacons loyal to himself and the “monophysite” confession. It

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\(^\text{10}\) Ibid.
should be noted as well that the Jacobite church is certainly not the only Christian community with a “monophysite” confession; the Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopian churches are “monophysite” as well.11

As with the “Nestorian” church, it is important to ask whether the Jacobite church is truly “monophysite” in the sense that it departs from orthodox Christological doctrine. An examination of the writings of such Jacobite figures as Severus of Antioch and Philoxenus of Mabbug shows that they in fact affirm both the human and divine natures of Christ, but seek to emphasize that in the person of Jesus Christ there is but one conscious subject and one actor, the Incarnate Word.12 In fact, Philoxenus in particular, in spite of the tendency among some monophysites to avoid usages of the communicatio idiomatum, is fond of making paradoxical statements emphasizing the two natures of Christ, such as saying that “the Immortal One died.” The Jacobite tradition, then, clearly holds to a different Christological doctrine than the Eutychian form of monophysitism, which held that the divine nature of Christ was so great that the human nature was “dissolved like a drop of honey in the sea.”13

The other Arabophone Christian “denomination” that must be taken into account for its importance in the development of the Christian Arab apologetical literature to be considered here is the ecclesial community traditionally known as “Melkites.” The name

11 For an account of the theological history of these churches, see Aziz S. Atiya, History of Eastern Christianity (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 1968.

12 For a thorough treatment of these authors’ Christological writings, see Roberta C. Chesnut, Three Monophysite Christologies (Oxford: University Press), 1985.

itself is of Arabic origin, meaning “royalists” and intended to signify those Christians who during the Christological controversies maintained the same doctrinal expressions as the “king,” i.e., the Byzantine emperor. Although better known in the West than the Jacobite church or the Church of the East because of its adherence to the Chalcedonian Christological definition, the Melkite church is in a somewhat different category than the other two “denominations” with regard to its origin and formation. Griffith notes that while the Nestorian and Jacobite churches were already in the process of formation prior to the rise of Islam … the Melkite community as a sociologically distinct community of Christians came into existence only in Islamic times and in the world of Islam. They professed the faith of Byzantine orthodoxy, but very much in the Arabic-speaking milieu of the Islamic challenge to Christian faith.14

Thus, among the Christian communities here considered, the Melkites are perhaps the best example of the complex cultural dynamic described above, in which the Christian community in some sense owed its cultural identity and its linguistic expression to the rise of Islam, while at the same time influencing the direction of Muslim doctrinal expression by its participation in the formation of a Christian Arabic apologetical literature.

The Translation Movement and the Rise of Arab Aristotelianism

Perhaps no intellectual current during the ‘Abbāsid period was more sustained or more pervasive than the translation movement which brought the philosophical and scientific texts of classical Greece into the mainstream of Arab cultural life. Gutas notes that, so complete was this movement in both its origins and its aims, that it lasted over

14 Griffith, Shadow, 137-38.
two centuries, claimed as its proponents and participants virtually every part of the professional and ruling classes of the ‘Abbāsid empire, and achieved the translation into Arabic of “almost all non-literary and non-historical secular Greek books that were available throughout the Eastern Byzantine Empire and the Near East.”¹⁵ This great intellectual achievement became a formative influence on the development of the Christian Arabic apologetical literature in three distinct ways.

First, because a great deal of Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelian dialectic and metaphysics, had already been assimilated by the Syriac-speaking Christian communities, the materials translated into Arabic formed a significant portion of the intellectual apparatus with which Christians would begin their Arabic response to Islam. Gutas argues that the degree to which the translation movement began as a Syriac enterprise has been significantly exaggerated, but the historical record is clear that the Christian communities in what later became the ‘Abbāsid empire were engaged in mastering the Greek disciplines even before the appearance of Islam. As Griffith puts it,

> Over that long period of time [from the sixth to the tenth centuries], in the careers of an impressive number of mostly … Jacobite scholars from the environs of Edessa, some with direct ties to the philosophical school in Alexandria, the fortunes of Aristotle and Greek philosophy and science more generally, grew steadily in the Syriac-speaking world.¹⁶

Thus the terminological and conceptual range of the Greek texts formed a significant part of the worldview and intellectual heritage of those who first took pen in hand to respond to Islam in the Arabic language. Furthermore, because of this background, philosophical

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¹⁵ Gutas, 1-2.

investigations would serve as intellectual common ground for Muslims and Christians, who once the translation movement was in full swing, worked cheek-by-jowl in the translation enterprise.

Second, some of the texts translated from the Greek became highly influential sources in the development of the art of public disputation, which in turn greatly influenced the nascent Christian Arabic literature, both in format and in content. Gutas traces this series of developments to a single critical decision made by the caliph āl-Mahdī late in the 8th century:

It is reported on quite unimpeachable authority that the caliph āl-Mahdī (d. 785) … commissioned the translation into Arabic of Aristotle’s *Topics*…. The *Topics* is hardly light reading, so the question why it attracted such attention at the initial stages of the translation movement is significant…. There can be little doubt that the selection of the book was because of its contents and their relevance to the needs generated with Islamic society…. Gutas then goes on to describe how this project turned out to be the first of three such translations of the *Topics* over a period of a century and a half, the last of them being done by none other than Yaḥya ibn ʿAdi, a prominent Jacobite Christian controversialist. The early interest and perennial prominence of this particular text suggests how important it was in the formation of what in fact became an important feature of Arab cultural life, the public disputation about questions of a religious nature. In fact, the same caliph who played such a crucial role in the translation movement by having the *Topics* translated the first time is on record as having used theological dialecticians as state propagandists for the suppression of non-Islamic Persian religion. With the Christians having honed their

17 Gutas, 61-62.
skills at disputation and polemic over centuries of Christological controversy, the caliph seems to have felt the need to draw on the same classical sources in order to create a cadre of well-trained apologists for Islam. The resulting tradition of formal theological debate had a direct influence on the shaping of the apologetical literature in Arabic to be considered here.

A third way that the translation movement influenced the Christian Arabic theological enterprise is creating a kind of secular, intellectual criterion against which Muslims and non-Muslims alike could be measured. Just as in the religious sphere the Qur’ān made a claim for Islam as the authentic heir of all true prophets throughout history, so now in the philosophical sphere Muslim controversialists attempted to arrogate to themselves the role of authentic heir to the intellectual heritage of ancient Greece:

The Byzantines were portrayed as deserving of Muslim attacks not only because they were infidels … but because they were also culturally benighted and inferior not only to Muslims but also to their own ancestors, the ancient Greeks. The Muslims by contradiinction, in addition to being superior because of Islam, were also superior because they appreciated ancient Greek science and wisdom and had translated their books into Arabic.18

As will be demonstrated, the first generation of Arabophone Christian apologists took up the challenge thus presented. They sought to show that Trinitarian doctrine is authentic to God’s revelation because it is supported by the prophets and even by the language of the Qur’ān itself, but it is also authentic to the philosophical heritage in that it is coherent and consistent in the context of Aristotelian metaphysics.

18 Gutas, 84-85.
The Divine Attributes and the Oneness of God

A final cultural force that was of great importance in its contribution to the creation of the Christian literature to be examined here was the burgeoning debate within Islam about how the divine attributes were to be considered in light of God’s absolute oneness, which in the Islamic tradition would preclude any kind of plurality within the divinity. The way in which the question was formulated and investigated depended largely on the rules of theoretical Arabic grammar. Frank points out that Arabic grammar, in turn, held a particularly prominent place in the development of the Islamic religious discourse:

… [G]rammar is the first science to reach maturity in Islam – before the end of the second/eighth century – and it does so, almost completely apart from earlier and alien traditions, as a peculiarly Islamic science. This attention to language, most particularly to the language of the Koran and to the grammatical and lexical structures and the characteristics of literary Arabic, had a profound influence on the formation and development of the kalām [Muslim theological discourse] … not simply in their terminology but also in the manner in which many fundamental problems of ontology and ethics – concerning, thus, God’s Unity and His Justice (at-tawḥīd wal-‘adl) were conceived, formulated, and analysed.19

The chief problem for the Muslim grammarian and theologian of the period is that the rules of Arabic grammar indicate that any attribute (ṣīlah) applied to an entity being described implies the existence of a noun, which in turn indicates what Frank calls “a kind of entitative reality”20 within the subject described. Thus to make predications of God is, at least potentially, to affirm within the divinity multiple entitative realities that are in some way distinct from Him, which in turn could undermine the doctrine of God’s

19 Frank, 10.
20 Ibid., 13.
unicity. Yet both the language of the Qurʾān and Islamic piety, such as devotion to the “beautiful names of God,” affirmed many divine attributes. The early Arabophone Christian apologists considered here were eager to take advantage of this very real theological problem and use it to demonstrate that only Trinitarian doctrine could satisfy the demands of Arabic grammar, just as only Trinitarian doctrine could make the language of the Qurʾān fully intelligible or satisfy the requirements of a vigorous philosophical investigation.
Chapter 1: *Fr tağlt Ālalh al-wāhid*

The first text to be considered here is also the earliest extant Arab Christian apologia, *Fr tağlt Ālalh al-wāhid*. When in 1899 Margaret Dunlop Gibson¹ published a text and translation of this document based on a manuscript from the Convent of St. Catharine on Mount Sinai, she introduced the treatise to the English-speaking world under the title “On the Triune Nature of God.” This name is infelicitous because the term “nature” (Arabic الدَّر or الْتَكْرِاَب), with all its philosophical implications, does not appear in the Arabic title. The term *tağlt*, which comes from the word for three, has no exact equivalent in standard English, but could be translated “threeness” or perhaps “trinicity.” Thus a more precise rendering of the Arabic would yield a title for the treatise such as “On the Trinicity of the One God,” or perhaps even “On the Fact that the One God Exists as Three.” (For the sake of brevity, this treatise will hereafter be referred to simply as *Fr tağlt*.)

Both the identity of the author and the precise date of the treatise’s original composition are unknown. Samir Khalil Samir, in an examination of the manuscripts from which Gibson produced her text and translation, detected (on a page that Gibson seems to have found illegible) a reference to the Christian religion having “stood firm … and erect for seven hundred and forty-six years.”² Samir argues that, depending upon

¹ Margaret Dunlop Gibson (1843-1920) was a Semitics scholar who, together with her twin sister Agnes Smith Lewis (1843-1926), rediscovered numerous early Syriac and Arabic Christian manuscripts. For a recent account of their lives and work, see Janet Soskice, *The Sisters of Sinai: How Two Lady Adventurers Found the Hidden Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

whether one uses the Incarnation, the advent of Jesus’ preaching, or the paschal events as one’s starting point, this reference would yield a date of composition between 737 and 771, making it the earliest known Christian document in Arabic, and possibly even the sole surviving Arabic Christian document from the Umayyad period, which ended with the rise of the ‘Abbāsid caliphate in 750.

In order to provide context for the Trinitarian doctrine found in this treatise, it will be useful to note some of the stylistic and terminological characteristics of the text. Perhaps most importantly, the treatise demonstrates a familiarity on the part of the author with the text of the Qurʾān and a strong commitment to using much of the same terminology. There are at least eight direct Qurʾānic quotations or citations in the treatise, and the rest of its text is saturated with Qurʾānic expressions and turns of phrase. So closely does Ḩā′ī tāliq track with Qurʾānic terminology, in fact, that different readers could legitimately argue about what “counts” as a Qurʾānic citation. They could also perhaps argue about whether the author’s constant use of such terminology is a reflection of the religious idiom available to him, or reflects a consciously employed strategy on his part. It is not necessary to impose such a dichotomy on the author’s motivations, however, since both considerations must have been factors in the writing of the text. On the one hand, as Sidney Griffith points out, the religious vocabulary of the Arabic language in the eighth century “had already been co-opted by Islam” and the author’s unstructured and flowing style suggests an easy familiarity with the Qurʾānic vocabulary and conceptual range. Samir goes so far as to describe the unnamed author as “impregnated with the

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3 Griffith, Shadow, 19.
Qur’anic culture.”

On the other hand, as will be shown below, the author pursues a consistent strategy of putting the vocabulary of this Qur’anic culture to work for his apologetical enterprise. The religious idiom of his time and place has become for him not merely a given fact of his cultural milieu, but also “a new idiom in which [his] faith must be articulated if it is to carry conviction.”

A second noteworthy facet of the style in which Ṣan ʿālī is written is an almost complete lack of discernible structure. Far from being a formal academic work, the treatise almost seems written according to “stream of consciousness,” as various arguments, quotations, analogies, and associations occur to the mind of the anonymous author. Indeed, so loose and flowing is its composition that one could reasonably hypothesize that the treatise as we now have it is the written record of a speech or sermon, although there is no historical or textual reason to believe this to be the case. Whether intentionally or otherwise, this style is particularly suited to a document that draws so heavily on the Qur’ān (“Recitations” or “Readings”), itself a collection of texts that were originally oral proclamations. Perhaps, as with the issue of Qur’ānic vocabulary described above, the style of Ṣan ʿālī both reflects the cultural norms to which the author was accustomed and constitutes one aspect of his conscious apologetical strategy.

A third characteristic of the treatise is its strong scriptural orientation. Besides its Qur’ānic citations already mentioned, the text includes some eighty-one biblical quotations, including in its scope Genesis, Deuteronomy, Job, the Psalms, Isaiah,

4 Samir, 108.

5 Griffith, Shadow, 57.
Jeremiah, Daniel (in its longer form), Ezekiel, Micah, Habakkuk, Zechariah, Malachi, Baruch, and the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. This is in part a reflection of the early stage of Christian-Islamic encounter during which it was written. Samir has suggested what he calls a “periodisation” of Christian apologetical works of the ‘Abbāsid era, in which he argues that the first stage included works with a purely “biblical-homiletical” approach.6 This heavily scriptural way of writing gradually gave way to a purely logical-philosophical method by the beginning of the tenth century, with a combination of the two methods being predominant during the middle and late ninth century. Besides being an indication of the treatise’s early date, the strongly scriptural orientation of *Fi ṭatḥīq* is in part due to the question of religious legitimacy at the heart of the Christian-Muslim theological encounter. As will be shown below, the Qur’ān explicitly claims to reaffirm the central message of all true prophets throughout history, including the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus. Thus one of the central issues at stake in Christian-Muslim dialogue was which of the two religious traditions was faithful to the common source material that both claimed, particularly the writings of the prophets. In writing about the Trinity, then, the author of *Fi ṭatḥīq* had to demonstrate that Trinitarian doctrine was not a novelty that post-dated Christ, but instead one aspect of an authentic understanding of the entire scriptural heritage.

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6 Samir, 110-113.


“God and His Word and His Spirit”

Although the text begins with the conventional formulation, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God” the author quickly turns to a Trinitarian formulation that is less familiar. Instead, the phrase “God and His Word and His Spirit” is used throughout the text. The apologetical strategy employed by the treatise is two-fold: first, to ground a Trinitarian formula in terminology that emphasizes the oneness of God in a way that the more commonplace “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” does not; and second, to appropriate Qur’ānic terminology to such a degree that the Muslim reader will be put upon the horns of a dilemma, namely, either rejecting terminology that is used in the Qur’ān itself, or affirming the reasonableness and theological integrity of Trinitarian doctrine.

As with many ancient theological texts, the treatise at hand begins with a doxological passage that not only praises God for the divine attributes but also invokes blessing and guidance for the author’s project. In this opening doxology the author makes his first attempt at the apologetical strategy described above:

Verily [the angels] adore Thee, and set their seal to one Lord, that men may know that the angels adore God and His Word and His Spirit, one God and one Lord. We worship Thee, our Lord and our God, in Thy Word and Thy Spirit….We do not distinguish God from His Word and His Spirit. We worship no other god with God in His Word and His Spirit. God shewed His power and His light in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Gospel, that God and His Word and His Spirit are one God and one Lord.8

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8 Gibson 2-3; “wa-ānāmā yushbahūn ʿult wa yuqṭamān bi-rabb wāḥid li-yʿalīm al-nās ān al-mulāʾikah yushbahūn bi-lah wa kalimathī wa rūḥī, ālah wāḥid wa rabb wāḥid. Fa-lak nʿābad rabbūnā wa ālāhunā
In this wonderfully concise passage, the author has managed to accomplish four things related to his apologetical strategy. First, he draws upon the Qur’ānic usage of the terms “Word” and “Spirit” and subtly aligns this usage with the biblical sense of the terms.

Second, by use of the relative pronoun “His” (which in the Arabic text is actually a suffix appended to the terms “Word” and “Spirit”), he recasts the Trinity in such a way that the accusation that Christians worship three gods is obviated. Third, by invoking “the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Gospel,” the author draws upon the Qur’ānic claim that the Qur’ān affirms these earlier revealed texts. If it can be shown from these earlier texts, goes the implied argument, that God is to be worshipped “in His Word and in His Spirit,” and the Qur’ān can be shown to use these words in a similar way, then one must conclude that the Trinitarian understanding of God is theologically tenable. Fourth, building upon these previous points, the author presents an implied challenge to Muslims: how is it that God can be distinguished from His Word and His Spirit, with no worship being offered to the latter two?

**The use of “Word” in the Qur’ān**

In order to understand the apologetical strategy employed by the treatise at hand, one must be aware of the way the terms “Word” and “Spirit” are employed in the Qur’ānic text. There are three passages employing the term “word” (*kalimalah*) that are of

---

*bi-kalamatika wa rūḥika.... Lā nafṣuq Allāh min kalamatihi wa rūḥhi wa lā n’abād m’ā Allāh bi-kalamatihī wa rūḥhi ālāh ākār. Wa-qi’d bīn Allāh āmirīhī wa nūrūhī fī āt-tūrāh wa-al-ānbiyā wa-al-zābūr wa-al-ānjīl ān Allāh wa kalamatihi wa rūḥhi ālāh wāḥīd wa rabb wāḥīd."

particular importance because they explicitly apply the appellation to Jesus Christ. Surah 3 includes a description of an angelic announcement to Zakarīya (= Zacharias), somewhat in parallel to the account found in Luke 1:5-22, albeit without the miraculous details of Zacharias and Elizabeth’s advanced ages. Verse 39 of this surah says of Zakarīya, “The angels called to him as he was standing praying in the holy of holies, saying: God proclaims to you glad tidings of Yahya [= John], attesting to a Word from God; and also noble, set apart, a prophet among the righteous.” As one might expect from a text that describes Zakarīya’s encounter with angels and the announcement of Yahya’s upcoming birth, this same surah contains a passage in parallel to the Annunciation scene from the Gospel of Luke. Verses 45 and 46 read:

Lo, the angels said, “O Mary, God proclaims to you glad tidings of a Word from Him. His name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, eminent in this world and the next, and among those close [to God]. He will address the people in infancy and in maturity, and be counted among the righteous.10

The third passage that uses “Word” in reference to Jesus is perhaps even more notable, in that it has ironically become both a Muslim “proof-text” in denial of the divinity of Jesus and, for the author of the present treatise as well as other Christian writers, one of the key Qur’ānic citations in support of Trinitarian doctrine. Surah 4:171 says:

O People of the Book! Do not exceed proper bounds in your religion, and do not say about God anything but the truth. Indeed, the Messiah Jesus son of Mary is a messenger of God, and His Word sent to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers. Do not say “Three”: cease; it will be better for you, for indeed, God is one God. He is beyond

10 All translations of Qur’ānic texts in this dissertation are my own.
having a son, and unto Him are all things in the heavens and on earth. God suffices as the Doer of things.

There are three elements in this passage which will become important in the way that the anonymous author at hand attempts to build his case for the Trinity. The first, of course, is the Qur’anic assertion that Jesus is a “Word from God,” in this instance joined with the assertion that He is also a “Spirit from God”. The second is the implication that, by affirming Trinitarian doctrine, the Christians have undermined the oneness of God. The third is the suggestion that, if God had a son, it would imply some insufficiency or lack in God Himself. Rather than shrinking from these challenging claims, the author of the treatise engages their theological implications and actually builds his case on them. In doing so, he lays down one of the principles that will become a basic and recurring aspect of the early Arabophone Christian response to Islam; namely, reaching into Islamic sources and theological discourse and making what would otherwise be challenges to Christian doctrine the raw materials of the Christian apologetical strategy.

In order to contextualize these three key passages, one must take into account the other Qur’anic uses of the term “word” in relation to God, and in doing so, three closely related terms must be included: the singular kalimah, the plural kalimāt, and the word kalām, which could be translated “speaking.” When the Qur’anic use of these terms is analyzed, four characteristics of the divine word or speaking emerge. First, the divine word participates in the divine attribute of eternality: it is unchangeable, inexhaustible, infinite. Second, the divine word establishes a relationship between God and humankind. Third, the divine word guides humankind, bringing persons out of their ignorance into a
right way of conducting themselves. Fourth, the divine word is associated with judgment
and eschatological punishment.

Surah 6 contains two verses which express the immutability of God’s word. Verse
34 of this surah speaks of the patience and perseverance of the various prophets of God in
the face of the rejection of their message and asserts that “there is no one [or nothing] that
can alter the words of God.” Later in this same surah, this same assertion is repeated and
the immutability of God’s word(s) is associated with His nature. The changelessness of
the divine word results from God’s omniscience: “The word of your Lord is fulfilled in
truth and justice. There is no one [or nothing] that can alter His words; He is the One

Who Hears and the One Who Knows.” As in Christian theology, this quality of the divine
word as unchangeable is linked with the idea of its being unbounded or unlimited. Surah
18:109 expresses the infinity of the divine word(s) thus: “Say: ‘If the sea were ink for the
words of my Lord, then the sea would be depleted before the words of my Lord were
depleted, even if we were to add another [sea] like it as reinforcement.’” Surah 31:27
contains a very similar description of God’s words: “And if indeed upon the earth, all the
trees were pens, with the sea to supply them [as ink], and after it seven [more] seas, the
words of God would not be depleted, for God is powerful and wise.”

In the Qur’an’s teaching, the divine word or speaking also effects a relationship
between God and humankind. Just after Adam’s expulsion from the primeval Garden,
“Adam received from his Lord words, for [God] turned toward him. For He is the One
Who Turns [in forgiveness], the Merciful.” Later in the unfolding of revelation, the
divine words establish a special place for Abraham in the economy of God’s activity in
the world: “When Abraham was put to the test by his Lord by means of some words, he fulfilled them. God said: ‘I will make of you a leader to the people.’ Abraham said: ‘And from my offspring?’ God said: ‘My covenant does not benefit evildoers.’” In another passage the divine word is represented as coming to other faithful people throughout the history of revelation and assuring them of overcoming the world’s resistance. Surah 37:171-173 says that “Our word has already come to Our servants, the ones sent [by Us], that they would be victors, and that Our forces would be triumphant.”

According to the Qur’ān, the divine word or speaking not only establishes a relationship between God and human beings; it also brings them out of ignorance and teaches them how to act. Surah 14:24-25 says:

> Do you fail to see how God sets down a proverb [or “parable” or “lesson”]? A good word is like a good tree, having its root fixed and its branches in the heavens; it bears fruit at all times, by permission of its Lord. And God sets down proverbs [parables/lessons] for the people, so that they may bring them to mind.

The nascent Muslim umma (community) is commanded in the Qur’ān to take this principle into account in their treatment of pagans when engaged in battle: “If one of the polytheists appeal to you for refuge, take him into protection until he hears the word of God, then bring him to a secure place. That is because they are a people who do not know [about God].”

The Qur’ān also associates the divine word or speech with judgment and eschatological punishment. Surah 10:96-97 describes the two-fold function of God’s word in relation to those who resist it. The divine word both affords an opportunity for becoming a servant of God, as described above, and then becomes a word of judgment
that is effected *against* those who resist it: “Those against whom the word of your Lord has proved true do not have faith, even if every sign came to them, until they see the painful punishment.” Surah 11:118-119 issues an equally dire warning, this time associating the word of God with a judgment directed not at those who lack faith, but at those who are committed to disputing with one another. By being more concerned with disputation than anything else, these evildoers have made impossible the achievement of unity among humankind. The word of God is here represented as a primordial judgment against such people:

If your Lord had willed, He could have made the people into a single united community; yet they will not stop disputing [with one another], except for those upon whom your Lord had mercy. And it was for this that He created them, and the word of your Lord is fulfilled: “I will fill Hell with the jinns\(^{11}\) and humankind together.”

Surah 40:5-6 compares the unbelievers of Muhammad’s time with those of previous generations who resisted the message of the various prophets sent to them, and asserts that the primordial judgment described in the passage above has already been accomplished upon them:

… Every people planned to take hold of the prophet sent to them, and quarreled vainly in order to refute the truth, yet I took hold of them, and what consequences! In this way was the word of your Lord proved true upon those who did not believe: they are associates of the Fire.

Thus the author of *Fī ṭaḥlīl* had a rather rich body of Qur’ānic uses and connotations of the terms *kalimah*, *kalimāt*, and *kalām* to draw upon in his own use of the

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\(^{11}\) The jinns, from which comes the English term genie, are a class of spiritual beings mentioned several times in the Qur’ān. They are not to be identified precisely with angels and are described in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān* as “a category of created beings believed to possess powers for evil and for good.” The Qur’ānic treatment of the jinns reduced them considerably from the power they were accorded in pre-Islamic Arab folklore. *The Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān* (Leiden: Brill), 2003, vol. 3, 43-49.
term “Word of God” as an appellation of the second Person of the Trinity. As noted above, there are three different passages in the Qurʾān that use the term “word” in reference to Jesus, and perhaps most importantly, no other person is described in the Qurʾān as being a “word from God.” It is certainly true that the Qurʾānic text nowhere associates the various other uses of the term kalimah described above with the person of Jesus. Furthermore, since the various surahs of the Qurʾān are not presented in any chronological or thematic order, but simply according to their respective lengths, it is impossible to trace any development of the Qurʾānic usage of the word group kalimah/kalimāt/kalām, in the way that one might trace the way in which the Old Testament phrase “word of the Lord” may have influenced the use of Logos in the Johannine literature of the New Testament. Yet the lack of obviously systematic use of these terms should not obviate the point here addressed. As previously described, the author of the present treatise seems to have deeply imbibed Qurʾānic terminology, such that the apologetical opportunity presented by the various resonances of kalimah, kalimāt, and kalām in the Qurʾān was not lost on him. If, indeed, according to the Qurʾān, Jesus (and no one else) is a “word from God,” then the other Qurʾānic senses of this term are by no means irrelevant.

The use of “Spirit” in the Qurʾān

Equally important for the task at hand is the Qurʾānic use of the term “spirit.” In some cases, the Qurʾānic use of this term clearly refers to angels.12 In other cases, the text uses the expression “My spirit” or “His spirit” in reference to God, but in the context of

12 See, for example, surahs 19:17 and 78:38.
God’s creation of the first man as a living being: “He formed him, and breathed into him from His spirit.”\textsuperscript{13} Beyond these two categories of use, however, there are several other Qur’\textsuperscript{ā}nic usages of “spirit” in reference to God that must have been intriguing for the author at hand, some of which he even quotes or strongly alludes to, as will be shown later.

There is a group of three passages that speak of Jesus having been “supported with the Holy Spirit.” The first reference appears in a verse (2:87) that condemns the historical response to messengers sent by God:

\begin{quote}
We gave Moses the Book, and sent messengers after him. We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear proofs and supported him with the Holy Spirit. Is it not the case that when a messenger comes to you with what you yourselves do not like, you become haughty, then a part of them you accuse of being liars, and another part of them you kill?
\end{quote}

In a somewhat similar verse much later in this long surah (2:253), the text commemorates the favors bestowed by God on various messengers and then singles Jesus out for particular recognition, using the same terminology as the verse above: “We preferred some of those messengers over others; among them were some to whom God spoke, and others, We exalted to greater rank. We gave clear proofs to Jesus, son of Mary, and supported him with the Holy Spirit….” Elsewhere in the Qur’\textsuperscript{ā}n (surah 5:110), Jesus is represented as being addressed by God on the Day of Judgment, and once again the same terminology that appears in the two passages above is used:

\begin{quote}
Some day God will gather the messengers, and will say to them: “What was the reply that you received?” … Then God will say: “O Jesus, son of Mary, recall my favor toward you and your mother, as I supported you with the Holy Spirit, so that you addressed the people in infancy and in
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Surah 32:9; see also 15:28-29 and 38:72.
maturity, and as I taught you the Book and the Wisdom, and the Law and
the Gospel; and as you create out of clay the shape of a bird, by My
permission, and you breathe into it, and it becomes a bird, by My
permission, and heal the blind and the lepers, by My permission, and as
you raise the dead, by My permission; and as I held back the Children of
Israel from you when you gave to them clear proofs, but those who did not
believe said, “This is nothing other than obvious sorcery!”

Just as the Qur’ān refers to no person other than Jesus by the term “word,” so no other
prophet is described as having been “supported by the Holy Spirit.” Equally striking for
the author of Fi ṭaḥlīl is the fact that this third reference is followed immediately by
descriptions of Jesus breathing life into a bird made out of clay14, performing miraculous
healings, and even raising the dead. More will be said about this later, but for now it
should be noted that this passage combines the unique reference to Jesus having been
“supported by the Holy Spirit” with the exercise of life-giving or life-restoring powers, a
link that will play a key role in the apologetical strategy of the author being considered.

In addition to the three passages just described, there are two other Qur’ānic
passages that describe the spirit of God as having played a unique role in the conception
of Jesus. Surah 21, entitled “The Prophets,” consists in part of a recitation of God’s
interaction with various prophets and the virtues they demonstrated. Verse 91 of this
surah says: “And [there was] she who remained chaste: so We breathed into her from our
Spirit, and We made her and her son a sign to all creation.” A second passage that uses
very similar terminology is found in surah 66. This surah ends with a set of verses (10-

14 This passage appears to have been influenced by the so-called “Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” or by an oral
tradition about Jesus that either preceded and inspired this apocryphal gospel, or that developed from it. In
the Infancy Gospel, the child Jesus is criticized for forming sparrows out of clay on the Sabbath; he
responds by clapping his hands and commanding the birds to come to life, whereupon they fly away. See
Reidar Aasgaard, The Childhood of Jesus: Decoding the Apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas (Eugene,
12) that contrast two faithless women (the wives of Noah and Lot) with two faithful women (the wife of one of the Pharaohs, and Mary). Verse 12 describes Mary thus:

“Mary, the daughter of ‘Imrān, she who remained chaste, so We breathed into her body from our Spirit, and she believed in the words of her Lord and His Books, and she was one of the obedient ones.”

Another group of Qur’ānic passages describe a special role for the Spirit in bringing revelation to humankind. One of these passages is particularly noteworthy because the text of Fī ṭalāḥīt strongly alludes to it. Surah 16:101-102 reads:

When we substitute one sign in place of another (and God knows what He sends down), they say, ‘You are an inventor,’ but most of them do not know. Say: the Holy Spirit brought it down from your Lord in truth, in order to establish those who have faith, and as a guide and glad tidings to those who submit [to God].

The author of Fī ṭalāḥīt was at least somewhat cognizant of this passage, because he misquotes the latter portion of it as “the Holy [Spirit] has brought it down a mercy and guidance from thy Lord.”15 Surah 40:15 shows that this coming down of the Spirit with guidance is no one-time event, but something that takes place in various times and places:

“The One exalted above all ranks, Lord of the throne: by His decree He sends the Spirit upon those among His servants whom He wills, to warn of the Day of Meeting.”

Terminology similar to both of these passages is found in surah 42:51-52, which teaches that some form of mediation is necessary for divine revelation. The term “spirit” is used here to indicate the means by which revelation comes down:

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15 Gibson, 5; “tanazalahu rūḥ al-quds min Rabbak rīḥmah wa hadā.”
It was not given to any human being that God speak to him, except by inspiration, or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger for the revelation, by God’s permission, of what God wills. For He is exalted and wise. And in this way We have inspired you, by Our decree, with a Spirit. You did not know what the Book was, nor what faith was. But We have made it a light, by which to guide those among our servants whom We will.…

This passage is linguistically somewhat complex, and the various existing translations of the Qur’an do not agree on its exact rendering.16 The translation given here is intentionally literal in order to make clear the use of the term “Spirit” in the passage. Since the point at stake is how the terminology of the Qur’an was mined for the “raw material” of the Christian apologetical response, it would be mistaken to take one’s cue from latter-day translations that may themselves be at pains to avoid terminology that has been used by Christian apologists.

There is another passage in the Qur’an that uses the term “spirit” in reference to God in a way that is different from any other Qur’anic use. Surah 58:22 declares that:

You cannot find a people that believe in God and the Last Day, being on friendly terms with those who turn aside from God and his messengers, even if they were their fathers or their sons or their brothers or their fellow clansmen. For such as those, [God] has written faith in their hearts, and supported them with a Spirit from Himself.…

The terminology of this last phrase differs from the description of Jesus having been supported only by the substitution of the phrase “a Spirit from Himself” for the phrase “the Holy Spirit.” This is the only Qur’anic reference to anyone other than Jesus being

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16 E.g., Pickthall translates the first part of verse 22 as “We inspired in Thee (Muhammad) a Spirit of our command,” while Shakir introduces even more of an interpretive gloss by rendering the same phrase as “thus did We reveal to you an inspired book by Our command.” See Muhammad M. Pickthall, The Glorious Qur’an: Text and Explanatory Translation (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 1999) and M. H. Shakir, The Qur’an (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 1999).
supported by God’s Spirit, and upon careful examination of the text, the two references are somewhat different. The passages previously described associated the support of Jesus by the Holy Spirit with his production of “clear proofs,” specifically the life-giving or life-restoring miracles. Those passages also, given their context, associate the support of Jesus by the Holy Spirit with his special status as a messenger of God. The present passage seems to be in a different category, since it speaks of faithful people being supported by a “Spirit from God” not in relation to any special role or ministry, but as a special gift protecting them from defection due to natural ties of kinship and affection.

In summary, the use of the term “Spirit” in the Qur’ān is by no means systematic or perfectly consistent. But there were a number of uses that were directly relevant for the project of casting Trinitarian theology in Qur’ānic terms. The text of the Qur’ān seems to associate God’s Spirit with Jesus in a unique way, since no other prophet is said to have been “supported by the Holy Spirit,” and since this support is particularly associated with the life-giving or life-restoring miracles of Jesus. Additionally, the Qur’ān associates God’s Spirit with the conception of Jesus in a way that also seems unique, since through it Jesus and his mother became “a sign for all creation.” Lastly, the Qur’ānic text seems to assign to God’s Spirit the double role of bringing about or mediating divine revelation and then supporting those who believe in that revelation in such a way that they are made able to transcend their natural ties of affection in order to be faithful.

The Uses of “Word” and “Spirit” in Ṣaltah

When the text of Ṣaltah is analyzed carefully, it becomes clear that the author of the treatise strove to use the terms “Word” and “Spirit” in ways that would be consistent
with traditional Christian Trinitarian theology, and yet would also hew closely to the Qur’ānic uses of these terms described above. As described above, the Qur’ān repeatedly suggests that the Word of God participates in the divine attributes of unboundedness and immutability, which in turn suggest the quality of eternality. Although the question of the eternality of God’s Word was a matter yet to be completely settled in Islamic theology, the presence of these texts was sufficient for the author of Fītaḥlā to seize upon this aspect of the Qur’ān and make it a key part of his presentation. By the time of his writing, of course, the co-eternity of the Persons of the Trinity was undisputed Christian doctrine, so this was perhaps the easiest aspect of two traditions to correlate.

The author’s first representation of the Word of God as participating in the divine attribute of eternality comes early in the treatise, as he describes the creation of the universe as an action that God accomplished through His Word and the animating power of His Spirit:

It is written also in the beginning of the Law, which God sent down to His prophet Moses on Mount Sinai, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Then he said, “The Spirit of God was upon the waters.” Then He said, by His Word, “Let there be light”; and there was light…. Then He said, “Let us create man after our own image and likeness.” So God shewed in the beginning of the book which He sent down to His prophet Moses, that God and His Word and His Spirit are one God, and that God … created all things, and gave life to all things by His Word and His Spirit. We do not say three Gods … but we say that God and His Word and His Spirit are one God and one Creator.17

17 Gibson 3-4; “Wa makrūh aḍīqān fī rās al-taʿrāāah alātī ʾanẓalāhā Allāh ʿalā Mūsā nabiḥī fī tūr Sīnā; baddū kalqa Allāh al-samā wa al-ārḍ tūm qāl rāḥ Allāh kān ʿalā al-māāah. Tūm qāl bi-kalimatihā yakūn nūr fakān nūr…. Tūm qāl nāqlaq ʾānsān ʿalā ʿibhūnā wa tamṭāhūnā faqad bīna Allāh fī āwāl kītāb ʾanẓalahu ʿalā nabiḥī Mūsā ʿān Allāh wa kalimatihī wa rūḥī allāh wāḥīd wa ʿān Allāh … kalqaq kūl šāf wa ʿāḥū kūl šāf bi-kalimatihī wa rūḥī wa ʿasā nāqūl ṯalaṭhā alāha … waalākīnā naqūl ʿān Allāh wa kalimatihī wa rūḥī allāh wāḥīd wa kāliq wāḥīd.”
As is typical with this author, he succinctly accomplishes several things in this short passage. By referring to Moses as a “prophet,” he subtly invokes the prophetology of the Qur’ān and joins this usage with the Qur’ānic image of a book being “sent down” from God to His messenger. He is also careful to include the line in which God speaks in the plural, “Let us create,” which later in the treatise he will align with the similar Qur’ānic usage. Not only does the author speak of God creating by means of His Word and His Spirit; he boldly proclaims that God, His Word, and His Spirit are “one Creator.” This is a key consideration because, later in the treatise, the author is keen to show that this unique attribute of God, the ability to create, was resident in His Word even after that Word appeared on the earth in the person of Jesus Christ.

Shortly after this passage, the author of Fī taḥlīl addresses this issue of the eternity of the Word of God, and simultaneously takes up one of the main points on which the Qur’ān seems explicitly to oppose Christian doctrine – the concept that God could beget. He writes:

We do not say that God begat His Word as any man begets; God forbid! but we say that the Father begat His Word as the Sun begets rays, and as the mind begets the word, and as the fire begets heat; none of these things existed before what was begotten of them. God … never existed without Word and Spirit, but God was ever in His Word and His Spirit; His Word and His Spirit were with God and in God before He made the creatures. We do not say how this is. Verily everything relating to God is majesty and might….  

18 Gibson 5; “Wa lasnā naqīl ān Allāh walada kalamatīhi kamā yalaḍ ːāḥid min al-nās, m’āḏ Allāh: wa allākīnī naqīl ān al-Āb walada kalamatīhi kamā yalaḍ al-šāms al-Š’ād wa kamā yalaḍ al-’aǧl al-kalīmah wa kamā yalaḍ al-nār al-sākīnāh. Lam yakaṇ šār min hāwalā qabāl ṣalāf walada minhu. Wa lam yakaṇ Allāh ... dān kalimāh wa rūḥ wašākīn Allāh mungu qat bi-kalimatīhi wa ṭāhītī wa kānāt kalimatīhi wa rūḥītī wa Allāh wa bi-lalaq qahāl ān yašāqa al-kalīf. Lā naqīl kālī yakaṇ dālak lā-ān kul šār min išr Allāh ‘azmāh wa jabrītāh....”
In drawing upon these classical metaphors for the Trinity, familiar to any student of patristic theology, the author of *Fi ṭaqlīd* applies them to the specific question at hand, the relationship between God and His Word. As already shown, the Qur’ānic data is fraught with the tension between the absolute uniqueness of God and the apparent eternity of His Word, with the result that the Muslim is put upon the horns of a theological dilemma: whether to posit at least two eternally existing entities, and if not, what to make of the Qur’ānic terminology. The author at hand is able to draw upon both this inherent tension in Islamic theology and the traditional Christian metaphors for Trinitarian life and draw his ringing conclusion: God exists eternally with and in His Word. Furthermore, in an impressive rhetorical flourish, he asserts that the obscurity of this way of existing is based in the very fact that he is talking about God. Since “everything relating to God is majesty and might,” one should not be surprised at a conclusion that affirms both the Qur’ānic data and the traditional Christian language, and yet is not completely comprehensible. The reason this way of arguing is so impressive is that the author manages to turn an Islamic way of thinking about God into a tool for his apologetical strategy. The Qur’ānic emphasis that God is completely apart from and different from His creation means that we should not be surprised if we must conclude that His mode of existence is something quite unfamiliar to us. While the Muslim may assert that God does not beget because He is beyond such human ways of acting, the author of *Fi ṭaqlīd* argues that this very “otherness” of God means that perhaps He “begets” eternally in a way that human beings can only dimly understand by way of analogy. As will be shown later, other Arabophone
Christian authors take a similar approach to the Qur’ānic objection to begetting with reference to God.

Much later in the treatise, the author returns to this question of the eternality of God’s Word and applies it more explicitly to the person of Jesus Christ. Returning again to the supposedly agreed-upon common source for Muslims and Christians, the Old Testament prophets, the author of Frī ṭaḥlīṭ quotes Isaiah:

Isaiah also prophesied by the Holy Ghost about the birth of the Christ, saying, “A Maiden shall be with child, and shall bear a son and He shall be called Emmanuel, the interpretation of which is ‘Our God with us.’” The Maiden is the Virgin who is of the race of Adam. She gave birth to the Christ, Emmanuel, God of God, and mercy to His creatures. We do not hear of one man from Adam till this our day who was called “God with us” or who was called the Word of God. He was born of a Virgin without any man touching her.19

Here the author very cleverly connects the Old Testament prophecy with the Qur’ānic terminology about Jesus. Having already explored the idea that God exists eternally in and with His Word, he is able to present this prophecy as the link connecting God’s presence in His Word, the virgin birth (an event affirmed by the text of the Qur’ān), and the Qur’ānic description of Jesus as “a word from God.” His implicit argument runs thus: there is only one person in biblical tradition who is considered Emmanuel, “God with us.” Similarly, there is only one person referred to by the text of the Qur’ān as a “word from God,” and it is the same person, Jesus Christ. Since God exists eternally in and with

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19 Gibson 18; “Wa taβhā ʾAx’ārā tiḏān bi-rūḥ al-qadās ʾadā milād al-maṣiḥ wa qāl al-baṭīl yakūn li-ḥa ḫabāl wa ṭaḥād ʾibnān wa yusmāʾ ʾĀmānwīl tarjamatihi m’ānā Ālahunā. Fa-al-baṭīl hīa al-ʾagrān ala’ī hīa mīn ǧarīh ʾĀdām hīa walaḍat al-maṣiḥ ʾĀmānwīl ʾālaḥ mīn Allāh wā ʿalāmah li-kulūqūḥī. Wa lam nasn’ā bi-ʾażūd min al-nās min ʾĀdām ʾllā yūmnā baḡī yusmāʾ m’ānā Allāh ʾū yusmāʾ kalimah Allāh. Wa wudāda min ʾuḏrān min ʾgar yamsaḥa baṣār.”
His Word, then, saying that Jesus is a Word from God and saying that He is God-with-us amount to the same thing.

The treatise at hand also draws upon the second Qur’anic characterization of the Word of God; namely, that it establishes a relationship between God and humankind. This concept is a particularly easy one for the author to appropriate from Islam and apply to Christian theology, of course, since the existence of the Logos Christology meant that a very similar understanding of God’s word was already present in Christian doctrine. In drawing upon this idea common to the two traditions, the author draws a contrast between the salvific power of God’s word as present in the preaching of the prophets, and the power of God’s Word incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. By drawing this contrast, he is able both to draw upon the common wellspring of prophetic teaching, and to issue an implicit critique of Islam, since Islam was dependent on the preaching of another prophet, rather than the more powerful and efficacious action of God’s Word present in person. He writes:

The work of Satan and his error appeared in every nation and every people. They worshipped fire and images and beasts and trees, and served living things and sea-monsters and every beast of the earth. God was not content with this for His creatures… When the prophets of God saw this, that the children of Adam were lost, and that the Devil had conquered them, and that no man could save the race of Adam from error and destruction, the prophets and apostles of God entreated God and asked Him to come down to His creatures and His servants, and to preside in His mercy over their salvation from the error of the Devil.20

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20 Gibson 10, “Wa gahara ‘amal Iblis wa dalalahi fi kul ‘ummah wa kul qaum, wa ‘abadu al-nahr wa al-‘asam wa al-dhaab wa al-haar wa ‘abdu al-buwan wa al-hiyan wa kul duha al-ard. Fa-lam yurda Allah hagha lil-kuluhum…. Falam rarr galak anbii Allah an bani Adam qud halakūa waqad galaba ‘alhum al-‘itān wa lam yastafr a ‘hid min al-nas an yaklas gariyah Adam min al-dalalah wa al-halkah ragaba anbii Allah wa rasuluhu ilā Allah wa sallī al yanzal ilā kuluquhu wa ‘abduhu fā-yattīli bi-raḥmatihi kalāsunum
Immediately following this passage, the author quotes or paraphrases Is 64:1, Ps 80:1, Ps 107:20, Hab 2:3, Ps 118:26-27, and Ps 50:3, and argues that each of these Old Testament passages refers to the coming of God the Word in the person of Jesus Christ.

In this passage, the author appeals to a particularly Islamic description of the condition of humankind before being redeemed. The problem as described here is not violence or lack of charity among men, nor an interior tendency to sin. Rather, the problem to be solved consists essentially in the fact that human beings have been duped into worshipping all manner of created things, the singular evil that Islamic tradition came to describe as 
“association” of created things with divinity. By describing the human need met by Christ in this way, the author has subtly aligned the mission of Christ with the Qur’anic concept of how the Word of God establishes a relationship between God and humankind. According to the Qur’ān, the Word of God establishes a saving relationship by leading human beings to the worship of the one true God. For the author of 
, the Word of God as present in the preaching of the prophets did not accomplish this, for the prophets themselves both begged God to come in person and declared that He would do so. Furthermore, by the selection of the particular prophetic passages that the author uses, he is making an implicit argument for understanding the Word to be divine; while most of the passages used refer to God himself coming, Ps

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\textit{min āl-shātān.}” It should be noted that the use of “apostles” in Gibson’s translation should not be taken to refer to Christ’s apostles, which would render the usage anachronistic. She has simply translated the Arabic term 
(the “sent ones” of God) by its familiar Greek equivalent.

21 The term 
 does not appear in the Qur’ān, but forms of the verb from which it is taken, 
, appear many times in the Qur’ānic text to describe idolatry.
107:20 refers to the entity that comes to achieve salvation as God’s Word. By asserting that “no man could save the race of Adam from error and destruction,” the author simultaneously affirms the Qur’anic principle that only the Word of God can establish the salvific relationship between God and man, and implicitly criticizes Islamic soteriology. Since the preaching of the prophets was insufficient to turn the tide of human idolatry, and since the Qur’ān claims to reaffirm and continue the prophetic mission, the author seems to argue, how could simply following the Qur’ān be salvific? For the author of *Fitna*, the Word of God had to come in person, and this was accomplished by the appearance on earth of Jesus Christ.

A bit later in the treatise, the author introduces terminology that is more explicitly Christian to align the saving mission of Christ with the Qur’anic understanding of the Word of God. He begins to write of the work of Christ in terms of mediation, while coupling this concept with a specifically Qur’anic characterization of how this mediation is achieved.

The Christ is Mediator between us and God; [He is] God of God and [He is] Man. Men could not have looked towards God and lived. God willed mercy to His creatures and honour to them, and the Christ was between us and God, the God of God, and a Man, the judge of men by their deeds. Thus God was veiled in a Man without sin, and shewed us mercy in the Christ, and brought us near to Him.22

By asserting that “men could not have looked towards God and lived,” the author brings together the Old Testament terror of looking upon the divine with the typically Qur’anic characterization of God as wholly apart from His creation. As described earlier, the veil is a Qur’anic usage having to do with how God speaks to a human being. Here once again the author of *Fi ṭalḥīt* appropriates this image and applies it to the humanity of Christ. So in his typically succinct fashion, the author has brought together three distinct elements of terminology or imagery: that of mediation, taken from the Christian tradition; that of the impossibility of a human being looking directly upon God and surviving, a notion common to the two traditions; and the idea of the Word of God addressing humankind from behind a veil, taken from the Qur’ān. By his close alignment of these disparate elements of expression, the author is able to speak about the saving work of Christ in a way that is faithful to Christian tradition and yet aligns with a Qur’ānic way of understanding how the Word of God establishes a relationship between God and humanity.

The author returns to this same way of speaking about the salvific work of Christ later in the treatise, grounding his argument once again in the theoretically common ground of Old Testament prophecy:

Jeremiah the prophet prophesied … by the Holy Ghost, saying, “This is our God, we will worship no God but Him. He knew all the paths of knowledge, and gave them to Jacob His servant, and to Israel His saint. After this He looked upon the earth and mixed with the people.” We do not know that God looked upon the earth or mixed with the people except when He appeared to us in the Christ, His Word and His Spirit. He veiled Himself in flesh, He who is not of us. Men saw Him and He mixed with them. He was God and Man without sin. It was He who knew the paths of

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23 See, for example, Gen 32:30, Ex 33:20, and Is 6:5.
good and of knowledge and of judgment, and who taught them and made them to spring up to those who follow His command and His word.24

Here the author has chosen to cite a prophecy which combines a very Qur’ānic description of God (the One who knows all things) with a description of God’s action which is quite unknown and even contrary to the Qur’ān (mixing with His creation). The question which is ever operative behind these prophetic citations, of course, is which tradition, Christian or Islamic, is the faithful heir of the prophets. The tension between the two different characterizations of God present in the prophecy (knowing all things and mixing with His creation) would have been obvious to the Muslim reader. The author then cleverly uses two different Qur’ānic expressions to argue that the tension is resolved in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Word of God, communicating the divine knowledge and thereby establishing the divine-human relationship, and yet this Word appears to humanity in a way that is in keeping with the Qur’ānic principle: the Word of God is veiled in the flesh of Jesus.

This passage serves as an excellent segue to the third Qur’ānic characterization of the Word of God through which the author of Frāṭliq expresses his Trinitarian doctrine, namely, that the Word of God guides humanity out of its ignorance and into a right way of believing and acting. More will be said on this point later, when we turn to the way in which the author attempts to bridge the soteriological differences between the Qur’ānic

text and the Christian tradition. For now, the point to note is that the author of *Fi ṭabābīn*, in his treatment of Christ’s salvific work, attempts to describe it in a way that is largely compatible with how the action of the Word of God is described in the Qurʾān.

The alignment of Christian doctrine with this particular Qurʾānic characterization of the Word of God begins early in the treatise. In one of his first references to the salvific mission of Christ, the author writes of God that

> He is the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, one God and one Lord; but in the Christ He saved and delivered men. We will shew this also if God wills, how God sent His Word and His light as mercy and guidance to men and was gracious to them in Him. There came down to Adam and his race from heaven no Saviour from Satan and his darkness and his error…

Taken in the context of the treatise, it is clear that the last line of the passage cited means that there came no merely human entity with the ability to turn humankind away from its error. Rather, the Word of God was the only entity that could turn humankind away from its error and to the worship of God. This is a point on which the two traditions are largely in agreement, and thus provides the author with a relatively easy way to align the work of Christ with the Qurʾānic data about the Word of God.

Later on in the treatise, the author quotes the prophet Isaiah to support this characterization of the work of Christ:

> He said by the Holy Ghost about the Christ, “There shall come from Zion the Saviour, and shall turn away error from Jacob.” He also said by the Holy Ghost, “There shall be also from the root of Jesse [one who] shall stand as a chief of the nations, and the nations shall trust in Him.” Verily

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25 Gibson 6-7; “Hūh al-Abū wa al-Ībn wa Rūḥ al-Qods ālah wāḥid wa rabb wāḥid. Āmā bīlah-masīh fā-kalaṣā al-nās wa najāhum. Fā-sā-anbīna ǧalak ān šā Allāh kif ārṣala Allāh kalimaṭiḥi wa nūrūhi raḥmah li-nāṣ wa ḥadā wa min al-thum biḥi. Wa lam nazala min al-samā kalās li-Adam wa ḍarrāṭiḥi min Iblīs wa zalamaṭiḥi wa ḍalālāṭiḥi.”
Jesse begat David the prophet; Mary the good was from the race of David … and from her was born the Christ, Word and Light of God, on whom the nations trust; He was their Hope and their Saviour from error. Isaiah said also by the Holy Ghost, “There is no angel and no intercessor, but the Lord will come and save us”; because it was more suitable that no angel and no intercessor could save us, until He appeared to us in the Christ and saved us, and He led the nations … and was gracious to them in guidance.26

The author of *Fi ṭalḥīḥ* is clearly trying to align the prophetic traditions, the Qur’ānic concept that the Word of God leads humankind out of error and ignorance, and the mission of Christ. As will be shown later on, the author ultimately realizes that he cannot limit his description of the work of Christ to leading humankind out of error without doing damage to the Christian understanding of redemption. Later in the text, he will attempt to bridge the gap between Christian and Qur’ānic soteriology and will skillfully weave together the concepts of the two. For now it suffices to note that the author represents the salvific work of Christ as consisting chiefly in leading humankind out of error concerning God, thus aligning Christ’s ministry with the Qur’ānic characterization of God’s Word.

As presented in the Qur’ān, this error consists largely in the commission of idolatry. The author of *Fi ṭalḥīḥ* again aligns prophetic testimony from Isaiah with the idea

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26 Gibson 17; “Qāl bi-Ruḥ al-Quds ‘alā al-mašīḥ yātī min Šāhīn al-muqāla wa yaṣraf al-dalālah ‘an Yaqūb wa qāl aṯlāt bi-Ruḥ al-Quds wa yakūn min ‘aṣal Āṯī yaqūn raṣā al-‘āhum ‘alīhu yataqalun wa ‘an Āṯī hūa wālaḏ Dāḏal al-nabī wa Marṯam al-ṯīḥah min dārīh Dāḏ ... wa minḥā wulhel al-mašīḥ kalimah Allāh wa nūruhu āḏīṯ ‘alīhu yataqal al-‘āhum wa kān raḏānum wa ‘alāṣuḥum min al-dalālah. Wa qāl Āṯī aṯlāṯ bi-Ruḥ al-Quds lā malak wa lā ᵃṯaḏ ‘a waṭāḏin al-Rabb yātī lā-yaklasunā min āǧal ānahu āḥaqa bihi ānahu lām yastaḏ’ malak wa lā ᵃṯaḏ ‘a ān yaklasunā ḥatā āṯlāṯ al-mašīḥ wa ᵃšaḏāḏ ‘a ᵃḏhum wa tṣalṣalṭa ‘alīḥum....” Regarding the first sentence of this passage, the NRSV renders the relevant phrase as “he will come … to those in Jacob who turn from transgression” (Is 59:20). The anonymous author appears to be working from the Septuagint or from some version of the Old Testament derived from it. The Masoretic text does not as easily align with his method of argument.
that the Word of God leads humankind out of error, and applies this concept to the work of Christ:

Isaiah also prophesied by the Holy Ghost, saying, “Behold, the Lord sitting upon a light cloud, and He will come to Egypt, and the idols of Egypt shall be shaken.” The Christ went into Egypt clothed with pure flesh from Mary whom God purified…. Then He it was who shook the idols of Egypt and brought to naught the work of the Devil through it, and led them away from the error of Satan to the truth of God and His merchandise; and He has made His light to dawn in their hearts. Look, when was Egypt saved from the worship of idols and the error of Satan, save when the Christ trod it in His mercy and appeared to them in His light?27

Here the text of Isaiah provides the author with an opportunity to align his often-cited “error of Satan” very specifically with the primary form of sin with which the Qur’ān is concerned; namely, the trespass upon the unique honor due to God that is committed by the worship of idols. Out of all the many ways that the salvific work of Christ may be expressed (reconciliation between God and humankind, the demonstration of a perfect life of justice and charity, vicarious atonement for sin, the giving of the Holy Spirit, etc.), the author has chosen to express Christ’s work quite narrowly as the vanquishing of idols. By characterizing the mission of Christ in this way, the author of Fī ṭalāṭṭū accomplishes two things simultaneously. First, he perfectly aligns what Christ accomplished with the Qur’ānic understanding of what is done by the Word of God; i.e., bringing humankind out of ignorance and into the worship of the one God. Second, using the same rhetorical technique noted earlier, he turns on its head the fundamental Muslim objection to

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Christian doctrine, namely, that the worship of Christ compromises the oneness of God. Rather than creating an idol in competition to God, he seems to argue, the mission of Christ overturned the worship of idols – exactly what a careful student of the Qur’anic text would expect the Word of God to do.

The author also represents the work of Christ in conformity with the fourth characteristic of the Word of God as represented in the Qur’ān, namely, that it is associated with eschatological judgment. Blending descriptions of the earthly ministry of Christ and images of his role in judgment, he writes:

He wrought every sign among the children of Israel, and other people, and rewarded men in wisdom and righteousness. He rewarded those who believed in Him with everlasting life and the Kingdom of Heaven, and He rewarded those who rejected Him and did not believe in Him with contempt and sore punishment. Look how it corresponds with the strength that is in the works and signs of the Christ which are written in the Gospel.28

It is highly noteworthy that this description of Christ’s meting out just desserts to both the faithful and the faithless is bracketed by references to his “signs.” Few terms could be more laden with Qur’ānic significance than this term, “signs” (atāl). In the conceptual world of the Qur’ān, signs are the guarantee of true prophethood; Jesus in particular was given by God the ability to “produce clear signs;” the individual verses of the Qur’ān are referred to as “signs;” and finally, the Qur’ān itself in its entirety is regarded in Islam as the sign par excellence of God’s salvific activity in the world. Furthermore, it is the individual’s response to these signs – faith and submission to God’s will on the one hand,

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28 Gibson 25; “Wa āmala kūl ā‘āh ǧiti ḫalt Irārū wa gīrubum wa ṭajāzā al-nās bi-l-hikam wa al-baz. Jazā min āman bihi ḥībāh dā‘īmah wa malakūt al-sanā. Wa jazā min kafāra bihi wa lam yūman bihi ḫāb wa ‘aghāb ālim. Fa-ānażar kif wāliaq bi-qū‘ah ālāt bi-ā‘ām al-мaṣtāq wa āaţīhī ālāt kutiba fi al-‘ajīb.”
or rejection of the signs (and by extension, of God) on the other hand – that determine his ultimate destiny. Thus in this passage the author of *Fi taḥlīl* describes the eschatological role of Jesus in a way that is emphatically Qur’ānic. The passage is a kind of word picture, at the center of which is the Word of God determining the eschatological destiny of human beings based on their response to him; surrounding the Word are the signs wrought by him, the response to which become the measure of each person’s standing before God. It is a passage that is particularly striking in its ability to combine fidelity to the Christian doctrinal tradition with Qur’ānic imagery and language.

As with the term “Word,” the author of *Fi taḥlīl* seeks to use the term “Spirit” in a way that is faithful to Christian orthodoxy and yet aligns with the usage of this term in the Qur’ān. As noted above, one of the Qur’ānic characterizations of the Spirit is that it played a special role in the conception of Jesus Christ, a fact which means that this conception is taught by the Qur’ān, at least implicitly, to be unique in human history. Drawing upon this aspect of the Qur’ānic text, the author of the treatise at hand writes:

He [Habakkuk] prophesied by the Holy Ghost, saying, “God shall come to Teman, and the Holy One shall be shaded by the wooded mountain.” This is the plain and healing prophecy, when God shewed by the tongues of His prophets from what place the Christ should come and from whom He should be born, when His Word and His light should appear to men. Verily Teman is Bethlehem, it is on the right hand of the Holy City. The shady wooded mountain is Mary the Holy, whom God the Holy Ghost overshadowed, and the power of God rested upon her, as the Archangel Gabriel said, when Mary said to him, “Whence shall I have a boy, when a man hath not touched me?” Gabriel said to her, “The Spirit of God shall come down upon thee, and the power of God shall rest upon thee.” God agreed to the saying of His Prophet, and His Angel Gabriel when they say this saying about the Christ, and their saying is true.29

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29 Gibson 29; “Tanabā bi-Rūḥ al-Quds wa qāl Allāh min Timnā yātī wa al-Quds min jabal āš’ar yatīgalal
Obviously building upon the Qur’anic idea that God’s Spirit was uniquely involved in the conception of Jesus is no great stretch for the author at hand, since this idea is also central to the Gospel. However, his treatment of the subject is noteworthy. Mary’s question to the angel as quoted here follows exactly the wording of the Qur’anic text in surah 19:20, rather than following the text of the New Testament (Lk 1:34). The archangel’s response as quoted here, however, is not the text found in the following verse of the Qur’an (19:21), but instead follows closely the text of the Gospel of Luke (Lk 1:35a). It would appear, then, that the author wanted to draw upon the Qur’anic account, but the response given by the angel in the Qur’an would not have sufficed to connect the conception of Jesus with Habakkuk 3:3. Instead of using either the Lucan or the Qur’anic text straightforwardly, then, the author has skillfully woven together an account using material from both texts. By doing so, he is able to draw upon the Qur’anic language concerning Jesus’ conception while at the same time implicitly criticizing the Muslim understanding of this event. While the text of the Qur’an seems to describe the conception as an act of special creation (see surah 19:35), the inclusion of the angel’s response to Mary from Luke’s Gospel suggests that the event is something quite different. In fact, by using the language of God’s Spirit coming down upon Mary, the

author is able to bring to the reader’s mind the Qur’anic assertion that Jesus was “God’s Word sent to Mary, and a Spirit from Him” (4:171).

The prophecy from Habakkuk 3:3 as quoted here appears to be taken from an Arabic text of the Bible based on the Septuagint, since the second half of the verse differs significantly from the Masoretic text but matches that of the Septuagint. (Since the identity of the author at hand is unknown, it is also possible that he had the ability to read Greek and was working directly from some version of the Septuagint and translating the text given there into Arabic.) As has already been noted, the author’s frequent citation of Old Testament prophecies is an important element of his overall apologetical strategy. By citing this material which both the Christian and Muslim traditions claim to affirm, he implicitly but insistently poses the question of which tradition is faithful to the prophetic teachings. In this case, he is able to align the prophecy of Habakkuk (at least as rendered in the text he is using) with the words of Mary as given in the Qur’an and the words of the Archangel Gabriel from Luke 1:35 to highlight the action of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus. By doing so, he deftly aligns his treatment of God’s Spirit with a key element of the Qur’anic characterization of the Spirit, while at the same time calling into question the Muslim understanding of the conception of Jesus.

Furthermore, it is possible that there is another reason for the author’s particular selection of Habakkuk 3:3. This is one of the verses that, according to the arguments of some Muslim apologists, prophesy concerning the advent of Muhammad and the establishment of Islam. Working from the Masoretic text, a typical translation of this verse would be, “God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran.” Some
Muslim commentators have seen in these geographic references a description of the origins of Muhammad in the Arabian Desert and as a result have asserted that this among other biblical passages prophesies the advent of Islam. If such an assertion were familiar to the author of *Fī taḥṭīt*, he may have been particularly keen to incorporate Habakkuk 3:3 into the treatise for two reasons; first, by drawing upon the Septuagint text or an Arabic version of the Bible based upon it, he could introduce a quite different rendering of this verse, and second, by connecting the prophecy with both the Lucan and the Qur’ānic accounts of the Annunciation to Mary, he would be able simultaneously to undercut the idea that the passage prophesies the rise of Islam and to call into question the Muslim understanding of Jesus’ conception, as described above.

If indeed Habakkuk 3:3 was chosen by the author at hand as a source text because it was known to him to be used as a Muslim apologetical source, such a usage would be in parallel to his use of certain Qur’ānic passages. We have already noted that he is particularly concerned to draw upon those texts from the Qur’ān that are generally understood to present the greatest or most explicit challenges to Christian doctrine. In a similar way, if the hypothesis described here is correct, he would be interested in incorporating Habakkuk 3:3 into the treatise specifically because it was used as a Muslim “proof text.”

The author of *Fī taḥṭīt* also seeks to align his use of the term “Spirit” with the second Qur’ānic characterization, namely, the representation of the Spirit of God as the agent of revelation. In a typical passage, the author draws upon Matthew 22:41-46, and writes:
And the Christ said to them, “How did the prophet David prophesy by the Holy Ghost about the Christ, saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put Thine enemies below Thy footstool? If the Christ be the Son of David, then how does David call Him Lord?” The Jews were perplexed, and answered Him not a word. If the Christ were not God of God, He would not have dared to make Himself Lord of David, but the Christ was God of God, He was made flesh of Mary the daughter of David, for she was of the lineage of David, and therefore He was named the Christ. God had promised to David His prophet that the Christ should be of his race. Everything that David the prophet had said happened; verily he spake by the Holy Ghost, who revealed everything to him.”

As with the idea that the Holy Spirit was involved in a unique way with the conception of Jesus, this presentation of the Holy Spirit as the agent of revelation is no great stretch for the author, given the traditional doctrine of revelation. But other elements of the passage suggest that he is consciously trying to appropriate this particular characterization of the Holy Spirit for this apologetical strategy. He uses the term “prophet” in reference to David three different times, drawing upon an appellation that is certainly given to David in the Qur’an but which is not a biblical title for the Israelite king. In fact, in his usage of the Gospel of Matthew, the author of goes so far as to ascribe to Jesus himself use of the phrase “the prophet David,” even though the text of the gospel does not support this. Clearly the author is trying to draw upon the prophetology of the Qur’an, an


31 See surahs 17:55 and 21:78.
important aspect of which is the “Spirit” as the agent of inspiration and revelation, as
described in the discussion of surahs 16, 40, and 42, above.

The description the author gives of the mode of prophecy – that David spoke by
the Holy Spirit, who revealed everything to him – also seems to partake of the immediacy
and directness of the Qur’ānic concept of prophethood. With the biblical treatment of
prophecy, the reader often gets the impression that the prophet may have spoken an
utterance with a double-meaning, the full sense of which may have not been immediately
clear even to the prophet himself. In other cases, the prophet seems completely unaware
of the import of his utterance, which may even be at cross purposes with the speaker’s
intent.32 The text of the Qur’ān itself is received by Muslims according to a quite
different understanding of the mode of prophecy, in which the prophet consciously and
passively receives the text which is to be proclaimed (and later written down) directly
from God. The author of Fr taḥlīl seems in this passage to attempt to accommodate
David’s words to this Islamic sense of how divine revelation occurs, in a way similar to
his description of a book having been “sent down” to the “prophet Moses” noted earlier.

In a passage that follows a similar apologetical trajectory, the author of Fr taḥlīl
writes:

The faithful Job also prophesied by the Holy Ghost, saying, “It is the
Spirit of God that hath created me, and in His name He reigns over all; it
is He who hath taught me understanding.” The prophets and saints of God
have shewn that God and His Word and His Spirit established all things
and gave life to all things, and it is not fitting for any one who knows what

32 See, for example, Jer 31:15 as treated in Matt 2:18, or the prophecy of Caiaphas as recounted in John
11:49-51.
God hath sent down to His prophets, that he should disdain to worship
God and His Word and His Spirit, one God.33

Like David, Job is one of the twenty-five prophets referred to as such in the text of the
Qur’ān, and although the author of Fīt taḥlīl does not explicitly call Job “the prophet,” by
using the closely related verb tanabā, he is clearly fitting Job into the Qur’ānic category,
as already done with David. As with the passage from Matthew 22/Psalm 110, the author
notes that Job prophesies “by the Holy Spirit” and once again characterizes the prophetic
mode in a strongly Qur’ānic way, speaking of what “God has sent down to His prophets.”

Moreover, this passage from Fīt taḥlīl deftly ties together two different characterizations of
the Holy Spirit that are part of the author’s apologetical strategy. As just shown, the
passage appropriates the Qur’ānic understanding of revelation by the Holy Spirit and the
closely related Qur’ānic understanding of prophethood; additionally, by citing this
particular passage from Job, the author is able to associate with the Spirit the divine
prerogative of giving life. Concern for the power of giving or restoring life as represented
in the Qur’ān will serve a key function in the author’s overall apologetical strategy, as
will be demonstrated later. Thus, with his usual concision, the author has connected four
different strands of thought to serve his apologetical objective: the “prophet” Job, a
theoretically common source for both Christians and Muslims; the Qur’ānic concept of
revelation, with its emphasis on the role of the Spirit; the theme of life-giving as a divine

33 Gibson 23-24; “Wa tanabā Ḥayyā ṣaḏiq āţān bi-Rūh āl-Quds wa qāl Rūh āl-Rabb ālāḏī kalaqanī
wa bi-ismuḥu malaka kul šaṭ. Huwa ṣalat t’alamanī al-fāhsam. Faqad bayana ḥaḏūq Allâh wa ṣifāhu an Allâh
wa kalimatihī wa rūḥīhī āqām kul šaṭ wa āḥāq kul šaṭ wa līs yanbaqī ḥaḥīd y’alam nu anzala Allâh ‘alâ
ānbâhī an yastankaḥ al-y’âhad Allâh wa kalimatihī wa rūḥīhī alâh wâhi’d.” The citation from Job is either
misquoted or taken from a variant text. It fits most closely with the Septuagint, but the phrase “in His name
He reigns over all” appears in neither the LXX nor the Masoretic text. See Job 33:4.
prerogative; and the implicit question running throughout the entire treatise, namely, how to understand the relationship between God, His Word, and His Spirit.

The author of *Fi ṭaḥlīl* also draws upon the remaining Qur’ānic characterization of the Spirit, namely, a special role of supporting believers in such a way as to maintain their steadfastness in faith. In fact, he uses language similar to that found in surah 58:22 of the Qur’ān not only to characterize the action of the Spirit, but also the relationship between the Word of God and the Spirit of God:

> He [Christ] sent to the Apostles the Holy Ghost as He had promised them. If He were like Adam or like any man, prophet or otherwise, He could not decree in Heaven, nor could He go up to Heaven and remain on the earth as Adam remained, and Noah, and Abraham, and Moses and the Prophets and the Apostles, all of them. But He is the Word and the Light of God, God of God; He came down from Heaven for the salvation of Adam and his race from Satan and his error. He went up to Heaven where He had been in His honour and His dignity, and filled the hearts of men who believed in Him with strength and the Holy Ghost that they might adore God and His Word and the Holy Ghost in Heaven and in earth.  

As with so many passages in *Fi ṭaḥlīl*, the author here combines a number of different elements to support his apologetical strategy. Most importantly for the point at hand, he uses terminology similar to that found in surah 58:22 in order to align the Christian doctrine of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit with the Qur’ānic usage of the term “Spirit.” This alignment then allows him to inject an implicit critique of the Muslim understanding of Jesus as one among the prophets, while at the same time presenting a kind of

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34 Gibson 14; “We ārsala ilā lḥārāmmin Rūḥ al-Quds kamā wa’adahum wa laū kān miṣl Ādām aū miṣl ahdi min āl-nūs nubāēn aū gūruhu lam yastaṭ/f’a ān yaqdī fī āl-sāmā wa lā yaṭl’a ilā āl-sāmā wa yābelī fī āl-ārd kamā baqä Ādām wa Nūḥ wa Ibrāhīm wa Mūsā wa āl-ānbā wa āl-rusul kuluhum. Walākin kalimah Allāh wa nūruhu ālah min Allāh najala min āl-sāmā bi-kaḥās Ādām wa ḍarāʿtuhī min Iblī wa ḍalālatuhī. Wa șa’āda ilā āl-sāmā biṭ kān fī karāmahī wa salāṭunīhī wa malā qalāb āl-nūs ālāḏīn āmnūā bīhi quḥ wa Rūḥ al-Quds li-kāmah yasbah Allāh wa kalimahīhī wa Rūḥ al-Quds fī āl-sāmawīt wa āl-ārd.”
“Trinitarian economy” of God’s salvific activity in the world. By mentioning a number of the “prophets” affirmed by the Qur’ān35, the author is able to draw a contrast between them and Jesus, in that only Jesus was able to send the Holy Spirit to indwell his followers. By using the appellation “Word of God” again here, the author suggests his Trinitarian economy of salvation: God has sent His Word into the world, and to those who believe in that Word, Jesus sends the Spirit. This economy, while drawing upon the Qur’ānic usages of “Word” and “Spirit” as has been shown here, also stands in contrast to the Qur’ānic economy, in which the precise relationships between God, His Word, and His Spirit are left unclear. Besides this entire schema using the terms “Word” and “Spirit,” the author of Ṭr tālīṯ draws on a number of other Qur’ānic concepts and terms in order to pursue his apologetical strategy.

The Authority of God

As was noted earlier, the author of Ṭr tālīṯ makes a subtle change of syntax in the way that he recasts the Trinitarian formula. He does not refer to “God the Word” or “God the Spirit;” rather, he refers to “God and His Word and His Spirit” (Allah wa kalimatihi wa rūḥhi). In doing so, he is not only drawing upon the Qur’ānic uses of “Word” and “Spirit” as shown above, but also upon a Qur’ānic principle that one might call “devolved authority.” Although the primary theological emphasis of the Qur’ān is the complete otherness and transcendence of God, there are a number of passages which use the formula “God and His x” to indicate that God’s absolute authority has devolved upon

35 See, for example, surahs 2:37, 3:84, 4:125, 7:103-104, 11:25, 19:58, 40:23, and 71:1, among many similar references.
some entity so truly and completely that to resist or disobey that entity is to resist and disobey God.

One such passage is surah 2:285, which says that, “The messenger has faith in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and the faithful, each one of them, has faith in God and His angels and His books and His messengers [\textit{bi-Åălha wa malåktåhi wa kutåbihi wa råsiåhi}]...” The construction of his phrase is highly noteworthy, since the entire string of entities is governed by the preposition \textit{bi-}, which indicates that the object of faith is everything which follows: God, His angels, His books, and His messengers. As previously noted, surah 42:51-52 articulates the Qur’\-anic principle of inspiration, in which God speaks to a human being only in a mediated way, through inspiration, a veil, or a messenger. Taken together, these two passages suggest that the mediatory agent through which God communicates with the human being is so closely identified with God’s own authority, that the two cannot be distinguished. Having faith in God’s word means having faith in the means by which that word is communicated.

A similar passage appears in surah 7 and applies this principle explicitly to Muhammad himself. Verse 58 of this surah reads:

Say: O people, I am the messenger of God sent to you all, the messenger of Him to Whom belongs lordship of heaven and earth. There is no god but He; He gives life and gives death. So have faith in God and his messenger [\textit{bi-Åălha wa råsiåhi}], the illiterate prophet, who has faith in God and His words [\textit{bi-Åălha wa kalåmiåhi}], and follow him so that you may be guided.

This verse actually serves as a double-example of the principle here explained, since Muhammad is described as exercising faith in both God and His words, and the people
are exhorted to exercise faith in both God and Muhammad. Perhaps the most striking example of this “devolved authority” is found in surah 33, a surah that is in part concerned with various practical rules of conduct among Muslim believers. Verse 36 of this surah teaches that, “It is not appropriate for any faithful man or woman, when God and His messenger have ruled upon a matter, to have any choice in their matter. Whoever disobeys God and His messenger certainly goes astray in manifest error.” In this passage, the verb here translated “ruled upon” has for its subject the phrase “God and His messenger,” and there is no distinction whatsoever drawn in the text between the decision-making authority of God and that of His messenger. There is certainly nothing in the text that would allow for a translation such as “when God has ruled upon a matter through His messenger,” or anything of that sort. Instead, the text suggests a single decision-making authority exercised by God and His messenger. Similarly, at the end of the verse, the person who goes badly astray does so by disobeying “God and His messenger,” with the text once again making no distinction whatever between disobeying God and disobeying His messenger.

Clearly the structure of the phrase “God and His Word and His Spirit,” the Trinitarian formula used most often in Fī ṭaḥlīl, draws upon these Qur’ānic uses of the formula “God and his x” to denote devolved authority. Having borrowed this structure, the author connects it with another Qur’ānic usage that connotes God’s absolute authority, namely, the throne of God.
The Throne of God

In the language of the Qur’ān, the throne of God is the ultimate symbol of His authority. Other than actual names of God expressing divine attributes, the throne (‘arṣ in Arabic) is the term most often associated with God’s transcendence. Verses of the Qur’ān that refer to the throne can generally be grouped into three categories. In the first category are verses that mention God’s throne in reference to His absolute uniqueness and the fact that there is but one God. In the second are verses that mention God’s throne in the context of His identity as the Creator of the entire visible universe. As will be shown later, this is an important association, because the author of Fi ṭalāḥa makes a great deal of the connections between God’s role as Creator, the association of creative powers with Jesus, and the association of God’s “Word” with the act of creation. In the third category are a couple of verses that make reference to God’s throne in the context of specifically denying the idea of God begetting a son.

A typical example of the first category is surah 23:116-117, which proclaims, “Exalted be God, the King, the Truth. There is no god but He, Lord of the throne of honor! Whoever calls upon another god, along with God, has no proof for such a thing. Indeed, his reckoning will be with his Lord….” In a similar passage, Muhammad is instructed to take consolation in God’s greatness when his preaching is rejected by those he would like to win to Islam: “So if they turn away, say: God is sufficient for me. There is no god but He, and in Him I trust. He is Lord of the greatest throne” (surah 9:129). A typical example of the second category, those passages which associate the throne of God with His role as Creator, is surah 10:3, which reads, “Truly your Lord is God, who
created the heavens and the earth in six days, then established Himself upon the throne, directing affairs….” Surah 57 includes a very similar passage which associates the throne not only with God’s creative powers, but also with His continuing watchfulness over all of His creation. Verses 4 and 5 of this surah read:

He is the One who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then established Himself upon the throne. He knows what enters the earth, and what comes forth from it, what descends from heaven and what rises up to it…. Unto Him is the Lordship of the heavens and the earth, and unto Him are all affairs turned back.

At least one Qur’ānic passage combines both of these concepts, the utter uniqueness of God and His creative power, in conjunction with the throne imagery. Surah 32:4-5 says that “God is He who created the heavens and the earth, and that which is between them, in six days; then He established Himself on the throne. There is none besides Him to support you or intervene for you….”

As mentioned above, there is also a passage in the Qur’ān that makes reference to the throne of God in the context of specifically denying the possibility of God begetting a son. Surah 43:81-82 reads: “Say: if the Merciful One had a son, then I would be first among his worshippers. Glorified be the Lord of the heavens and the earth, Lord of the throne, from what they ascribe to Him!” As shown above, the image of God’s throne is usually invoked in the Qur’ān as a symbol of His creative power, His absolute uniqueness, or both. In this context, surah 43:81-82 seems to be using the image of the throne to set up an explicit contrast between the God who was capable of creating and administering the visible universe, and a God whose nature would admit of begetting. This contrast suggests two compatible reasons for the importance of the symbol of God’s
throne for the author of *Fī ṭaḥliṭ*. First, and most obviously, this contrast stands as a direct challenge to Christian Trinitarian doctrine, and therefore must be confronted directly. Second, as noted previously, using those Qur’ānic texts that seem to issue the most explicit challenges to Christian theology as the raw material for the Christian response seems to be a key component of this author’s apologetical strategy.

The text of *Fī ṭaḥliṭ* returns numerous times to the image of God’s throne, using this image to underscore the relationship among God, His Word, and His Spirit, that is being presented. After presenting several Old Testament prophecies teaching that God would come “in person” to save His people36, the author of *Fī ṭaḥliṭ* argues that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of these prophecies, and uses the image of the throne to explain how this can be so:

> It is He who came down from Heaven a Saviour to His servants. The throne is not divided, for verily God and His Word and His Spirit are on the throne, and in every place complete without diminution. The heavens and the earth and all that is therein are full of His honour.37

With his usual concision, the author here accomplishes several things. First, he neatly appropriates Qur’ānic terminology and imagery. Not only does he use the term throne here as the symbol of God’s authority, but he connects it with the term “honor,” as is

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36 The prophetic passages cited in this portion of the text include Is 64:1, Ps 80:1-2, Ps 107:20, Hab 2:3 (misquoted), Ps 118:26-27 (also misquoted), and Ps 50:3. Interestingly, this series of citations also includes the following: “There is no intercessor and no king, but the Lord will come and save us.” This line does not appear to be taken directly from any Old Testament source, but is similar in terminology to both Is 59:16 and surah 32:4 quoted above. Both *Fī ṭaḥliṭ* and surah 32:4 use the phrase *lā šāfi’a* (“no intercessor” or “no one to intervene”). Apparently the author was so deeply immersed in Qur’ānic terminology that, when citing Scripture from memory, he conflated Old Testament and Qur’ānic verses.

37 Gibson 10; “wa ḥāṣa ḍā‘ī ḥabāṣa min al-samā ḍalāṣ lī-‘abādihī. Wa lam fāraq al-‘arṣ. Fā-‘ān Allāh wa kalimatihi wa ruḥihi ala al-‘arṣ wa fī kul mākān tām lī yuntaqāṣ. Anītalata al-samāwāt wa al-‘arṣ wa mā lī-himā min karāmatihī.”
done in the Qur’ān. Second, building upon the use of the terms “Word” and “Spirit” as described above, he raises the question of how God can be on the throne and yet His Word and His Spirit be absent from the throne. In doing so, he takes up the main Qur’ānic argument against Christian doctrine (that Trinitarian doctrine undermines the oneness of God by associating other entities with Him) and inverts it. If God’s Word and His Spirit are not upon the throne with him, he implies, then the throne – the Qur’ānic symbol of God’s singular authority – is actually divided. Since in the Qur’ān, the throne is associated not only with God’s creative power, but also with his continuing administration of the universe, the terminological flourish “the heavens and the earth and all that is therein” (itself another Qur’ānic appropriation), links the image of the throne with the salvific work of God’s Word. With this adroit combination of terminology, the author argues that the administration of all things described in the Qur’ān is accomplished in part by the Word having come down to save God’s servants. Finally, by placing this passage as the conclusion to a series of Old Testament prophecies, the author implicitly poses the question: which tradition is the legitimate heir and fulfillment of these prophecies? As mentioned previously, the text of the Qur’ān places great stock in the idea that Islam follows upon and reaffirms the preaching of all true prophets throughout history, including the prophets of the Old Testament.

A bit later in the text, the author again uses the theme of God’s throne to discuss God’s salvific activity in the world, and in this passage he combines Qur’ānic terminology with a more explicit Christian soteriological emphasis:
The Wicked One thought that he would not cease to conquer the race of Adam and weary them, and that no one could save them from his error. It pleased God to destroy him and to trample on him by that Man whom he had tempted and sought to weaken…. God sent from His throne His Word which is from Himself, and saved the race of Adam and clothed Himself with this weak conquered Man through Mary the good, whom God chose from the women of the ages. He was veiled in her, and by that He destroyed the Evil One, and conquered and subdued him…. He boasts not over the race of Adam, for it was a terrible grief when God conquered him by this Man with whom He clothed Himself. If God were to destroy Satan without clothing Himself with this Man by whom He healed him, Satan would not have found grief and remorse.38

The author points out that Christians understand the Word of God to be issued from God’s throne, the Qur’ānic symbol of God’s unique and singular authority. This emphasis is further intensified by the phrase “from Himself” (minhu). If the Word is truly from God, and issues forth from the throne, then it is not possible to speak of it as somehow compromising or competing with God’s unique authority. By speaking in this way about the Word of God coming into the world, the author simultaneously expresses a Christian understanding of the relationship between the God the Father and God the Word and posits an implicit challenge to the Islamic critique of Trinitarian doctrine. This challenge could be stated as: if the Word of God is the an expression of God’s own authoritative will, and issues from God’s singular and unique authority, in what sense could devotion to that Word be considered a rival to the unique fidelity that is owed to God alone?

Also important in this passage is the author’s use of the term “veiled” to describe the relationship between the Word of God and the humanity of Jesus. The reality of Jesus’ humanity is emphasized by the reference to “Mary the good,” through whom the Word of God was veiled in order to come into the world and defeat Satan. This use of the verb “to be veiled” is significant because it appropriates one of the key terms of the Qur’ānic account of divine revelation and applies it to Jesus. As described above, surah 42:51 teaches that God speaks to humankind only in a mediated or indirect fashion, and one of the ways this occurs is “through a veil.” As also noted previously, one of the Qur’ānic emphases about the Word of God is that it brings human beings out of their ignorance and into a right way of acting. By combining the images of the throne, the veil, and the Word, the author if Fī ṭalḥa is able to align Trinitarian doctrine, particularly the Christian account of the so-called “economic” Trinity’s activity in the world, with a thoroughly Qur’ānic notion of divine revelation. The Word that came forth from God’s throne in order to guide human beings had to be veiled in order to be accessible to humankind, thus the necessity of the humanity of Jesus.

The next passage in which the image of the throne is used seeks to emphasize the perfect unity of action that exists among the persons of the Trinity, or in the terminology of Fī ṭalḥa, among God, His Word, and His Spirit. This passage enumerates the various things that Christ accomplished on the earth, and says that

He taught them to worship God and His Word and His Spirit, one God and one Lord. He taught that the Christ did not come down from Heaven for His own salvation, for verily the Word and the Spirit were with God from all eternity, and the angels adored God and His Word and His Spirit, one Lord who makes all holy, but He came down a mercy and a salvation to
Adam and his race from Satan and his error. The throne is not divided with God. The God of God was in Heaven ordering things and shewing mercy to His creatures as He willed.39

The emphasis that Christ did not come for his own salvation seems in part a reaction to the Qur’ānic representation of Jesus appearing before God on judgment day and being judged along with the rest of humankind.40 This passage, like so many others in Fī ṭalātīl, very concisely expresses Christian doctrine – that Christ came to effect the salvation of others, but was in no need of salvation himself – while posing an implicit challenge to Islamic belief. For the author of this treatise, the fact that Christ was in need of no salvation consisted not so much in the fact that he led a sinless human life in perfect obedience to the Father, but in his very identity as the Word of God, which was with God from all eternity. Salvation as represented here consists in being with God, and it is not possible for God to exist without His Word, which is co-eternal with Him. Picking up on the Qur’ānic identity of Jesus as a “Word from God,” already discussed at length above, the author anticipates a conceptual debate that would later become a critical matter in the development of Islamic doctrine, namely, whether the Word of God could be considered eternal. If eternal, then there would appear to be two distinct eternal entities (God and His Word), which would potentially, from an Islamic point of view, compromise the absolute oneness of God which is so central to the message of the Qur’ān. If, on the other hand,

39 Gibson 12, “wa a’alamuhum an ya’abadūn Allāh wa kalimatihun wa rūḥhu ʿālāh wāḥid wa rabb wāḥid. Wa a’alam ʿān al-masīh lam yanzal min al-samā li-ḥaṣās nafsīhum laqad kān kalimah wa rūḥ ‘and Allāh min qabil al-dāhar. Wa kānat al-mulūkīh yashshūn il-lah wa kalimatihī wa rūḥī rabī wāḥid yuqadasa ku l wa-lakinuhu nazala rabīmah wa ḥaṣās li-Adam wa wa ḥaṣās min Iblīs wa ḥaṣās hilālī. Wa lam yuṭarq al-ʿarš ‘and Allāh. Wa kān ʿālāh min Allāh fī al-samā yadabara al-ʿāmūr wa yaraḥama ḥaṣās kif yasā.”

the Word of God is considered not-eternal, then the question is raised as to how God
existed from all eternity without His Word, and how that Word came into being at some
point without positing mutability in God.

The last sentence of the passage quoted picks up on one of the themes closely
associated with the Qur’ānic usage of the throne image as described above, namely, the
power of God to administer the created world. The author seems to be reacting to an
anticipated Muslim critique that if the Word of God were present on the earth in the
person of Jesus Christ, then this would cause a theological problem. Either the power of
God to oversee and administer the created world would be compromised, or else the
“throne” (the singular and unique power of God) would be divided because God’s
authoritative Word had left the throne and come down to earth. The author of *Fi ṭālīḥīt*
anticipates such a criticism and attempts to undermine it with the bold assertion that,
because the throne of God is not divided, the Word of God was simultaneously on earth
in the person of Jesus Christ and in heaven, continuing the divine administration of the
created world. Certainly this is a somewhat different mode of expression than is typically
found in Christian theology, but it would seem to align with the scriptural testimony
about the perfect unity existing between Jesus Christ and God the Father.41 The
conclusion of the passage quoted also uses other Qur’ānic terminology to characterize the
actions of Jesus Christ in his perfect union with the throne of God. He is said to have
been “showing mercy … as He willed,” a combination of verbs that are used many times
in the Qur’ān to describe the divine activity.

41 See, for example, John 10:30 and John 14:10-11.
In the final passage of *Fi taftih* that make use of the throne image, the author is particularly adamant to assert that the unity of God is a Christian doctrine, and to deny any suggestion of Christian polytheism:

Say not that we believe in two Gods, or that we say there are two Lords. God forbid! Verily God is one God and one Lord in His Word and His Spirit. Nevertheless God inspired His servant and prophet David and shewed him that the Christ is the Word and the Light of God when He appeared to men by His grace. Verily He is God of God, though He has put on flesh. He who obeys Him obeys God, and he who is disobedient to Him, God will put below His feet, that men may know that God and His Christ are on a throne and [have] one honour. Nothing of God is without any other part.42

This passage brings together a number of terms and concepts that the author of has been using throughout the treatise. As he has done before, he combines the terms throne and honor, just as the Qur’ānic text does, to express the absolutely unique authority of God. He again invokes the Old Testament prophets, in this case particularly represented by David, to suggest that only Christian doctrine regarding the relationship between God and Jesus Christ is faithful to the prophetic tradition, a key point given the Qur’ān’s insistence that its teachings are a reaffirmation of previous authentic prophecy. Although the author does not here use the terminology of God’s revelation being “veiled,” that idea is called to mind by his reference to Christ having “put on flesh” in order to “appear to men.” Finally there is another reference to eschatological judgment which, as demonstrated above, is associated in the Qur’ān with God’s Word. Having woven together these

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previously used terms and concepts, the author concludes the passage with his coup de
grâce, the declaration that “nothing of God is without any other part.” Although the use
of the term “part” in reference to God may be shocking to the Western Christian
accustomed to speaking of God’s absolute simplicity, the author’s point is clear: it is not
possible to imagine some part of God existing in one mode or place, while some other
part of Him exists in another mode or place. Rather, Christians believe that, just as the
Qurʾān taught, the Word of God must be veiled in order to be accessible to humankind,
and when this word took the veil of Jesus’ humanity, the perfect unity between God and
His Word was not broken or violated.

The Power to Give or Restore Life

As has been noted earlier, the author of ِفُتْطَّلِی is also quite interested in the
Qurʾānic treatment of some of Jesus’ miracles, particularly with regard to the ability to
give or sustain life. There are two Qurʾānic themes which provide the background of this
interest, namely, the unique divine prerogative of creation and the representation of God
as the Giver of sustenance.43 The text of the Qurʾān explicitly sets up a contrast between
the power to create as a key attribute of the one true God and the pretensions of idols. For
example, surah 13:16 reads:

you indeed take others than Him, who have no ability for benefit or for

43 There are at least sixty-nine Qurʾānic passages having to do with God’s unique ability to create, with
God as the provider of sustenance, or combining these two themes. See, for example, 2:21-22, 2:29, 2:57-60,
harm, even for themselves?” … Do they make for God partners who have created even as He has created, so that their creation and His creation seemed similar to them? Say: “God is the Creator of all things, and He is the One, the Almighty.”

The Qur’ān also links this unique divine attribute of creation with the attribute of providing sustenance to creatures in general and to humankind in particular. For example, surah 40:61-64 describes God as follows:

It is God who made the night for you to rest in, and the light of day so that you may see, for God has favor toward the people; yet most of the people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all things; there is no God besides Him…. It is God who made for you the earth as an abode, and the heavens as a canopy; has formed you, and made your forms excellent, and provided you with sustenance of good things. Such is God, your Lord, so glory to God, Lord of all creation.

In addition to describing the power to create as the divine attribute par excellence, and linking this attribute with that of providing sustenance, the Qur’ānic text also draws an explicit contrast between the ability to create and the quality of begetting. Surah 6:101 says, “Originator of the heavens and the earth! How can there be a son for Him who has no spouse? He created all things, and He is the One who knows all things.” Surah 25:1-2 almost exactly echoes the same understanding of God: “Glory to Him who sent down upon His servant the Criterion [i.e., the Qur’ān] as a warning to all creation, He to whom belongs the Lordship of the heavens and the earth. He has taken no son, nor does He have a partner in His dominion. He created all things and decreed their estimation.”

Against this Qur’ānic background, the author of Fī talḥīṭ is keen to take advantage of the story of the boy Jesus making live birds from clay, as recounted in surah 3:49.
Citing this ability to create, and linking it with both the provision of sustenance and other divine prerogatives, the author writes:

You will find in the Coran, “And he spake and created from clay like the form of a bird, and breathed into it, and lo! it was a bird by permission of God.” He forgave trespasses, and who forgives trespasses but God? He satisfied the hungry, and no one does that nor provides food but God. You will find all this about the Christ in your Book; He gave the Apostles the Holy Ghost, and gave them authority over devils and over all sickness. No one gives the Holy Ghost but God, He who breathed into Adam, and lo! he was a man with a living soul.”

In this passage the author commits a bit of verbal legerdemain, as he smoothly elides Qur’ānic testimony about Jesus (the creation of the bird) with New Testament references (forgiving sins, bequeathing the Holy Spirit on the apostles, etc.). Upon careful analysis, however, it becomes clear that the author is not merely “playing fast and loose” with his source materials, but creating a dense and tightly interwoven fabric of concepts and allusions. First, he clearly wants to show that even the Qur’ān itself testifies that the attribute that most perfectly expresses God’s utter uniqueness, the ability to create, was in some way resident in the person of Jesus. Second, he carefully aligns the description of the bird’s creation by Jesus with that of Adam by God, calling attention to the parallelism which exists between the Qur’ānic and Old Testament texts. Third, in a way that is not obvious in translation, he has also associated the giving of the Holy Spirit to the apostles with these other two texts. Just as the Greek pneuma can be translated either “breath” or

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“spirit” depending upon context, so also the Arabic term ṭuḥ can be translated with either of these terms. Thus the passage can be understood as a kind of tripartite “frame” consisting of three instances of the breath of life being given (by Jesus to the bird, by Jesus to the apostles, and by God to Adam), with other expressions of divine prerogative (forgiving sins, providing sustenance, and power over devils) interwoven on this “frame.” Furthermore, the frame is so constructed as to refer implicitly to each of the three “books” given by God as they are mentioned in the Qur’ān – the Qur’ān itself, the New Testament/‘Alqūn, and the Old Testament/‘Aqūn.

The author is probably also drawing upon another Qur’ānic story about Jesus having to do with sustenance. Surah 5:114-115 records a story that must have interested the author of Tālī, both for its apparent echo of certain gospel themes and for its relevance on the question of the identity of Jesus. The passage reads:

Lo, the disciples said: “O Jesus, son of Mary, can your Lord send a table down to us from heaven?” Jesus said: “Fear God, if you are faithful.” They said: “We want to eat from it, and satisfy our hearts, and know that you have told us the truth, and to be among the witnesses thereof.” Jesus, the son of Mary, said: “O God our Lord, send down to us a table from heaven, that there may be a feast for us, for the first and the last of us, and a sign from you; and provide sustenance for us, for You are the best provider of sustenance.” God said: “I will send it down to you, and if afterward anyone among you does not have faith, I will punish him with a punishment that I have not applied to anyone in all creation.”

The linkage of the term “sign” with the provision of sustenance in a passage having to do with Jesus and his disciples brings to mind the gospel story found in John 6:1-25. In this passage, Jesus miraculously provides food for a crowd of five thousand people from five barley loaves and two fish. When the crowds later seek him out on the other side of Lake
Capernaum, Jesus tells them that, “You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill.” It is quite true that the Qur’anic story quoted here makes a clear distinction between God and Jesus, and presents the miracle as being requested by Jesus and performed by God, rather than being performed by Jesus directly. Implicit in the passage, however, is the fact that Jesus was able to obtain from God a miraculous provision of sustenance that the disciples were not able to obtain directly. For the author of *Fi ṭalḥīṭ*, the point here would be Qur’anic evidence linking the divine attribute of providing sustenance closely with Jesus, and doing so in a way that distinguishes the prayers of Jesus from those of his disciples.

Furthermore, there is a second reason that the Qur’anic passage quoted above would have been of particular interest to the author of *Fi ṭalḥīṭ*. The story of the table from heaven is followed immediately by a passage that addresses the idea of worshipping Jesus. Verse 116 reads:

> And lo, God said: “O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to the people, ‘Take me and my mother as gods, in place of God’?” He said: “Glory to You! It could not be that I would say what I have not the right to say; and if I had said it, You would have known. For indeed, You know what is in my soul, and I do not know what is in Your soul. For You know the hidden things.

For a Christian theologian interested in how the Qur’ān treats this attribute of providing sustenance, it must have seemed that the Qur’ānic text itself is rather defensive on this point. No sooner is Jesus presented as being able to bring about the provision of a table from heaven in a way the disciples could not, than the text presents him as saying that He should not be worshipped. Given the near proximity of these two things in the Qur’ānic text, it is not surprising that the author of *Fi ṭalḥīṭ* lists the provision of sustenance among
the divine attributes associated with Jesus. Nor could it have been lost on him that verse 116 addresses an attitude about Jesus that would have been unknown among orthodox Christians, on two counts. First, the passage suggests that whatever worship is directed to Jesus is a direct replacement for the worship that would otherwise be offered to God. Second, it suggests that the worship offered to Jesus by Christians is offered equally to his mother. Thus this surah associates Jesus with the miraculous provision of sustenance, and then immediately follows up the association with a passage forbidding the worship of Jesus, but doing so in such terms as any orthodox Christian could affirm and agree with.

This point is significant because the theological goal of the author throughout the treatise at hand is to affirm Trinitarian doctrine in a way that emphasizes the oneness of God and is, to the highest degree possible, in keeping with Qur‘ānic terminology and concepts. In fact, the author of Fiqh sets this whole question of the exercise of the divine prerogative of creation and sustenance of life in a traditional Christian interpretation of the biblical creation account. Early in the treatise he writes:

It is written also in the beginning of the Law, which God sent down to His prophet Moses on Mount Sinai, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Then he said, “The Spirit of God was upon the waters.” Then He said, by his Word, “Let there be light”; and there was light…. So God shewed in the beginning of the book which He sent down to His prophet Moses, that God and His Word and His Spirit are one God, and that God, may He be blessed and exalted! created all things, and gave life to all things by His Word and His Spirit. We do not say three Gods…. but we say that God and His Word and His Spirit are one God and one Creator.”

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45 Gibson 3-4; “Va makrah a‘īdān fi rās al-Ta‘ārah ālatī anzaluhā Allah ‘alā Mūsā nabihi fi Tur Sinā badu kalaqa Allah al-samā wa al-ārd. Tūm qal Raḥ Allah kān ‘alā al-māh. Tūm qal bi-kalimatihī nūr fa-kān nūr…. Fa-qad bayana Allah fi nūl kitāb anzaluhu ‘alā nabihi Mūsā ‘ān Allah wa kalimatihī wa rūḥī alah wāḥid wa ‘ān Allah tabārak wa t‘ālā kalaqa kul sa‘ī wa āḥā kūl sa‘ī bi-kalimatihī wa rūḥī. Wa lasnā naqīl falaqāt ala‘hā … wa‘ākīnā naqīl ‘ān Allah wa kalimatihī wa rūḥī alah wāḥid wa kāliq wāḥid.”
By interpreting the creation account given in Genesis in this Trinitarian fashion, the author not only grounds his apologetical strategy in the theoretically common ground of the Mosaic books, but also provides an explanation for the association of the divine attributes of creation and sustenance of life with Jesus in the Qur’anic text. Having drawn upon all of the Qur’anic material about the Word of God, as shown above, the author is able to present Jesus as the creative and life-giving Word through which God’s distinctive attributes are exercised. The emphasis that God, His Word, and His Spirit are not only “one God” but also “one Creator” is an implicit challenge to surah 5:116 and its suggestion that worship directed to Jesus is “in place of” worship of God. How is it, the author seems to ask, that the Qur’ān can represent the giving and sustaining of life as the divine attributes par excellence, associate them with Jesus, and commend worship of God but forbid worship of His Word, through which these attributes are exercised?

In conclusion, the anonymous author of Fī taqlīd Allāh al-wāhid called upon a deeply conversant knowledge of the Qur’ān in order to articulate his defense of Trinitarian doctrine. He interwove biblical material, particularly from the Old Testament, with the Qur’ānic uses of the terms “Word” and “Spirit” to build an argument that only a Trinitarian understanding of God could make intelligible both the teachings of the prophets and the expectations of God’s Word and God’s Spirit that could be derived from the Qur’ān. Three aspects of this author’s apologetical technique were to become standard methodology for the other Arabophone Christian theologians to be considered here: placing Muslims in the dilemma of either denying Qur’ānic language about God or
else affirming the theological integrity of Trinitarian doctrine; making heavy use of Old Testament material to implicitly but constantly challenge Muslims as to which religious tradition could credibly claim to be the theological heir of the prophets; and inverting Qur’ānic “proof texts” and other elements of Islamic discourse, including the ontological chasm existing between God and His creation, to be the basis of Trinitarian arguments.
Chapter 2: Theodore Abū Qurrah

The texts to be considered next are the writings of Theodore Abū Qurrah, a Melkite theologian and controversialist of the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Unfortunately little is known with certainty of the details of Abū Qurrah’s life and career, because he provides little information about himself and the only third-party references about the man and his life consist of what John C. Lamoreaux describes as “short notices in a variety of sources, almost all of which are late and hostile to their subject.”¹ It is known with some certainty that Theodore served as the Melkite bishop of Haran, a Mesopotamian city with an astonishingly diverse religious environment, about which more will be said shortly. Sidney Griffith, Ignace Dick, and a number of other scholars give credence to the report that Theodore had also been a monk of the famous Judean monastery of Mar Sabas², but Lamoreaux considers this to be unlikely and the text from which this tradition is taken to be “naively legendary.”³ He further suggests that the text likely confused Abū Qurrah with another Theodore who, like Abū Qurrah, was also from Edessa. The dates of Theodore’s birth and death are unknown, but the extant references

³ Lamoreaux xiii.
suggest that his career as an apologetical theologian began during the reign of the caliph al-Mahdī (775-785) and lasted at least until the reign of al-Maʿmūn (813-833).⁴

Theodore Abū Qurrah occupies an interesting position in the development of Arabophone Christian theology, in that the extant texts indicate that he wrote in both Greek and Arabic. Whereas one of his primary influences, John of Damascus, had written in Greek although living in the new Muslim empire, and had lived within a Byzantine ecclesiastical and theological tradition, Theodore Abū Qurrah “wrote in Arabic, with an eye to the Muslim mutakallimūn [theologians] of Basrah, Kufa, and Baghdad.”⁵ Indeed, the Muslim community seems to have done a better job of preserving Abū Qurrah’s memory as a theologian than his own Melkite community, since we know of his participation in both Christian-Muslim debates and internecine Christian controversies in part from references found in the bibliographical writings of Ibn āl-Nadīm (tenth century) and ʿAbd āl-Jabbār āl-Hamadhānī (tenth and early eleventh centuries).⁶ Thus the writings of Abū Qurrah, together with the anonymous text Fī tathlīth considered above, can be considered the earliest documents attempting to formulate a natively Arabophone expression of Christian doctrine, in conscious dialogue with the Islamic religious milieu in which the documents were written.

As mentioned above, the Haran in which Theodore lived, ministered, and wrote was a place of striking religious diversity. In addition to the Muslim majority, there were

⁴ Griffith, Beginnings, 271.
⁵ Griffith, Beginnings, 272.
⁶ Lamoreaux, xvii.
representatives of all three of the Arabophone Christian “denominations” – the Chalcedonian Melkite church, the non-Chalcedonian Jacobite community, and the non-Chalcedonian Church of the East. Finally, there was even a newly resurgent Neoplatonic paganism competing for the religious adherence of Haran’s citizens. Against this polyglot theological backdrop, Theodore had a number of distinct agendas as an apologist: the defense of monotheism against paganism, the defense of Christianity against both Judaism and Islam, and the defense of Chalcedonian Christology against the non-Chalcedonian doctrinal expressions of both the Jacobite church and the Church of the East. As a result, he wrote treatises on a wide range of theological topics and directed to an array of audiences, from broad accounts of how to discern the true faith from among the variety of religious expressions available in his time and place (e.g., *On the Existence of God and the True Religion* and *On the Method of the Knowledge of God*) to treatments of quite narrow and specific doctrinal questions (e.g., *Letter to David the Monophysite* and *On Free Will*). Here we will concern ourselves only with those writings of Theodore Abū Qurrah’s which bear upon the question at hand: the development of an Arabophone Christian Trinitarian theology which drew upon Qur’ānic and Islamic terminology and concepts. Using the titles by which John C. Lamoreaux has made them known to the English-speaking world, the relevant treatises include *On the Method of the Knowledge of God*, *On the Death of Christ*, *On Our Salvation*, *Theologus Autodidactus*, and particularly *On the Trinity*.

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7 Lamoreaux, xi.
Abū Qurrah’s Appropriation of Islamic Terminology

The first characteristic to note about these writings of Theodore Abū Qurrah is the degree to which he has taken pains, like the anonymous author of *Frater Superior*, to express himself in terms that would resonate with a Muslim reader, or even with an Arabophone non-Muslim who was under the influence of the Muslim religious discourse. A crucial example is how he frames the question of determining the true religion from among the many religious traditions competing for the attentions of his intended audience. In the treatise translated and published by Lamoreaux under the title *Theologus Autodidactus*, Abū Qurrah reviews briefly the teachings and theological emphases of Haran’s Neoplatonic pagans, the Magians, the Samaritans, the Jews, the Christians, the Manicheans, the Marcionites, the Bardaisanites, and finally the Muslims. Theodore represents the Muslims’ response to the teachings of all the previously mentioned groups as, “Don’t listen to any of those you just met! They’re just a bunch of infidels who associate partners with God.”8 By placing the Muslims last in his recounting of the various religious traditions he mentions, and by formulating the Muslim claim about all the other groups in this way, Theodore gives a central place in his treatise to the Muslim claim that only Islamic doctrine preserves and honors the oneness of God. Furthermore, given the theological variety among the groups described, by singling out this allegedly common trait, Theodore indicates how central to the theological debates of his day were the issues around the unicity of God.

8 Lamoreaux, 5; the original Arabic is unpublished and unavailable.
In this same text, Abū Qurrah sets the stage for discerning which religion is true by postulating what one can presume about the way God would act toward His creation, given what we know about the divine nature. In other words, he assumes a methodology in which one examines the natural order, derives from that examination some conclusions about God’s nature, and then uses those conclusions as the basis for one’s assumptions about the way that God would go about revealing Himself and His will to humankind. In describing this procedure, Abū Qurrah casts everything he says in a thoroughly Islamic conceptual framework:

Because God is kind and generous, when He saw His creation deviating from the true worship, He would have sent them messengers and a book, both in order to show them the true worship and to return them to it from their sins. And yet, there are many messengers and many books, and they disagree with one another! One of two things must be the case: either not even one of these messengers has come from God, or there is among them just one true messenger. Because of what we know about God’s generosity and about how He cares for His creation, the latter must be the case.9

One can discern even in this short passage at least three key concepts from Islamic soteriology. First, there is the notion that humankind tends to sink into error regarding authentic worship and that the main thrust of God’s salvific action in the world is to bring humankind back to right worship of Himself. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, this guidance of humankind out of ignorance (Arabic jāḥālihah) and into right worship is one of the primary Qur’ānic emphases about the Word of God. Second, there is the idea that this guidance into right worship is accomplished by the sending of “messengers and a book.” This terminology immediately calls to mind such Qur’ānic passages as surahs 2:87, 2:285, 5:110, 21:12, 42:52, and 58:22, all of which have already

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9 Lamoreaux 6; the original Arabic is unpublished and unavailable.
been quoted above. These passages characterize the salvific action of God in the world as the sending of messengers, the sending down of a Book, or both. It is significant that a Christian theologian of Theodore Abū Qurrah’s time, with so many conceptual choices available to describe the economy of salvation (the offering of sacrifice, the establishment of communion, the calling of a covenant people, etc) would select these rather emphatically Qur’ānic terms when describing how one would suppose God to act, based upon what we can discern of His nature. He clearly wants to establish common ground using explicitly Islamic terms before moving into a more detailed discussion of how to discern among the various messengers and books purporting to bear God’s self-revelation.

Abū Qurrah also makes use of the Islamic conceptual framework in his short treatise *On the Characteristics of the True Religion*, which is similar in theme and content to portions of *On the Existence of God and the True Religion*. He takes the same strategy in this shorter treatise of arguing that one can discern from the divine attributes how we might expect God to accomplish His salvific agenda in the world, and then by comparing the various religious traditions to these conclusions, determine which of them represents what God actually has done and revealed. In pursuing this line of reasoning, Abū Qurrah posits three essential characteristic marks of the true faith: first, that it would be universal, with messengers having been sent to all nations and peoples of the world; second, that the messengers would be validated by the performance of signs and wonders (a common assertion among Christian apologists and a sore spot for Muslims, since no one claimed Muhammad to have been a thaumaturge), and third, that the messengers sent
by God would deliver their messages in the native tongues of the peoples to whom they preached. This third characteristic is particularly noteworthy for the purpose at hand:

The third characteristic is that God’s messengers must instruct the nations to which they are sent in their native tongues, so that those nations might understand them and receive what they bring. Why is this? If God were not to give the messengers He sends to human beings the power to address them in an understandable manner, He would not have a just claim against them on the day of the resurrection should they declare His messengers liars and not believe and accept their message. In short, if God were to punish the nations that did not accept His messengers, notwithstanding that those messengers had addressed them in an unintelligible fashion, He would no longer be just.10

While this is a reasonable supposition that fits well into the overall construct of Abū Qurrah’s argument, it is also a clever way to address a Muslim audience. First, it aligns his argument with a key aspect of the Islamic understanding of the Qur’ān. It will be remembered that one of the basic tenets of Islam was that the preaching of Muhammad was no new religion, but simply the same message preached by all of God’s authentic messengers to the various nations, but this time rendered in the Arabic tongue. The text of the Qur’ān itself emphasizes this point: “The Book that elucidates – We have made it as a Qur’ān in Arabic, in order that you may become wise.”11 Similar statements are made in surahs 16:102-103 and 20:113, both of which emphasize the clarity and accessibility of the Arabic in which the Qur’ān is rendered.12

10 Lamoreaux 56; the original Arabic is unpublished and unavailable.
12 Surah 16:102-103 says, “The Holy Spirit has brought it down from your Lord, as the Truth to make firm those who believe…. This is in the clear Arabic tongue; nazalahu rūh al-quds mīn Rabbik bi-āl-haq li-yaṭbih ʿalā gīn ʿasāma… haḏā līsān ‘arabīāh muḥīn.” Surah 20:113 says, following a passage about the Last Judgment, “Therefore we have sent it down, an Arabic Qur’an, and promulgated in it some of the threats of judgment….; wa kāfīlīk inzalānāhu Qur’ānān ‘arabiān wa ʿarāḥā fīhī mīn āl-wa‘āid.”
Second, Theodore makes this claim while engaged in the project of being one of the first to write Christian theology in Arabic. So at the same time that he asserts that this linguistic accessibility is a necessary characteristic mark of the true religion, Theodore by the very fact of his writing causes Christianity to fit this requirement. This somewhat ironic stratagem is important to consider, since there is no known Arabic version of the New Testament or Arabic Christian liturgy prior to Abū Qurrah’s time. This previous dearth of articulation of the Christian message in Arabic would leave Christianity open to a charge that it did not possess the third characteristic described by Abū Qurrah, but for the very project on which he is engaged. Thus the inclusion of this third characteristic affirms an important Islamic soteriological principle while at the same time obviating the idea that Christianity was not proclaimed in Arabic.

A final example of Theodore Abū Qurrah’s attempts to use terminology and concepts that would resonate with Muslims or others under the influence of the Arabophone Muslim discourse is his use of a Qur’ānic image already familiar from its appearance in *Frṭ ṭalṭīr*: the throne of God. As we have seen above, the anonymous author of that treatise used the throne of God, and its importance as a Qur’ānic expression of God’s absolute authority and uniqueness, to pose a dilemma about how God could sit on the throne, and yet His Word and Spirit be absent from it. Theodore displays his knowledge of this important Qur’ānic image but makes use of it in a somewhat different apologetical stratagem. In his treatise *On Our Salvation*\(^\text{13}\), he quotes a number of Old

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\(^{13}\) Lamoreaux surmises that the texts appearing as the sixth, seventh, and tenth treatises in Constantin Bacha’s edition of Theodore Abū Qurrah’s writings originally constituted a single treatise and has published them this way in English with the title *On Our Salvation*. 
Testament passages referring to God’s presence on the throne, thus linking the Old Testament and Qur’anic images, and then writes:

I do not suppose that the people of faith will disagree with the prophets about God’s sitting on a throne. At the same time, none of them can say that because of His sitting on a throne He is not everywhere in heaven. Rather, all of us know that God is in every place and that He fills the whole of heaven, notwithstanding that He shows Himself to His angels in heaven only from the throne, as well as that it is to that place that the angels lift praise to God because of His residing there – and they do not do this in ignorance.14

Abū Qurrah makes use of this image of the throne not to build a case for the Trinity, as did the author of Fī taṭlīq, but instead to defend the doctrine of the Incarnation. After the foregoing passage, he goes on to build an analogy between the simultaneous presence of God on the throne and in all places, and the presence of the Son in a human body while at the same time retaining the divine attribute of infinity. After building his analogy, Theodore challenges the Muslims directly, although not by name:

How do those who disagree with us deny that God resides in the body that He took from the pure Virgin Mary, while they say that God sits on the throne in heaven? It is incumbent on them either not to find fault with such as those who say this or not to speak like those who find fault.15

Although these passages are not directed at developing his Trinitarian doctrine, they are significant for the immediate question at hand, which is Abū Qurrah’s interest in,

14 Lamoreaux 136-37; “Wa,lastu āqīn ān aḥdān min āhl al-āmān yuḥāfaḥhum fī ǧalak. Wa lā āḥad minhumyaqdar ān yaqīl ān Allāh ǧalāṣuḥu ’alā āl-kaṣrī lā yakhīn fī kūl muḏʿa min āl-sāmāʾ bal nʿalām kūlnā ān Allāh fī kūl āl- muḏʿa wa nʿalām ānūhu mālā āl-sāmāʾ kūlī ārūḥī ānūhu lā yabdū lī-humā kātiḥi fī āl-sāmāʾ ilā min āl-ʿarṣwa ilā mā hūnāk yarʿaʿīn āl-tamīḏ li-łaḥ li-ḥalūl Allāh fihi wa hum lā yajhālūn.”

and aptitude for, making use of Qur’ānic and Islamic concepts and terminology. His argument demonstrates sufficient familiarity with the text of the Qur’ān to borrow from it an important image, the throne of God, align that image with similar usages from the Old Testament, and then put it to use in his apologetical strategy. One can almost imagine a sly smile creasing his face as he wrote the line, “I do not suppose that the people of faith will disagree with the prophets…” Like the author of Fī ṭalīḥa, Theodore implicitly challenges his Muslim readers about their claim to be the authentic heirs of the theological and spiritual legacy of the prophets. He even ends the first passage cited above with a Qur’ānic flourish, pointing out that the angels cannot be considered to act in ignorance, the very term that Muslims used to describe the general state of the world before the advent of Muhammad’s preaching.

Abu Qurrah’s Position in the Development of Christian Arabic Writings

The second characteristic of Theodore Abū Qurrah’s writings is that he clearly belongs to the second period of Arabophone Christian apologetical writing as described by Samir Khalil Samir; namely, the period characterized by a blend of scriptural and philosophical approaches. On the one hand, he is eager to take the same approach as the author of Fī ṭalīḥa, placing his Muslim readers on the horns of a dilemma by using biblical evidence, especially from the prophets, for the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, in On Our Salvation, he marshals citations from Genesis, the Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Baruch, Micah, and Hosea, as well as Matthew, John, and Hebrews, for the idea that Christ was
divine and co-eternal with God the Father. In a typical passage, he quotes Isaiah 48:12-16 (in a translation that seems derived from the Septuagint) and comments on it thus:

God said through the prophet Isaiah, “Hearken to me, O Jacob, nay, Israel, whom I called. I am the first and I am forever. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand propped up the heavens; I shall call them and they will stand together, and all of them will assemble and hear. Who declared this to them? Because He loved you, the Lord fulfilled His intention from Babylon, to uproot the seed of the Chaldeans. I spoke, I called, I am the one who brought this one and prospered her way. Draw near to me and hear: I have not spoken in secret. From the time it came to be, I have been there; and the Lord has sent me and His Spirit.” Who is this one who was the first and forever, who laid the foundation of the earth and propped up the heavens and called Babylon and established her way; and now the Lord sent Him and His Spirit? This can only be the eternal Son, who was sent by the Father and the Holy Spirit, when He became incarnate and was born of the Virgin Mary.16

In the treatise On the Trinity, Abū Qurrah takes a similarly scriptural approach, particularly grounded in Qur‘ānic terminology about the pre-Islamic scriptures: “We have already shown you, in this treatise in brief, elsewhere in detail, that everyone must believe in the gospel, the law of Moses, and the intervening books of the prophets.”17 He seems at pains here to refer to those scriptures affirmed by Christians in a way that echoes the Qur‘ān and emphasizes that they are the theological common ground of Christians and Muslims. His use of the term *al-ānjīl* allows him to refer to the New

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17 Lamoreaux 178-79; “Āṣbatunā lakhum fi mīmarunā hafta bi-al-aijāz wa li-gūruhu bi-talḥiy ānūhu qad wa‘jabā lāl wālīd ān yū ‘man bi-al-ānjīl wa nāmus Mūṣā wa mā bihihuma mīn kutub al-li‘bā‘.”
Testament with a specifically Islamic term, while skirting the issue of the rather different sense in which this term is used in the Qur’ān, as a way to refer to the preaching of Jesus himself, as opposed to the books written later about His life and teachings. He then goes on to make the rather bold claim that “these scriptures … mention the Father as God, the Son as God, and the Holy Spirit as God. They do not speak of three gods, however, but warn us sternly to speak of just one God.”18 In the text that follows, Abū Qurrah cites passages from Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, Job and Hosea, as well as Matthew, John, and Romans. In many of the passages taken from the Old Testament, he bases his argument in the frequent textual ambiguity between “the angel of the Lord” and the presence of God Himself, apparently interpreting the former as pre-Incarnate appearances of God the Son.

When dealing with these scriptural proofs, Abū Qurrah takes a rather sly posture with regard to the status of the Qur’ān itself. Without articulating any clear position about the origin of the Islamic text, he asserts that “both we and you already recognize that all revealed books forbid us to speak of anything other than one God.”19 Here Abū Qurrah uses a specifically Islamic way of referring to scripture, in that the word that Lamoreaux has chosen to translate as “revealed” is actually manuzîlah, a word which would be literally rendered “handed down” or “given down.” This is a Qur’ānic term capturing the

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18 Lamoreaux 179; “…haṣâḥāl al-kutub alâtî taṣākara ân al-Āb âlah wa al-Ibn âlah wa al-Râh al-Quds âlah [wâhi’d]. Wa lâ taqâl pâtâh âlahâ bâl taḥzûrinâ ân naqâl gîr âlah wâhi’d.” Lamoreaux’s translation omits the first appearance of wâhi’d, apparently taking it to be a scribal error. The syntax of the sentence does indeed work better without it.

19 Lamoreaux 179; “Wa naḥnu wa ântum qad ‘alannâ ân al-kutub kulha al-manuzîlah tanhî ân yaqâl ilâ âlah wâhi’d.”
sense by which Muslims believe inspired scripture to be transmitted not just dynamically, but in a literal word-for-word sense. Besides using terminology about scripture that would be familiar to a Muslim reader, Abū Qurrah in this passage has referred to scripture in such a general way that the precise formulation of what constitutes revealed scripture is put to the side in favor of establishing the common ground: Muslims and Christians agree that inspired scripture teaches that there is but one God.

It should be noted that Theodore Abū Qurrah seems to have had much less direct knowledge of the Qur‘ān than the author of Fī taḥlīl. Whereas the anonymous author treated earlier cites the Qur‘ān often and expresses himself in writing that is virtually saturated with its concepts and terminology, Abū Qurrah cites it only infrequently and is much less influenced by its terminology. That said, he was certainly aware of some of the key Qur‘ānic claims that were relevant for his purposes. For example, when explaining in Theologus Autodidactus the different understandings of God presented in the various religious traditions that he reviews, he zeroes in on a key distinction between Christianity and Islam, quoting the Qur‘ān’s assertion in surah 112:2-3 that God is “one, eternal, who did not beget and was not begotten.”\textsuperscript{20} This particular selection from the Qur‘ānic text is important not only because it shows Abū Qurrah’s awareness of this Islamic emphasis about the divine nature, but also because the treatment of begetting as an attribute is a key part of Abū Qurrah’s Trinitarian theology, as will be shown later.

Whereas Fī taḥlīl was almost purely scriptural in its approach, Abū Qurrah’s writings make use of both scriptural and philosophical arguments. In fact, his most

\textsuperscript{20} Lamoreaux, 19.
important treatise for the subject at hand, *On the Trinity*, is rather neatly divided into two parts, with the first presenting arguments for Trinitarian doctrine from the scriptures, and the second presenting proofs that are purely philosophical in character. Theodore Abū Qurrah himself explains that these rational proofs are given by God in addition to the scriptures both for those who faith is too weak to be maintained by scriptural evidence alone, and as a weapon against those who would otherwise disturb the consciences of these same weak Christians:

As for the Christians to whom He gave such persuasive arguments, it was not because those of us who understand the definition of faith needed rational persuasion, but so that the Holy Spirit might strengthen through them the weak whose faith is imperfect without some rational and valid proof to support it and so that he, through what they say, might stone you with a valid argument, as if with a rock, so as to keep you from disturbing the church’s children, even as God ordered the stoning of all beasts who would approach Mount Sinai when He descended on it.21

Abū Qurrah uses four different philosophical tools in his treatment of Trinitarian doctrine: an account of how attributes may be discussed; a nuanced understanding of how number is applied to beings; a set of philosophical terms including person, nature, essence, and taxonomical categories that he calls “logical names;” and the use of analogy. Uses of these philosophical tools in relation to Trinitarian doctrine appear primarily in his treatises *On the Death of Christ* and *On the Trinity*. Because his uses of these various tools are interrelated and mingled in the text, it is not possible to treat them entirely

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21 Lamoreaux 179; “Wa ānāmā āqīna man qad āqīn āhu min āhīl āl-Nasār ātīhāmin ḍalal līsā baḥāha min kān minā y’aqal had āl-āmān lā qanū āl-’aqal li-dī’ām bihi ‘alā yadī ḫū’la’ min lā yatam āmānūhu min āhīl d-daf’īlā bi-ān yasnaḏūhu b’ād birḥān yasāḥ bi-’aqalūhu. Wa lī-yajakūm min āl-sinatikum [sic; translation given corrects to āl-sinatīhīm] bi-kalām ṣabīhī ka-ʾal-ḥajarah yakaḏ biḥā ṣağbakum ‘an ābnu’ āl-kaniṣah ka-mā āmara Ālīhu ān tarjam āl-salāh āl-dīnāhū min Tūr Šalu’ ʾez taraḏ’ āḏhu.”
separately, but they will be examined here in light of the conceptual distinctions among
them.

In *On the Death of Christ*, Theodore Abū Qurrah does not address the Trinity as
his primary concern, but his employment of certain philosophical tools is quite relevant to
his Trinitarian doctrine. He begins the treatise by contrasting the way that Christians,
called here “the people of truth” (āl-hāq āhlhu), and others – the people of falsehood or
error (āhl al-ba‘jal) – treat attributes, especially attributes that appear to be contradictory
and unable to be predicated of the same being. Regarding the people of truth, he writes
that

... when it is a question of things that contradict unity in different respects,
you will find contradiction in the words of the people of truth and you will
find them saying both “Yes” and “No” of a single thing. This is because
their minds carefully examine things so as to distinguish their different
respects and isolate each for separate examination. Their minds grasp
when a thing has an attribute in one respect and use that attribute to
describe that thing. At the same time, their minds grasp when the same
thing, in another respect, has an attribute at variance with the first. When
they do this, however, they are moved to maintain the first attribute and
not cast it aside.... Their knowledge of the truth of things is broad enough
to encompass them and join all their attributes together.22

In the context of Abū Qurrah’s social and religious milieu, and taking into account the
content of his entire corpus of writings, it is difficult to read this contrast as referring to
anything other than the respective treatments of God’s unicity by Christians and
Muslims. Muslims could appeal to the very sensible argument that what is one cannot

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22 Lamoreaux 109; “Fa-ānak qad tajad fī kalām āhīl āl-hāq taclādādan wa tārāhim yaqūlūn n’ām walākin la
‘alā ša’r wāhid wa ḍalak ān ‘aqūlūhim tašhas ilā āl-āsā fa-tamūz ānḥā’hā wa tajrad kul wāhid minhā tanza
rubā wa qad taṣṣib ṣaḥā labu ṣaḥaf fī naḥū min ānḥā’hu fa-taṣaṣṭah bi-tilka āl-ṣaḥaf wa taṣṣib labu ṣaḥaf
taḥalaf al-ālā fi hā ḍahar wa bi-hā ḍarakah ān i’aqad ‘alā āl-ṣaḥaf āl-āsā fī-lā taṣrābhā... Wa taḥānā al-ās
lā’ m araḥah ḥaqiqatihā watajam a kuṣaṣṭahā.”
also be three, and vice versa, making it necessary for Christians to make just the argument that Theodore Abū Qurrah makes here – that one may simultaneously and without contradiction speak of God as one and as three. Furthermore, in the period during which Abū Qurrah lived and wrote, with Muslim society rapidly becoming more interested in falsafah – Greek philosophy – it was very much to the Christian’s advantage to show not only that his way of speaking about God was not a self-contradiction, but that it actually demonstrated greater philosophical sophistication than the Muslim account which, as Abū Qurrah implies, exercised a less nuanced way of predicating attributes.

This concern for giving an account of how attributes should be predicated is closely connected with the second of Abū Qurrah’s philosophical tools, his nuanced account of how number should be predicated in relation to beings. Abū Qurrah’s use of this tool in On the Death of Christ is somewhat complex, since he does not seek to address Trinitarian doctrine directly. Instead he builds a case for understanding the relation between number and beings that involves the Trinity, and then uses the relation that he has established as the foundation for his consideration of Christ’s death. In doing so, he writes:

Orthodoxy says that God is one in nature and three in person. It can thus say that God is one in one respect and three in another respect…. When

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23 There are a couple of different reasons that may explain why Abū Qurrah would proceed in this way. First, since we have no information about the chronological relationship among his various treatises, he may have assumed a certain amount of knowledge on the part of his reader about what he has said elsewhere about the Trinity. In this case, it would not be necessary to rehearse a complete defense of Trinitarian doctrine before drawing conclusions that can then be applied to the Christological question at hand. Second, it would be reasonable to assume that he anticipated an entirely Christian audience for this treatise, since it was concerned with a rather technical point of Christology. If that were the case, he could presume broad agreement about Trinitarian theology and use that agreement as a basis for the argument that this treatise makes against both Jacobites and adherents of the Church of the East.
the ignorant hear that God is both one and three, they think the statement contradictory and invalid. In most things, falsehood surrounds the truth on either side, and in contradicting the truth does not grasp its unity.24

With regard to this verbal picture of true doctrine occupying a kind of central ground between errors, Abū Qurrah attributes to Arius the doctrine “that God is three in person and three in nature,” (تالّاَتَةَ فِي الْوَجْعَ َوَتَالّاَتَةَ فِي الْتَّابَّة) and to Sabellius the doctrine “that God is one in nature and one in person” (والِهَدُ فِي الْتَّابِعُ وَالِهَدُ فِي الْوَجْعَ). Abū Qurrah seems to suggest that Arius and Sabellius arrived at such theological error by failing to realize that number cannot be predicated of any being absolutely, but instead is applied as that being is considered in a particular aspect of that being’s existence. Clearly in making this argument Abū Qurrah has moved beyond the purely scriptural approach and is bringing to bear the philosophical types of reasoning that would eventually become predominant in Christian-Muslim debates about the Trinity, including the use of non-scriptural terms that are taken from Greek philosophy.

It is also possible that he intends in this passage to respond to the Qur’ānic assertion that “threeness” must not be predicated of God. As already noted, direct citations of the Qur’ān are rare in Theodore Abū Qurrah’s treatises. However, it is not difficult to imagine this passage from On the Death of Christ as a response to one of the most well-known ostensibly anti-Trinitarian passages in the Qur’ān, surah 4:171. Even if Abū Qurrah were not familiar with the exact wording of this passage, its direct challenge to Christianity must have made its general sense widely known in Christian-Muslim

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24 Lamoreaux 110; “Qad yaqūl ʿāl-ʿAjūţūdākṣāh fī ʿāl-ʿālah ʾānahu wāḥid fī ʿāl-ṭahāʾah wa tālāṭah fī ʿāl-wajūh wa qad gawīr ʿān tāqūl wāḥid fī nahū wa tālāṭah fī nahū ʾāḥar... Wa ʿāl-jahāl ʿaḍā samʿaā ʿān ʿāl-ʿālah wāḥid tālāṭah ẓāmūʾ ʿān ḥaḍrā qul yānaqq bʿāḍahu bʿāḍan wa ʿānahu la yastaqīm ābdān. Wa ʿāl-bāṭal fī ʿākṣar ʿāl-ʿāsīaʾ muḥūn bi-ḥāṭq wa la yaqalʿa ʿāla ʿāl-waḥadāh fī muḥālātahī ʿāl-ḥāq.”
theological encounters. In fact, the very way in which Abû Qurrah cites the Trinity as a case of number being predicated of a being in two different respects – not in an argument about Trinitarian doctrine, but in an argument about Christology – indicates that he expected his anticipated readership to be familiar with this line of argument.

A third purely philosophical tool that is deployed by Abû Qurrah is the distinction between person (ʻal-wajūh) and nature (ʻal-ṭabā’a). This distinction appears not only in On the Death of Christ as just cited, but also in On the Trinity in a discussion of how number may be predicated of a being. Here, then, we see the second philosophical tool discussed above being joined with the terms person and nature in a specifically Trinitarian argument. He writes:

I want those who deny Christian doctrine [literally, “who deny what Christians say”] to know that some names refer to persons [ʻal-wajūh] and others to natures [ʻal-ṭabā’a]. Names that refer to natures include “man,” “horse,” and “ox.” Names that refer to persons include “Peter,” “Paul,” and “John.” If you want to count many persons with one nature, you must not predicate the number of the name that refers to the nature.25

He then points out that number can be predicated of Peter, James, and John in reference to their persons, but not in reference to their nature, which is common to them and to which number is not applied. In the same way, he argues, one may enumerate the persons of the Trinity, but just as humanity is the common nature of Peter, James, and John, and is not enumerated, so one cannot say there are three gods because of the enumeration of

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the persons, anymore than one would say there are three “humanities” because of the enumeration of Peter, James, and John.

Abū Qurrah then takes the argument a step further by making a distinction between the “logical name” – that is, person – and the individual name particular to each person:

[Y]ou must count three persons and one God. This is because “person” is a logical name and does not belong essentially to just one of them. Rather, the name “person” is predicated of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and of every angel, human being, and animal, as well as of every other indivisible entity. The logical name was introduced solely that number might be applied to it, for it is not right for number to be applied to their common name, that by which their nature is named, which name belongs essentially to it…. Nor is it right for number to be applied to the particular, non-logical name of each of them – otherwise, number will make each of the numbered entities to be all three of them. How so? If you say, “Here, Peter, James, and John are three,” you make each one to be the three of them. So also, if you say, “In heaven, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three,” you make each one to be the three of them. For this reason, it is necessary that number be applied to the logical name, which is predicated of each of them (that is, of a person) and that we say that Peter, James, and John are three persons, but that the name “man” remain singular, neither diffused nor multiplied.26

26 Lamoreaux 183-184; “Yanbağī an ’adad ṭalāṭah wajah alahān wāḥid li-‘ana al-wajah huwa ‘āsm manṭaqq̣ī wa lisa bi-jābat wa lā lī-wāḥid minhum bal yaq’a ‘āsm al-wajah ‘alā al-‘Āb wa ‘alā al-‘Ilm wa ‘alā al-Rūḥ al-Quds wa ‘alā kul wāḥid min al-mulā‘i kah wa al-nās wa al-ḥiwaan wa gēr dālaq min al-gēr al-manṭaqq̣āt. Fa-‘ānāmā duḥāla al-‘āsm al-‘āsm manṭaqq̣ī li-yakān ‘alāhā al-‘ādād li-‘ana lā yastaqīm li-l-‘ ādād ān yaku’n ‘alā ʾāsmuhum ʾāl-‘ām al-musmā‘ah taḥ‘āthināl ʾābat bi-hā…. Wa lā yastaqīm ān yaku’n al-‘ ādād ‘alā ‘āsm kul wāḥid minhum al-hāṣ gēr al-manṭaqq̣āt li-kālīn yاج.al-‘ ādād kul wāḥid min al-m adūdān kuluhum. Wa kif dālaq? Iḏā qalat hunā ṭalāṭah Buṭrus wa Ya‘qūb wa Yūḥānā faqād šayārat kul wāḥid minhum ṭalāṭīm kā-dālaq ān qalat ān fī al-samā‘ ṭalāṭah al-‘Āb wa al-‘Ilm wa al-Rūḥ al-Quds faqād šayārat kul wāḥid minhum ṭalāṭīm. Min āḥīla dālaq yaṣṣara al-‘āmar ān yaku’n al-‘ādād ‘alā ‘āsm al-manṭaqq̣āt al-wāq’a ‘alā kul wāḥid minhum al-adīh huwa wajah fa-naqūl ān Buṭrus wa Ya‘qūb wa Yūḥānā ṭalāṭah wajah wa āsm al-ansān yabqi’ alā ḥadathīa lā yanṭuṣīrā wā lā yakūtīra.” It is perhaps important to note that Abū Qurrah’s use of the term wajah is not precisely parallel to the traditional Western usage of prosopon or persona. Whereas the two latter terms have usually been used within the Boethian sense of an individual substance of a rational nature, Abū Qurrah’s use of wajah does not require the attribute of rationality, since it is applied to the lower animals and even apparently to non-living substances; rather, it is indivisibility which is the key attribute of the wajah.
Thus we see that Abū Qurrah makes a conceptual distinction not only between person and nature, but also between different types of names as they are applied to beings, with number being applicable to the “logical name” – the name that is be used in an ontological taxonomy – but not being applicable to the particular, non-logical name. This is a particularly interesting point for him to make, because in so doing, Abū Qurrah posits a relationship between philosophical categories and grammar. His concern that number not be applied to the particular, non-logical names of the persons (Peter, James, and John or Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is that the grammatical structure would then suggest that each individual must be all three of the individuals. As explained in the introductory chapter, one of the key aspects of Muslim theological discourse in the eighth and ninth centuries was the working out of theological assertions according to the rules of Arabic grammar. Thus Abū Qurrah’s concern here that number not be predicated of the particular, non-logical names, lest each individual be described as all three, signals that he is to some degree writing within the same conceptual framework. This fact is important for two reasons: first, it reveals a key component of the common ground of Christian-Muslim religious discourse of the period; and second, it shows that the writing of Christian theology in Arabic was no mere project of translating Greek terms into Arabic, but was instead a genuine attempt to articulate Christian doctrine within an entirely new conceptual framework.

A fourth philosophical tool used by Theodore Abū Qurrah in the context of Trinitarian doctrine is the use of analogy. His use of analogy is particularly prominent in his response to a verbal ploy that Muslims apparently used in an attempt to demonstrate
to Christians that the doctrine of the Trinity was inherently self-contradictory. Abū Qurrah describes the use of this ploy as follows:

The ignorant [literally, “those who have no mind”] ask the Christians: “Tell me. Do you deny every God other than the Father? Do you deny every God other than the Son? Do you deny every God other than the Holy Spirit?” If the Christian says, for instance, “I deny every God other than the Son,” they respond, “The Father and the Holy Spirit, then must not be God.” If, however, the Christian says, “I do not deny every God other than Christ,” they respond, “You have, then, multiple gods.”

Abū Qurrah responds that the question itself is defective and then proceeds to examine it by way of analogy. He imagines that a “gospel” (اَنْجُد), by which he apparently means an individual copy of one of the canonical gospels, is placed before a Christian who is then asked whether he denies every gospel other than this one. Abū Qurrah argues that the Christian may safely assert that he does indeed deny every gospel other than the one placed before him because “it does not follow from your words that each of these gospels [i.e., each of the other gospels in the world] is not a full gospel, for the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit speaks is one.” This is not the only analogy that Abū Qurrah makes to the verbal ploy that he is attempting to refute. He also suggests the following scenario:

Imagine that there is set before you a plate inset with three mirrors. When you look in the plate, a complete image appears in each mirror. Suppose someone were to point to the image appearing in one of the mirrors and ask, “Do you have an image other than this?” You would have to say, “I

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28 Lamoreaux 189; “Lā yalazam min qūhaka haglā ān yakūn kul wāḥid min tulka al-ānjīlīn lisa bi-ānjīl tām.”
have no image other than this,” for because your face is one and your countenance is one, you do not have an image other than this one. By saying this, however, you would not be denying that the image in each of the other mirrors is your image.29

Finally, Abū Qurrah proposes yet a third analogy, in which an artist sketches three different pictures of a person, one each on three different sheets of paper, and then asks the person whether he denies of himself any other countenance. In each of these three analogies, Abū Qurrah sees the multiple items (gospels, reflections, and images) as corresponding to the three persons of the Trinity insofar as it is not necessary, nor logically permissible, to affirm one as true and authentic while denying the others. To demonstrate why this is so, Abū Qurrah uses additional philosophical terminology like his distinction between person and nature explored above. He argues that in each of the hypothetical questions, the questioner is asking not about the hypostasis (āqūm), but instead about the substance or nature (jaṭḥar, tabrāath)30:

When asked about the gospel placed before you, you were asked not about its hypostasis, but its essence (that is, its words, through which the Holy Spirit spoke), for the name “gospel” is not distinct to that book to the exclusion of others. Similarly, when asked, “Do you deny every God other than Christ,” you were not asked about His hypostasis, even if the question hints at it, but only His nature, for the name “God” is not distinct to Christ

29 Lamoreaux 189; “Yaḍ’ā bīn yadīq ṭabaq mūwašilah fihi yadal maraṣat fā-āḍā āṭlī’at fī ʿal-ṭabaq ṭuli’at ṣūrah tāmāh fī kul wāḥid min tilka ʿal-mar’a’at. Fa-la’dā Ḥan rajalān āṣṭār bi-yadihi ilā ʿal-ṣūrah ʿal-ṭāl’āh fī āḥdā ʿal-marāṣat fā-qāl laka ilak ṣūrah gīr haḍhā? ʿAl-hāṭq ʿalika ān taqāl ṣanahu la ṣūrah fī gīr haḍhā. Li-ānā āḍā kān waḥahuka wāḥdān wa ḥallūkā wāḥdāh fā-lā ṣūrah laka gīr wāḥidah. Wa laʾm yakun qūlūka yanfī ʿal-ṣūrah ʿal-ṭāl’āh fī kul wāḥidah min ʿal-marāṣat min ān takūn ṣūrah laka.”

30 Abū Qurrah’s use of jaṭḥar as opposed to tabrāah seems to turn on the distinction between written words and living beings. In the case of the former, the hypothetical question is properly directed at the meaning of the words, and for this he uses jaṭḥar. Lamoreaux has chosen to translate this term “essence,” but the more commonly used translation is “substance.” In the case of living beings (the persons of the Trinity), the question is directed not at meaning, but at the innermost quality of their being, and for this he uses tabrāah.
to the exclusion of the Father and the Spirit. The name “God” is the name of a nature, not a hypostasis…. For that reason, you can rightly say, “I deny every god other than Christ,” without having the Father and Spirit cease from being God. The question, instead, is equivalent to asking, “Do you deny every divine nature other than Christ’s nature?” This you answer in the affirmative, and your answer is true, in that the Son’s divine nature is the nature of the Father and the Spirit.31

By introducing the use of analogy to defend and explain Trinitarian doctrine against the Muslim charge of inherent self-contradiction, Abū Qurrah moves the debate onto rather difficult ground. Although Christian theologians had long used analogies, such as the well-known one involving the sun, its light, and its heat, to support Trinitarian doctrine, for Muslims this was evidence that Christians simply did not understand the yawning chasm that existed between God and His creation. Since the Qur’ān placed such emphasis on the notion that God’s glory consists in being exalted far above all comparisons to creatures, the use of analogy risked undoing the entire project of expressing Trinitarian doctrine in terms that were familiar and accessible to, and even affirmed by, Muslims. As will be shown later, though, Theodore Abū Qurrah takes the bold approach of not only affirming the possibility of analogy between God and the natural world, as seen in the examples just cited, but of actually arguing that analogies between human attributes and divine attributes are theologically necessary if God is to be understood as the origin of all perfections.

Abū Qurrah’s Treatment of the Divine Attributes

Having considered Theodore Abū Qurrah’s use of both scripture and philosophical tools in his writings about Trinitarian doctrine, we will now consider in a more detailed fashion the way in which he builds a case for the Trinity around the question of divine attributes. For the reason just described, one of his most fundamental tasks in this regard is to establish that one may speak of human attributes as analogous to divine attributes. To understand Abū Qurrah’s teaching on this particular point, it is necessary to collate texts from three different treatises: *On the Method of the Knowledge of God, Theologicus Autodidactus*, and *On Our Salvation*. In the first of these treatises, Abū Qurrah presents an epistemological theory holding that knowledge can be derived in one of four ways: “Everything that can be known is known in one of four ways: through being seen, through its effects, through something resembling it, or through something contrary to it.”32 He then asserts that each of these methods, other than the first one, is applicable to knowledge of God. After expounding a couple of quasi-Thomistic arguments about God’s effects in the world, he takes up the question of whether anything can be known about God by resemblance/similarity. In doing so, he points out that the usual ways of using human language to speak about God are inextricably linked to human attributes, and here he shrewdly makes use of common terminological ground with Muslims:

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32 Lamoreaux 157; “...āmā ʿaṭānān wa ʿāmā bi-ṣʿar wa ʿāmā bi-ṣabah wa ʿāmā bi-ḥalāl.” It should be noted that the Arabic term Lamoreaux translates “resembling” (bi-ṣabah) does not necessarily connote physical resemblance. One could also translate it “similarity.”
Indeed, everyone says that God is living, hearing, seeing, wise, powerful, just, generous, and so on. Each of these attributes is something we find in ourselves. If no created being resembled God in any way, it would be impossible to apply both to him and to us a single attribute. And yet, we find that everybody agrees that it is appropriate to apply to God the things that among us are considered honorable. At the same time, they flee the loathsome prospect of applying to him anything that among us is considered a defect.33

Each of the attributes that Abū Qurrah mentions here is grounded in Qur’ānic descriptions of God. Thus Abū Qurrah’s strategy here is very similar to that used by the author of Fi ṭaḥlīl: the reader must either concede Abū Qurrah’s point or else risk denying the language used in the Qur’ān. As such, it would be very difficult for any Muslim reader to object to the assertion that these are attributes that can be predicated of both God and human beings. Moreover, just as the Qur’ān emphasizes repeatedly that God is “exalted far above” all weaknesses, Abū Qurrah is clear that only those qualities observed as most noble in human beings may be attributed to God. Even though he has carefully built his argument to this point on common terminological ground between Christians and Muslims, he clearly anticipates that his readership may initially recoil in horror at the suggestion of any similarity between God and His creatures:

When we say that created beings resemble God, those who hear should not flee. With regard to what resembles him, we mean to suggest only that it resembles him in the manner that an image in a mirror resembles the person who appears in it: the person being a solid body; the image in the mirror, a transient specter.34

33 Lamoreaux, 159; “Fā-qad yaqūl kul wāhid ān Allah ḥaṣ samī’a baṣīr ḥaḳīm qawwāt ‘adāl jūṭ bi wa mā ša kul dalak wa ḥadā kūluhu qad tarāḥū fūn wa ‘andānā. Wa laa kān lā saʾīl yāṣbih Allah min al-ḥuluq fī ḥāl li-mā āṣafīyāʾ an yaqʿ alīhu wa ‘alīnā fiḥā ṭābīdah batah. Wa ḥadā fī al-nās kūluhum ānāhum yastahsanūn ān yūqʿānā mūkāram mà ‘andānā ‘alā Allah wa yūẓaqhum dalak wa yastahsanūn ān lā yūqʿaʿ ālīhī saʾān min munāṣaṣunā wa yafrūn min dalak.”

34 Lamoreaux 160; “Lā yanfār al-sāmʿān min qūmūn ān al-ḥalāʾiq tasbīh Allah. Li-ʿanā ʿanmā naqūl
Besides emphasizing the exaltation of God over His creatures, this statement rather
cleverly suggests to the reader by way of analogy that any honorable attribute that may be
discerned in human beings must also be predicated of God, just as any handsome feature
that appears in a reflection must have its source in the actual face of which it is a
reflection. In other words, he has made a subtle but crucial adjustment to his argument by
the analogy of the face in the mirror. He is now suggesting not only that there are
attributes that can be predicated both of human beings and of God, but that any attribute
that can be predicated of a human being (except attributes of defect) must have its origin
in a divine attribute. Although so subtle as to be easily missed, this suggestion is
important an aspect of Abū Qurrah’s argument, as will be shown more explicitly later on.

Theodore Abū Qurrah makes a similar argument about the relationship between
human and divine attributes in Theologus Autodidactus, a treatise in which he is
particularly concerned with what may be discerned of God from observations about
human nature: “While God is unseen, through the likeness of our own nature’s virtues,
notwithstanding that God transcends and is contrary to our nature, our minds can see both
Him and the attributes according to which He is to be worshipped…”35 Abū Qurrah then
goes on to build an analogy around the idea of a mirror, similar to the passage from On
the Method of the Knowledge of God just examined, but with a greater elaboration of how
the reflection in the mirror corresponds to understanding the divine attributes. In this

änaṇ̄ā̄ ʾāshbahahu minhā fī āl-hāl al-ʿalī ʾāshbahahu fīhā kamā ʾāshbah ʾāl-ṣāḥs al-ʿadī fī ʾal-marāḥah ʾāl-wājah al-ʿadī
yālʿa fīhā. Fa-ʾāl-wājah jaram ṭāḥīt wa ṣāḥs ʾal-marāḥah ḥāl zaʿīl.”

35 Lamoreaux 9-10; the original Arabic text is unpublished and unavailable.
account there is not only a person looking into a mirror and seeing there an authentic likeness of himself; there is also a second person who can see into the mirror, but whose vision is blocked from direct observation of the first person. The second person is a friend of the first person, and by looking into the mirror can recognize his friend by the authentic likeness of that friend’s features, even though he cannot see his friend directly. In the same way, argues Abū Qurrah, one can observe and know the divine attributes by observing the noble attributes that are to be observed in human beings, because they are the authentic image and likeness of some aspects of the divine nature. He is then careful to elaborate that even those human attributes that mirror divine attributes differ ontologically from them, to the same degree and in the same way that a person’s reflection in a mirror differs ontologically from the person himself:

At the same time, in terms of these attributes, the two faces do not resemble one another, for the face of the man in and of itself transcends and is contrary to the likeness in the mirror. After all, he exists, while the image does not. Accordingly, something unseen can be seen from its likeness, notwithstanding that it transcends and is contrary to its likeness.  

In setting up this analogy, Theodore Abū Qurrah both affirms certain key Islamic emphases about the nature of God and sets the stage for a specifically Trinitarian argument based on the correlation of human and divine attributes. By emphasizing that the first person is not directly observable by the second person, he underscores doctrinal ground that is common to Christians and Muslims, the incomprehensibility of the divine nature. This aspect of the analogy also calls to mind the Qur’ānic teaching that God’s self-disclosure is always mediated in some way, as described in surah 42:51-52; the

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36 Lamoreaux 10; the original Arabic text is unpublished and unavailable.
second person recognizes his friend not by direct apprehension, but through the medium of the mirror. By his insistence that the likeness in the mirror “transcends and is contrary to” the living person, Abū Qurrah affirms the great ontological chasm between God and His creation which is a central theological emphasis of the Qurʾān. On the other hand, as with the passage from On the Method of the Knowledge of God cited above, by the very use of this analogy Abū Qurrah challenges the Islamic sense of an absolute ontological gulf between God and everything outside himself. Since the image in the mirror has its existence only insofar as it reflects the real and living face of the man who looks into the mirror, the implication is that a human attribute can exist only insofar as it is the authentic reflection of a real divine attribute. This implication sets the stage for one of Abū Qurrah’s key arguments for the Trinity; namely, that one may derive from a particular human attribute – the power of begetting – not only the reasonableness of Trinitarian doctrine, but also its theological necessity.

**Abū Qurrah on Begetting and Headship**

After setting forth the mirror analogy just described and in that context making reference to the specific attributes of existence, life, and knowledge, Abū Qurrah turns his attention to what he considers the highest and noblest of human attributes: begetting and headship. He writes that

> We see that something resembling Adam in nature was begotten and proceeded from him. We see, too, that that he is head over this one who is like him. Since Adam begets and is head over one who is from him, He who caused him to beget and to be head must surely Himself beget and be
head over one who resembles Him. Nonetheless, this is so in a transcendent and contrary manner.37

Having established his argument on common terminological ground with Muslims, Abū Qurrah now turns his argument rather abruptly to the attribute which the Qur’ānic text most emphatically denies of God, the power of begetting. Whereas the attributes mentioned up to this point – existence, life, and knowledge – are not only obvious common ground but also readily supported by Qur’ānic language, begetting is explicitly denied as a divine attribute, and is even associated specifically with weakness or defect in the Qur’ānic text.38 This is why it is so important to note that Abū Qurrah’s mirror analogy necessitates an analogous divine attribute in order for a human attribute to exist at all. His reader has been led to affirm divine attributes supported by the Qur’ān, and then to affirm that these attributes are the transcendent reality of which similar human attributes are mere reflections. Having affirmed both of these points, the reader is then left with three choices: first, to deny that begetting exists as a divine attribute, in which case there is a human attribute without a divine attribute as its source, leaving a kind of ontological gap and perhaps even ascribing to human beings a virtue that is absent in God; second, to affirm the existence of begetting as a divine attribute, and reject the Qur’ānic text; or third, to affirm begetting as a divine attribute and modify his understanding of what the Qur’ānic text means. The remainder of Abū Qurrah’s argument beckons the reader to this third option.

37 Lamoreaux 12; the original Arabic text is unpublished and unavailable.

38 See, for example, surahs 4:171; 6:100-102; 10:68; 17:111; and 23:91.
As noted above, the Qur’ānic text seems to deny a divine attribute of begetting at least in part because of an association of begetting with a defect, weakness, or need. Two aspects of Abū Qurrah’s thinking that have already been presented form the backdrop of how he responds to this Qur’ānic characterization. First, he argues in *On the Death of Christ* that it is necessary to speak of attributes with a certain degree of philosophical nuance, ascribing a particular attribute to a particular being in one way, while simultaneously maintaining that the same attribute may not apply to the same being in another way. As already quoted above, he maintains that one of the philosophical advantages of “the people of truth” (āl-bāq ābluhu) is that they can both affirm and deny a given predication when that predication is considered in two different ways. This is important to note because it means that Abū Qurrah is operating with an implicit assumption that one may affirm begetting as a divine attribute from a certain perspective and deny it from another perspective. In other words, this principle opens a way for his affirmation of a divine attribute of begetting to be true and for the Qur’ānic denial of such an attribute to also be true, if the text considers the attribute from a different point of view. Certainly this seems to be the case, for the Qur’ān explicitly mentions the necessity of copulation with a partner in order for begetting to occur.39 Although Theodore Abū Qurrah does not quote this text or make any explicit reference to it, he certainly seems to have it in mind when he writes:

Adam’s begetting of a son took place through a woman, sex, and development… Further, Adam preceded both his son and Eve in time…. God’s begetting of His Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit,

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39 Qur’ān 6:101: “How can he have a son, when he has no companion?”
transcend and are contrary to this. They did not take place through a woman or sex. They involved neither pregnancy nor development. There was no question of temporal precedence, only simultaneity.40

So, following Abū Qurrah’s principle about the predication of attributes, begetting may be affirmed of God insofar as He is the origin of a Son of like nature with himself, while it may be denied of him insofar as “begetting” connotes cooperation with a partner, a process of growth or development, or precedence in time. The second aspect of Abū Qurrah’s thinking which shapes his response to the Qur’ān on this point is the distinction, inherent in the mirror analogy, of a difference between how a given attribute exists in God and how it exists in human beings, even though the attribute is the same. The Qur’ānic verses cited above seem to reject begetting as a divine attribute based on an assumption that the attribute must exist in one being exactly as it exists in another being. Using the attributes of existence, life, and knowledge which are theological common ground for Muslims and Christians, Abū Qurrah has already built up a case that one must admit that there are attributes that exist in both God and human beings, but in quite different ways:

Adam’s existence has a beginning and an end, while God’s existence is above and contrary to that, being without beginning and having no end…. Adam’s life is perishing and in order to persist requires, first, milk, and then food and drink. It grows up little by little, such that he is now a child, now a youth, now an old man…. As for God’s life, it transcends and is contrary to this. It has no beginning and needs nothing. It does not grow up and change from one state to another…. Adam obtained his knowledge through his senses or from someone who taught him. He does not know what was and will be, nor even much that is right in front of him. As for God’s knowledge, it transcends and is contrary to this. He did not obtain it

40 Lamoreaux 12; the original Arabic text is unpublished and unavailable.
that was or will be is hidden, from all eternity to all eternity. 41

In the same way, then, God’s begetting and headship “transcends and is contrary to” the way in which begetting and headship exist among human beings.

In the treatise published by Lamoreaux under the title *On Our Salvation*, Abū Qurrah further explores this problem of how the same attribute can be predicated of God and of human beings, and how this problem relates to the affirmation or denial of God’s having a Son. He argues that, in order to predicate of God an attribute of begetting, one must either affirm that this begetting takes place in a way similar to human beings, which is impermissible, or else affirm that begetting exists in God in a way that is not fully comprehensible by human beings. Furthermore, if the idea of God’s begetting a Son were to be rejected based on the fact that it requires positing a kind of begetting that is beyond human understanding, this would entail rejecting all cataphatic doctrines about divine attributes:

You will surely object: How could God beget, when we see that one who begets experiences inescapable necessities such as sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and its consequences, none of which can properly be said of God? We respond: How can you inquire about something that transcends the heavenly minds and all the angelic hosts, who humble themselves before it and refrain from inquiring about it? If, because you do not understand how it occurs, you find that you must reject the sonship even after it has been proven to be the case, it is time for you to deny everything you attribute to God, in that you do not understand how it occurs. If you refuse to do so, then tell me how God is alive when life among us is accompanied by necessities of which you are not ignorant, things like eating, drinking, nourishment, clothing, and transience. You are unable to say how God is alive notwithstanding these necessities. Accordingly, you

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41 Lamoreaux 11; the original Arabic text is unpublished and unavailable.
should deny life to God because you do not understand how it occurs and because it is contrary to the type of life you see with your own eyes…

Here Abū Qurrah pursues a rather shrewd line of argument, in that he is borrowing from Qur’anic and Islamic modes of expression about God and using them for his apologetical purposes. As noted above, he has selected an attribute, life, which has undoubted and explicit Qur’anic support, and here he points out that there is no way for any believer, Christian or Muslim, to explain how this attribute exists in God. He knows that the Muslim reader cannot retreat to the position that one cannot make positive predications of divine attributes, because this would contradict the Qur’anic witness. Perhaps even more importantly, Abū Qurrah’s argument that divine attributes “transcend and are contrary to” the human attributes of which they are the source largely aligns with the central Qur’anic tenet that a great ontological chasm exists between God and His creation. We have already seen in the previous chapter that one of the key apologetical methods of the author of Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim was to take Islamic arguments used against Christian doctrine and invert them, using these quintessentially Islamic ways of thinking to support his Trinitarian arguments. In a similar way, Abū Qurrah here affirms the idea that God exists in an entirely different way than human beings exist, and then argues that if this is the

case, one cannot deny a divine attribute of begetting on the basis that the attribute of
begetting exists among human beings in a way that we may not ascribe to God.

Divine Exaltedness and the Attribute of Begetting

In order to fully explore Theodore Abū Qurrah’s treatment of begetting as a
divine attribute, one must collate arguments found in three different treatises: On the
Method of the Knowledge of God, On Our Salvation, and Theologus Autodidactus. When
all the relevant texts are considered together, it becomes clear that Abū Qurrah’s strategy
revolves around the idea of God’s absolute perfection and utter transcendence, a concept
which any Muslim reader would be eager to affirm. Abū Qurrah seeks to place his reader
in the position of having to affirm a divine attribute of begetting or else affirm a defect in
the divine nature. We have already seen that he argues, via his mirror analogy, that no
human attribute can exist without a divine attribute of which the human attribute is a dim
reflection. In On the Method of the Knowledge of God, he also pursues this line of
thinking to its obvious conclusion; namely, that if one denies a divine attribute of
begetting, one necessarily ascribes to human beings a perfection or virtue which God is
lacking:

You who deny the Son, do you say that God is or is not able to beget one
like Himself? If you suggest that God is not able to beget one like
Himself, you have introduced in Him the greatest of defects…. Notwithstanding that you recognize that one of us can beget one like
himself, you suggest that God is unable to do something excellent that we
are able to do – and everyone knows that begetting is one of the things that
among us are considered honorable and excellent. There is no escape: You
must concede that God is able to beget one like Himself.43

43 Lamoreaux 162; “Fa-aḥbaruʿū ʿāhā ʿa-l-jāḥad li-l-Ibn. Ātaqū lān Allāh yaqar ān yadal niḥluḥu ān lā
Next Abū Qurrah acknowledges the distinction between affirming that God is able to beget and affirming that He has actually done so. Such a distinction could potentially give his reader a way of affirming that the human attribute of begetting does indeed find its origin in a divine attribute of having the capacity for begetting, but without actually having to affirm that God has in fact begotten a Son. Abū Qurrah argues that such a position would still involve asserting a defect in God. If one were to assert that the divine attribute is the capacity for begetting, rather than actually having done so, then one must find a reason for this capacity not to have been exercised. He then argues that the only possible reasons would each constitute a defect in the divine nature:

God would only refrain from begetting one like Himself – since He is able to do so – for one of three reasons. It may be that He is too lazy or too weak to endure the discomfort that would befall Him in the act of giving birth. It may be that it is out of envy that He does not want to see one like Himself. It may be that He has the ability to beget but does not know this, and that He thus refrains from making use of it out of ignorance. Each of these options is simply too loathsome to be said of God and must be rejected: God is not overcome by laziness, nor is He touched by envy, nor is He subject to ignorance… It is not possible for us to deny that God has a Son. If we do, we attribute to God defect, fault, and something quite loathsome.  

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yaqdar fa-ān y’amat ān Allah lā yaqdar ān yadal miḥlu fāqad āḏḥalat ‘alīhi ā’āzam ʿāl-munqasah ḥīṭu taj’ alunā naḥnu yaqdar āḥadunā ān yadal miḥlu hu wa ta’al Ālāh lā yaqdar ‘alā mā naqdar naḥnu ‘alīhi min ʿal-fūḏal. Lī-aḵā āl-walad qad’alama kul āl-nās ānahu min mukāram mā ‘andiša wa ūḏudulah. Fa-lā bad lik a min ān taqūl ān Allah yaqdar ān yadal miḥlu.”

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‘Fa-ān Allah lā yaamtā ’ān ān yadalmiḥlu iḏ kān qādar ān yadal ilā ʿiḏḥad ṭalātah ʿāshūb. Āmā ī-ḵulūf tanūbihū ʾiṯ āl-wilādah yaksal ʿanīhā wa yajaz. Wa āmā li-ānūhu lā yuḥūb ān ʿarā miḥluḥ ḥasanān. Wa āmā ān yakūn ḥīqāh ‘alā ḥalak lā y’arāfūhā wa ānāmā yamūn ā’ān ān yast’ā mahūḥa jahālan biḥā. Fa-kul ḥagāh āsāj min ān yaqūl ʿalā ʿĀlāh wa ḥīnā naḏ minhu. Fa-l-ʿamrī mā y’atarīhi kasal wā lā yadḥal ʿalīhi ġasad wā lā yadhū minhu jahāl... Wa līsā ḥiḏḥad ān yankār ān li-lāh ibnān wa ilā f aqad āḏḥula ʿalā ʿĀlāh ʿal-naqṣ wa ilā ʿiḏ wa ilā-samājā ʿal-ʿazīmah.”

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Lamoreaux 162; “‘Fa-ān Allah lā yamtā ’ān ān yadalmiḥlu iḏ kān qādar ān yadal ilā ʿiḏḥad ṭalātah ʿāshūb. Āmā ī-ḵulūf tanūbihū ʾiṯ āl-wilādah yaksal ʿanīhā wa yajaz. Wa āmā li-ānūhu lā yuḥūb ān ʿarā miḥluḥ ḥasanān. Wa āmā ān yakūn ḥīqāh ‘alā ḥalak lā y’arāfūhā wa ānāmā yamūn ā’ān ān yast’ā mahūḥa jahālan biḥā. Fa-kul ḥagāh āsāj min ān yaqūl ʿalā ʿĀlāh wa ḥīnā naḏ minhu. Fa-l-ʿamrī mā y’atarīhi kasal wā lā yadḥal ʿalīhi ġasad wā lā yadhū minhu jahāl... Wa līsā ḥiḏḥad ān yankār ān li-lāh ibnān wa ilā f aqad āḏḥula ʿalā ʿĀlāh ʿal-naqṣ wa ilā ʿiḏ wa ilā-samājā ʿal-ʿazīmah.”
This line of argument seems almost calculated to cause the Muslim reader to recoil in horror, since nothing could be further from the Qur’anic descriptions of God than the attribution of weakness, envy, or ignorance here postulated.

Having established rational arguments that both the denial of God’s ability to beget and the denial of His actually having done so would entail the affirmation of a defect in God, Abū Qurrah turns his attention to two objections to the concept of divine begetting. In answering these objections, he continues to focus on the idea of divine exaltedness and perfection, suggesting that either of the objections made would also entail defects in God. The first objection is that the father who begets a son must necessarily be prior to that son. The implication of this objection, although not clearly articulated by Abū Qurrah in the text, is that the Christian doctrine of the co-eternity all three Persons of the Trinity and the doctrine of God’s having begotten a Son are mutually contradictory. Abū Qurrah has already laid the groundwork for responding to this objection by his position that the same attribute exists in God and in human beings in quite different ways and that the human attribute is but a reflection of the divine attribute. In response to this particular objection, he argues that chronological priority is not inherent or necessary to the attribute of begetting, but instead is the result of the imperfect way in which the attribute exists in human beings:

You must remember that about which we earlier agreed: Of necessity, we describe God with the things that among us are considered honorable and we exclude from Him our defects, on account of their being contrary to His essence, which essence is nothing other than honorable. The priority of a father with respect to a son arises solely from a defect in our own nature as begetters…. A human father is begotten in a state that is incomplete, in that he has yet to attain the point where he is able to
beget…. Furthermore, even after he has attained the ability to beget ... he still cannot do so apart from sexual intercourse, and still more time passes for him before he is able to have sexual intercourse, during which time he is prior to his son…. As for God most high, however, there was never a time when He was unable to beget one like Himself. There was never a time when He did not know that he was able to beget one life Himself. There was never a time when He did not will to make one like Himself.45

Abū Qurrah’s response to the objection based on chronological priority is perfectly consistent with what he has said previously about the relationship between human and divine attributes, since he locates in human nature three separate defects or weaknesses from which a human father’s chronological priority to his son originates: the need for physical growth and development, the need for sufficient cognitive development to be aware of one’s own ability to beget, and the need for a cooperative partner in the act of begetting. This association of chronological priority with human needs and defects is in keeping with Abū Qurrah’s insistence that the same attribute may exist in different beings in different ways, and that a given human attribute is but a weak reflection of a transcendent divine attribute. By arguing as he does, he is able both to overcome the objection and to emphasize yet again the transcendence and absolute perfection of God which is so important to Muslim discourse about God.

The second objection that Abū Qurrah addresses is the suggestion that if God can and does beget, there is no necessity for him to have begotten only one Son. He seems to

imagine his reader asking, “If indeed the lack of an attribute of begetting would be a
defect in God, why is this attribute not maximally expressed, in the begetting of many
sons?” In answering this objection, Abū Qurrah again grounds his response in the concept
of God’s complete adequacy and perfection:

Since God was able to beget one like Himself, one of two things must
have been the case: either He beget one Son and no more or He begot
more than one Son. If you suggest that He must have begotten more than
one Son, the one Son must have been deficient, for He was insufficient to
please the Father. If the Son was deficient and the Son is equal to the
Father and of His essence, the Father, then, was lacking.46

As with his previous response, Abū Qurrah’s argument here is exactly in keeping with his
previous positions. Human begetting, although it produces another being of equal dignity
and like essence with the begetter, is but a pale reflection of divine begetting, because it
produces a being who, like the begetter, is imperfect. The divine begetting, on the other
hand, produces a Begotten One who is utterly adequate and pleasing to the Begetter,
because in being of like essence with the Begetter, He is perfect and without defect. Like
Abū Qurrah’s previous response, this answer overcomes the objection while at the same
time associating the defect of limitation exclusively with human begetting and
emphasizing divine transcendence and perfection. Since the Qur’ānic objections to divine
begetting are all based in the association of begetting with weakness and defect, Abū
Qurrah’s method of arguing transcends the assumptions that are built into the Muslim
criticism of Christian doctrine.

46 Lamoreaux 163; “Allah ad kān yaqdar ān yadal miyyahu lā had min ān yadaqahu āhad āmarīn ānā
ān yadal ibnān wāḥidān wa lā yaziʿ. Wa ānā ān yadal ākṭar min ān wāḥid. Fa-ān zamat ānahu yanbāqī
ān yadal ākṭar min ān wāḥid fa-āl-Ībnu al-wāḥid ḥaqaṣ li-īnahu lā kaftaḥah bihi li-μasrah al-Ab. Wa ān kān
al-Ībn nāqaṣān wa al-Ībn ʿadāl li-l-Āb wa min jāḥarihī fa-āl-Āb ʿilān nāqaṣ.”
Headship in God

Closely related to his arguments on begetting are Abū Qurrah’s arguments on the divine attribute of rāṣaḥ. The most literal translation of this term is “headship,” although Lamoreaux uses both this term and “dominion” when translating rāṣaḥ in different passages. These two lines of argument (on begetting and on headship) are connected in four different ways. First, the headship/dominion that Abū Qurrah attributes to God arises from the divine attribute of begetting and is entirely dependent upon it. Second, both concepts are described as specific instances of human attributes mirroring divine ones. Third, both begetting and headship are ways that he approaches Trinitarian doctrine with the language of attributes. Fourth, in both lines of argument he seeks to overcome Muslim objections to Trinitarian doctrine by demonstrating that the attribute in question is a manifestation of divine transcendence and perfection, rather than a violation or diminution of it.

In Theologus Autodidactus, Abū Qurrah argues that a significant aspect of Adam’s nobility consisted in becoming the head not merely of lower creatures, but of a community of persons like to himself in nature and equal to himself in dignity. He rather humorously asserts that “… it would not be headship but degradation and dishonor to be called the head of ticks, pigs, scarabs, and worms. His speech, too, would be empty and unneeded, for He would have no one to understand or answer him.”47 He then goes on to argue that, just as a lack of begetting as a divine attribute would mean that a perfection

47 Lamoreaux 12; the original Arabic text is unpublished and unavailable.
exists in human beings that was absent in God, so also the absence of headship as a
divine attribute would mean that Adam’s most noble attribute, the headship of a
communion of persons like to himself in dignity and worth, had no basis in a
Corresponding divine attribute. Furthermore, it must be the case that God exercises
headship over a communion of persons of like essence because otherwise His headship
would be exercised over His creatures only. Importantly, Abū Qurrah argues that the
ontological gap between humankind and the “ticks, pigs, scarabs, and worms” is actually
less than that between humankind and God:

Would it not be absurd that Adam is head of one like himself but God is
head only of His creation? Adam would not be pleased to be head of the
creation. Indeed, neither he nor any of us would be pleased to be head of
pigs, asses, flies, bedbugs, fleas, scarabs, and worms. If Adam and we are
not pleased with this, how is it that we attribute to God that with which we
ourselves are not pleased? If we were to say that God is head, but only
over angels and humans, this also would be degradation. After all, by
nature angels and humans stand further from God than do pigs, lice, and
scarabs from us. While we and those animals share the nature of living
being, angels and humans share absolutely nothing with God.48

Here it becomes plain that for Abū Qurrah absolute divine transcendence is at the
heart of his argument. It would be woefully insufficient to assert that the human
attribute of headship is the reflection of a divine attribute of headship exercised
over the created universe, because Adam’s headship would then in a sense be of a
greater order than God’s. It is specifically because of God’s transcendent nature
that we can be assured that He must exercise headship over a communion of
persons of like essence, because otherwise the “headship” attributed to him would

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48 Lamoreaux 13; the original Arabic text is unpublished and unavailable.
be an insult and a degradation. By arguing this way, Abū Qurrah exercises the strategy we have seen before in Fi ṭaḥḥuf of inverting the Muslim argument against Christian doctrine. Whereas for the Muslim, divine transcendence means that God must not be associated with other beings, for Abū Qurrah that very transcendence means that God must be associated with other beings, else He cannot be said to exercise meaningful headship. There also seems to be in this argument an implicit critique of some of the Qur’anic modes of expression about God’s transcendence, such as the title “Lord of the Worlds” (Rabb āl-‘alamīn). In the Qur’anic text this title is clearly intended to convey God’s unique exaltedness over His creation, but when viewed through the lens of Abū Qurrah’s argument, it can be seen as faint praise indeed, ascribing to God only a headship of little dignity.

In On Our Salvation, Abū Qurrah again makes use of the idea of divine headship and seeks to build a case for Trinitarian doctrine around the questions of whether that headship is absolute or relative, and whether it is eternal or temporal:

Before there were creatures, was He possessed of dominion? If you say that He did not have dominion before there were creatures, you have caused him to derive honor from creatures, for dominion is surely an honor for the one who possesses it. Further, if it was creatures that gave God His honor … it would not have been out of His graciousness that He created them. No! It would rather have been His need to be honored by having someone to dominate that caused him to create them…. Furthermore, if you maintain that God’s dominion was only over creatures, you make His dominion to be of the most inferior and mean sort….  

49 See, for example, surahs 1:2; 6:45 and 162; 10:10; 27:44; 37:87; and 45:36, among other passages.

50 Lamoreaux 140; “Qabal ān yuḥliqa āl-ḥulq kānah lihu rūsah ām là? Fa-ān qalat ānahu lam takun
As with the arguments examined above, Abū Qurrah builds his case on the implicit question of which account of divine headship genuinely expresses the divine transcendence and exaltedness - an understanding of God as Lord over His creatures only, or an understanding of God as head of a communion of persons alike in essence and dignity. The argument presented here builds on the argument from Theologus Autodidactus, in that the argument there suggested that a divine headship exercised only over created beings would be a diminution of the divine honor. The present argument goes a step further and argues that, if God’s headship is exercised over only His creatures, then it is both a temporal rather than eternal attribute and it actually makes God dependent upon His creatures. Clearly this argument is calculated to inspire horror in a Muslim readership accustomed to Qur’ānic expressions of God’s absolute transcendence and exaltedness above His creatures. Here again Theodore Abū Qurrah is inverting the Muslim objection to Trinitarian doctrine and making it instead the lynchpin of his argument. Without divine headship over a communion of persons of like essence and dignity, God’s lordship is associated not with transcendence but with defect, since it would be a headship that is not only of lesser dignity than Adam’s headship, but time-bound and dependent upon His creatures. This line of argument is why Abū Qurrah can
make the almost strident claim that “if you deny that God has a Son, you attribute defect to God, nullify the glory of His divinity, and reduce the honor of His dominion.”

Having established his argument that God must have a Son in order for His headship to be both eternal and transcendent over His creatures, Abū Qurrah turns his attention to two details about the exercise of this divine headship that are crucial for his project of defending Trinitarian doctrine. These two details are the question of whether God’s headship is exercised over an equal, and the question of the mode by which this divine headship is exercised. With regard to the first question, he presents the full range of options (“God’s dominion must be over one equal, one lesser, or one greater”) and then immediately rejects the second and third options. If God’s headship were exercised over one inferior to himself, then the same problem would arise as with headship over mere creatures; it would be a headship that was inferior to Adam’s and therefore a derogation of the divine transcendence. The third choice involves a simple contradiction in terms, since there is nothing greater than God. Thus by a simple rational argument Abū Qurrah establishes that the headship exercised by God must be over one equal to himself, and moves on to the question of the mode by which the divine headship is exercised.

Abū Qurrah asserts that headship can be exercised in one of three modes: “by force, by will, or by nature.” He then argues that the divine headship cannot be

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51 Lamoreaux 140; “Anka ān ānkarat ān yakūn li-žah Ibn faqad adhaliat ‘alhi āl-naqas wa aqṣatihii ‘an jalal lābiatihi wa haṭaṭatihii ‘an šarf mülukhu.”

52 Lamoreaux 141; “Rūsah Allāh la bud min ān takūn āma ‘alī mā hīn ‘adāluhu wa āma ‘alā mā hīn dāhluhu wa āmā ‘alā mā hīn ḍāla minhu.”

53 Lamoreaux 141; “... āmā ān takūn bi-āl-qaḥar wa āmā ān takūn bi-āl-raḍā wa āmā ān takūn ṣabā‘aah.”
exercised by force, both because this would involve a logical contradiction and because it would entail a defect in God. Since he has already offered a proof that God’s headship must be exercised over one equal to himself, if this headship were imposed by force, it would mean that the one equal to God is weak and therefore that God himself is weak. As for headship that operates “by will,” Abū Qurrah does not mean by this that the one exercising his headship imposes his will on the other; this mode of headship would fall into the first category of force. Instead, he makes clear that he is referring to the will of the one who is subject to the headship exercised. It would be a kind of elective headship, not unlike that exercised by the head of state in a democracy. Abū Qurrah makes an argument similar to what he has already written about headship not being derived from creatures because this would entail God being dependent upon His creatures. In the present argument, he asserts that the divine headship cannot be according to the mode of the will because then God would be dependent upon the will of the one over whom He exercises headship, which would also entail His headship being at least potentially transitory, which would be a diminution of the divine transcendence.

Theodore Abū Qurrah thus concludes that the divine headship operates according to the mode of nature:

It remains that His dominion be by nature. Dominion by nature is the type of dominion that the Father has over the Son. It never ceases. It is not brought about by force. In it, there is neither discomfort nor misgiving. It is instead full of joy and love.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{54} Lamoreaux 141-42; “\textit{Faqad baqī‘ ān takān rāsah taba‘ānah. Wa āmā āl-rāsah āl-tabā‘ānah fā-hā ālatī takūn li-l-Āb ‘alā āl-Ībū ālatī la zu‘al li-hā wa là nītar bi-āl-qahar wa là fīhā kullah wa là wakham wa hāa mumītah ah sarurān wa hubān.”
There is a significant danger for the Anglophone reader in understanding this part of Abū Qurrah’s argument. When he writes of “dominion by nature,” one might get the impression that he is asserting that the Father and the Son have different natures, which would of course be outside the mainstream of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. However, Abū Qurrah clearly affirms in numerous places in the treatises here analyzed that the Father and the Son share the same substance, for which he uses the Arabic term ḥaḍ. Here, instead of the philosophically precise ḥaḍ, he uses the somewhat more general term ṭabā‘atāh. Although Lamoreaux’s translation is faithful to the Arabic construction, the headship Abū Qurrah describes here might be more felicitously rendered in English as “a relation of headship that is natural to both the one exercising headship and the one over whom headship is exercised.”

This way of writing about the divine headship opens up a very important consideration for the project at hand. Given that Abū Qurrah seems to be speaking of a divine headship that is “natural” in the sense just described, he appears to be describing the relations of the Persons of the Trinity in terms of divine attributes. Although sharing the same nature/essence (ḥaḍ), according to Abū Qurrah’s account, it is “natural” (ṭabā‘ād) to God the Father to exercise headship and similarly natural to the Son and the Spirit to be subject to that headship. This would seem to describe a divine attribute specific to each Person, although admittedly the way in which there is a difference between the Son and the Spirit is not addressed here, most probably because this passage occurs in a primarily Christological treatise. Bearing in mind that Arabophone Christian authors eventually argued for three incommensurable attributes indicating the presence of
three divine Persons in the one God, the argument here considered would seem to be a major developmental milestone. Although Abū Qurrah does not in any of his treatises articulate the full-blown argument based on three incommensurable attributes, here he establishes a clear link between divine attributes and multiplicity in God. Once headship by force and headship by will have been eliminated for the reasons he explains, what remains is that God (which is how Abū Qurrah consistently refers to God the Father in these arguments) has a unique attribute of exercising headship over a communion of Persons like to him in essence and dignity, while the Son has an attribute of being subject to that headship. This is perhaps the earliest such link between divine attributes and divine Persons to be found in the Arabophone Christian literature.

**Divine Attributes and Divine Persons**

Later in *On Our Salvation*, Theodore Abū Qurrah makes a rather striking claim that bears directly upon the idea of three incommensurable divine attributes as indicative of the three divine Persons. This claim does not occur in a systematic consideration of divine attributes, but instead in a passage that attempts to prove that the Old Testament bears witness to the Persons of the Trinity. In enumerating various scriptural passages, Abū Qurrah writes:

Solomon, the son of David, made mention of this Son, calling him the “Wisdom of God,” both so as to teach us that he was always with God and to inform the ignorant that whoever denies the eternity of this Son deprives God of His wisdom. He said, speaking in the voice of Wisdom, “The Lord created me at the beginning of His ways for His deeds. Before the ages, He established me in the beginning. Before the earth was made, before He poured out the founts of water, before He shaped the mountains and hills, before all, He begot me. When He was creating the heavens, I was with Him. When He was marking off His throne on the winds, when
He was making firm and preparing the founts below the heavens, when He established for the sea the limit of its extent, that the waters might not transgress its edge, when He was making strong the foundations of the earth, I was acting with Him. I was daily His delight, and I was rejoicing in Him always.” What sun is more luminous than this proof of the eternity of the Son and of His being begotten from God before all eternity, as well as that through him God created the world, that He delights in God and God delights in Him, even as said above, and that He became incarnate?55

Whereas the previous passage examined merely suggested a link between divine attributes and the existence of multiple Persons in God, this passage explicitly associates the Son with the divine attribute of Wisdom. Certainly Theodore Abū Qurrah is not the first Christian writer to assign this passage from Proverbs a Christological interpretation, and a full examination of the difficult interpretive history of this passage due to the verb “created” would be out of place here. Despite its use by other Christian authors before and after Abū Qurrah, the presence of this identification of the Son with divine Wisdom is significant in this context for two reasons. First, since it occurs in the same treatise as the treatment of divine headship just described, it suggests that Abū Qurrah was thinking in terms of divine attributes as he developed his Trinitarian theology. Second, because the association between divine attributes and divine Persons becomes more explicit when he focuses specifically on Trinitarian doctrine in On the Trinity, and because the Trinitarian arguments based on divine attributes because more prominent in later Arabophone

Christian literature, this usage seems to be a noteworthy point in the overall developmental trajectory.

As one would expect, Abū Qurrah’s most developed Trinitarian argument appears in his treatise *On the Trinity*. In developing his argument, he brings together the focus on the divine attributes, considerations from Arabic grammar, and the identification of Jesus as the Word of God. He approaches his argument by recounting a challenge that Muslims of his day apparently posed to Christians, namely, “Was it three or one that created the world?” As Abū Qurrah explains, this was supposed to be an unanswerable question, since if the Christian asserted that three had created the universe, it would appear to be an assertion that there were three Creators and therefore an admission of polytheism, whereas if the Christian answered that one had created the universe, the Muslim would “consider the other two hypostases nullified.” In response to this rhetorical challenge, Abū Qurrah cites several examples from the natural world in which it is considered appropriate to associate the same verb with two different nouns in the singular and yet not to assign the verb to the same nouns when they are joined by the conjunctive *and* into a plural subject. He points out, for example, that one may say, “The carpenter made the door” and “The hand of the carpenter made the door,” but one does not say, “The carpenter and his hand made the door.” After citing several examples of this kind in which one entity executes the action of a given verb *through* another entity, Abū Qurrah argues:

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56 Lamoreaux 185; *Taliżah haluqū al-huluq al-wāhid?*

57 Ibid., “... ṣanāʿa ʾin al-ṣamām al-ḥārin qad buṭila....”
In the same way, one says, “The Father created the world” and “The Son created the world.” One does not say, “The Father and the Son created the world,” for the Father created the world through His Son. It is as St. Paul said, “In these last days God has spoken to us by His Son, through whom He created the world.”

Adroitly shifting from speaking of God’s Son to speaking of God’s Word, Abū Qurrah immediately follows this argument by quoting John 1:1-3 with its emphasis that God made all things through His Word. The terminological shift from God’s Son to God’s Word allows Abū Qurrah to associate the argument that he has just built upon grammar and analogies from the mundane world with the Qur’ānic resonances and connotations of the Word of God presented previously. Since the term word is used in the Qur’ān specifically in reference to Jesus, as also explained above, Abū Qurrah may be attempting in this passage simultaneously to suggest that the Muslim’s rhetorical challenge is baseless and to introduce one of the more problematic passages from the Qur’ān in such a way that the act of creation is associated with Jesus.

Two significant characteristics of Abū Qurrah’s argument up to this point are worth noting. First, his response to the rhetorical Muslim challenge follows a pattern seen previously, in which the Muslim argument is not merely answered, but actually inverted to be an argument in favor of Trinitarian doctrine. Whereas the hypothetical Muslim would like to give his Christian interlocutor a strict choice between creation by one or creation by three, Abū Qurrah points out that this dichotomy does not accord with common sense and everyday experience. Beyond this, he also subtly suggests that the

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dichotomy does not align with Islamic religious sensibilities either, since both religious traditions affirm that God acts through His Word, although the precise identity of that Word is a matter of dispute. Second, the introduction of grammar as a key element of his argument is an important precedent for developing Arabophone religious discourse, both Christian and Muslim. As will be shown later, grammatical considerations, particularly from the Qur’ānic text itself, eventually become an important aspect of the debates about unicity and multiplicity in God.

Theodore Abū Qurrah clearly intends to place this appellation of Word in reference to the second Person of the Trinity in the context of divine attributes, for he then calls the reader’s attention to other New Testament passages in which Jesus is referred to by other attributes:

For this reason, St. Paul called the Son “the light of the Father’s glory,” when he said, “In these last days God has spoken to us by His Son, through whom He created the world. He is the light of the Father’s glory and the form of His essence.” He also called him “the Wisdom of God” and “His power” … comparing him to God in the same way that the fire’s heat is like the fire, for heat is the fire’s power. So also, the evangelist John called Him “Word” when he said, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.”

In treating the term Word as a divine attribute, Abū Qurrah accomplishes something similar to what the author of Fī taḥlīl accomplishes by using the phrase “God and His Word and His Spirit.” The second hypostasis of the Trinity is conceptually oriented to the first in such a way that any accusation of polytheism is obviated. That said, Abū Qurrah’s

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association of the Word of God with divine attributes is unquestionably a development of Arabophone Trinitarian theology beyond anything to be found in Fr ṭahlīt. Careful attention should be paid to Abū Qurrah’s use of scripture in this passage. He presumes an equivalency between the use of the term “Word” in the Johannine literature with the terms “light,” “wisdom,” and “power” from the Epistle to the Hebrews (which, in keeping with the tradition of his era, he mistakenly attributes to St. Paul). Whereas some interpreters might take the term “Word” to be used as the proper name of the Second Person of the Trinity and the other terms to be used metaphorically, Abū Qurrah apparently sees no difference in the use of these terms. For him, they are equivalent expressions of an attribute of God that are in some way distinct from God Himself. Each of these attributes (Word, light, wisdom, and power) is substantially identical with each of the others, and yet none of them is identical with the First Hypostasis. This is a crucial point, because it means that Abū Qurrah establishes a direct correlation between divine attributes and the Divine Persons of the Trinity.

He does not, however, establish any clear distinction between the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity in this regard. If Word, wisdom, light, and power all refer to the same attribute which is the Second Hypostasis, there is no similar list of terms which are considered equivalent expressions referring to the Third Hypostasis. The reader is left with the conclusion that there is both rational and scriptural support for the idea of a divine attribute which may be understood as a distinct divine hypostasis, but is not offered any explanation for why there should be more than one, and if more than one, why only two.
In conclusion, Theodore Abū Qurrah’s writings occupy an important position in the developmental trajectory of Arabophone Trinitarian doctrine. First, they move beyond the purely scriptural approach of Ṣūfīkh to an approach that combines scriptural and philosophical argumentation. Second, Abū Qurrah introduces Arabic grammar and its implications as a relevant consideration in the work of theology. Finally, he begins to build the conceptual framework for an articulation of Trinitarian doctrine on the basis of divine attributes, by arguing that the human attributes of begetting and headship must correspond to similar divine attributes and doing so in a way that affirms the central Islamic tenet of God’s absolute transcendence and exaltedness.
Chapter 3: Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rāʾiṭah

The next texts to be considered are those of the Jacobite theologian and apologist Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rāʾiṭah (hereafter referred to simply as “Abū Rāʾiṭah,”) who lived and worked in the Jacobite center of Takrīt during the late eighth and early ninth century. There are only two events that allow for the approximate dating of Abū Rāʾiṭah’s life. First, he is known from both Melkite and Jacobite sources to have sent Nonnus of Nisibus as his deputy to the court of an Armenian prince to debate Christology with none other than Theodore Abū Qurrah, a mission which seems to have taken place between 815 and 820. Second, Abū Rāʾiṭah is known to have been among the accusers of a bishop named Philoxenus who was deposed in 828. Sandra Toenies Keating, who has introduced a volume of Abū Rāʾiṭah’s writings to the Anglophone world, concludes approximate life dates of 770-835 for Abū Rāʾiṭah.¹ This dating makes him a near-contemporary but probably somewhat younger than Theodore Abū Qurrah, and the passage of time between the heights of their respective careers is somewhat significant in the changes it necessitated for Abū Rāʾiṭah’s apologetical method, as will be demonstrated later.

Georg Graf, in his extensive efforts to develop a comprehensive bibliography of early Christian Arabophone writings, has catalogued a total of seven texts attributed to Abū Rāʾiṭah.² Like Abū Qurrah, Abū Rāʾiṭah had multiple intended audiences and a

¹ Sandra Toenies Keating, Defending the “People of Truth” in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abū Rāʾiṭah (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 35-40; see also Griffith, Beginnings, 164-165.

range of apologetical agendas, as he sought to prevent the conversion of Christians to Islam, to commend Christian doctrine to Muslims, and to defend and promote the distinctive doctrinal expressions and liturgical practices of his Jacobite community vis-à-vis the other two Arabophone Christian “denominations,” the Melkites and the Church of the East. Among his seven known texts, three are particularly relevant for the purpose at hand: a *risālah* (epistle) on the Trinity, another on the Incarnation, and a third “on the proof of the Christian religion.” These three texts will be referred to hereafter as *Fī al-Talūt al-Muqadas*, *Fī al-Tajasud*, and *Fī ḏīn Naṣrānīyah*, respectively.

As with Abū Qurrah, little is known with certainty of the particulars of Abū Rāʾītah’s life and day-to-day work. The surviving texts use the term *āl-Takrīt* as part of his name, indicating a person from or closely associated with Takrīt, and giving rise to the idea that he may have been the Jacobite bishop of that important theological center. Griffith gives some limited credence to that possibility, also noting that he may instead have been bishop of Nisibis, and noting that there is contradictory information on this point in the existing texts.³ For her part, Keating rejects entirely the idea that Abū Rāʾītah was a bishop of either city, noting that the somewhat traditional idea of Abū Rāʾītah as bishop of Takrīt arose from a combination of mere speculation and references in Coptic authors beginning in the eleventh century, quite too long after Abū Rāʾītah’s time to be taken at face value.⁴ Keating gives more credence to a reference in an Armenian

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⁴ Keating, 40-45.
chronicle about the Christological debate between Nonnus of Nisibis and Abū Qurrah which calls Abū Rāʾīṭah a “vardapet in Mesopotamia.” She argues that at this point in history, the term *vardapet* was used in the Armenian Church to refer to a non-ordained theologian who served as a teacher of scripture, doctrine, and philosophy, and that the term may be understood as roughly the equivalent of *malpōnō* in the Church of the East during the same era. Thus it may well have been the case that Abū Rāʾīṭah was not a bishop, but rather a scholar of international and inter-communion repute in the still-new endeavor of expressing and defending Christian doctrine in Arabic.

**Abū Rāʾīṭah’s Use of Qur’ānic Terminology and Islamic Concepts**

Throughout his writings, Abū Rāʾīṭah shows a stronger familiarity with the Qur’ānic text and a greater effort at using Islamic terminology than Abū Qurrah. A typical example of the way he employs Qur’ānic turns of phrase appears in

*Fī ṭāḥāt dīn al-Naṣrānīyah.* Abū Rāʾīṭah’s overall argument in this *risālah* is that there six invalid reasons for the embrace of a particular religion or ideology (the desire for temporal gain or advantage, the desire for heavenly reward, overpowering fear, the fact that the religion under consideration permits what is desired, the opportunity to advance social standing, and tribal solidarity), and only one valid reason - the existence of proof for the religion, given by God Himself. His objective, of course, is to establish that only

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5 Keating, 46.

6Keating 83; “Kul dīn zahara fī ʿal-ʿālam lā yahltā āʾataqād fa-aʿāluhu min ʿāḥad sabʿah āqṣām ʿadharān. Āḥadhah āmā ṭalḥah fī ʿažāl zahar naʿfahu wa gūrhi. Wa ʿal-ʿanf ʿam a fī ʿajal ʿarjūa darakahu. Wa ʿal-ʿalāy ṭalḥah qāḥahad yadhar lā qabḥahu. Wa ʿal-ṣalā ṭalḥah fī kul maṭlaḥ min ʿal-maḥjūrāt tasabab ihī. Wa ʿal-ḥāmas āstabsānān lī-tammīṭahu wa ẓalgraṭāhu. Wa ʿal-sādas ṭuṭṭā fī ʿašbāḥ min rahaṭ maḥṭāl ālā ṭalḥaṭ wa ʿal-waṣūl ālā az wa ʿal-maḍālahār ʿālā ʿal-quḍrah wa ʿadrāk ʿal-ṣawāh wa ʿal-ʾisār bi-naṣrah.”
Christianity can be understood as contrary to the first six motivations and in keeping with the seventh. In elaborating this argument, Abū Rāʾiṭah is sometimes obliged to demonstrate that various aspects of Jewish and Christian salvation history do not fall within the first six categories. He anticipates, for example, that an interlocutor might point out that the Exodus event, with its attendant call of the Jewish people back to faithful worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was accomplished through a combination of fear and desire:

You see that Moses, son of ‘Imrān and the other prophets accepted by you, proclaimed a religion and they revealed it and confirmed it with desire and fear together. As for the desire, it is just as the statement of Moses that “God made you heirs to the land of Canaan….” As for the fear, it is also just as his statement to the Sons of Israel, offering to them that “Surely God has made you heirs of the peoples, so you shall kill them until not one of them remains…..”

It is worth noting that Abū Rāʾiṭah refers here to Moses as the “son of ‘Imrān” and as one of the prophets, both of which are Qur’ānic ways of referring to him. This is significant in that it demonstrates both Abū Rāʾiṭah’s familiarity with the Qur’ānic text and his willingness to establish common ground with his Muslim audience by using such terminology. Abū Rāʾiṭah has thus set himself the task of demonstrating that the dynamic of the Exodus event was something other than fear and desire, and he continues to develop his argument in specifically Qur’ānic terms. Rather than compelling his people through fear and desire, argues Abū Rāʾiṭah, God “brought about the protection of the

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religion, and its acceptance through signs and wonders that God revealed and caused through the hand of [Moses] in the land of Egypt…. Now these signs proved the religion of God by the hand of Moses [and] are among the wonders widely-known by all of the peoples.”

By using the term “signs” (al-ʿāʾāt), Abū Rāʾīyah connects this seminal event in salvation history with a key Islamic concept, since as previously explained this term is used throughout the Qurʾān to denote the proofs that God provides for his revelatory action in the world and even for the Qurʾānic verses themselves. Taking both the singular and the plural into account, this term appears some 235 times in the text of the Qurʾān. Abū Rāʾīyah is thus able simultaneously to cast the Exodus in specifically Qurʾānic terminology and fit it into his model of valid and invalid reasons for conversion to a particular religious tradition.

As he continues to describe and characterize the Exodus event, Abū Rāʾīyah does so in a way that is virtually saturated with Qurʾānic terminology:

The proof of this [i.e., that God acted toward Egypt and toward the Israelites in order to provide convincing signs to validate His revealed will] is the statement of God, may He be praised! to His intimate friend, Moses, when he begged Him to save the Sons of Israel from the hand of Pharaoh and from the error of his people, from his enslavement and oppression of them with every painful torment, and to reveal to them His religion and send down to them His book with His practices and His law by His [own] hand in mercy to them here [on this earth], when the Merciful One said to His servant Moses: “I have seen the humiliation of my people dwelling in the Land of Egypt, and I have heard their cries, and I have descended to save them. And so, I send you for this.”

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8 Keating 95-97; “... jʿalaʿ asanatuḥu ʿal-dīn wa qabuluḥu bi-ʿal-ʿāʾāt wa jarāʾ ʿib ʿalat ʿazharuḥa wa ʿajraḥa Allah ʿalā yadīḥī bi-ʿārḍ Miṣr.... Fā-haḏahi ʿal-ʿāʾāt ʿaḥbat dīn Allah ʿalā yadī Mūsā min ʿal-ʿajāʾ ib ʿal-mugāʿazah ḍī ʿal-ʿumūm kāfīḥ.”

9 Keating 96-99; “Wa ʿal-burḥān ʿalā dalak qul Allah sabḥānuḥu li-najīhu Mūsā ʿand al-tamāsuḥu ḫalāṣ
Even in so short a passage as this, at least five different Qur’anic allusions or turns of phrase can be detected. First, Abū Rā‘īṭah follows the mention of God’s name with the expression “sabbānuhu,” which Keating has translated “may He be praised!” and which can also be rendered “Glory to him,” “may he be exalted,” or simply “blessed be he.” This usage follows a Qur’anic convention, and the expression appears in forty-one different places in the Qur’anic text. Second, Abū Rā‘īṭah describes God’s reason for intervening on behalf of the Israelites first as saving them “from the error of [Pharoah’s] people” – i.e., from the influence of Egyptian polytheism – and mentions their deliverance from hardship and slavery only secondarily. Third, Abū Rā‘īṭah expresses God’s revelatory action in a quintessentially Islamic way by attributing to Moses a prayer for God to send down his book, an attribution which certainly is not drawn from the Old Testament and which incorporates a purely Muslim way of understanding scripture. Fourth, the Law of Moses is referred to in this passage not by the Arabicized form of the word Torah (āt-Tūrāḥ), as sometimes appears in Arabophone Christian writing, but by the terms sunan and šarā’a. Both of these terms were and are significant ones for a Muslim reader. The first term is used to refer to the rules of daily living attributed to the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic tradition and is the root word for Sunni; it could be loosely but reasonably translated “the way of right living.” The second term is used to refer more technically to Islamic law and has entered English and other Western

See Ex 3:7-8.
languages under the near-transliteration *sharia*. Fifth, God is referred to in the passage by the name *al-Rahūm*, the Merciful, which is one of the most frequently used names for him in the Qur’ān and in Islamic practice.

In addition to attempts to employ Qur’ānic terminology such as the one just described, Abū Rā’īṭah also attempts to affirm and employ Islamic ways of speaking about God insofar as possible for a Christian author. This includes acknowledging the limitations of human language itself when used in reference to God, and in his treatise *Frātāt dīn al-Naṣrāniyah* Abū Rā’īṭah expresses this limitation in terms that echo the Qur’ān:

> If someone asks us about [any] part of our teaching about God, may He be praised! concerning the Trinity and the Unity, and the matter of the Incarnation and becoming human, and anything else about His attributes, and we answer with a deductive proof or an analogy or evidence from a book, and if [the answer] happens to approach the goal and the questioner is happy with the answer [given to] him, then we thank God for this! If it is found, [however], to be far from [the goal], not appropriate for [the question] in all or most respects, this is [still] good and holds true for His predication, for according to His statement: “The understanding of the one who describes Me with descriptions is not capable of succeeding.”

The statement with which Abū Rā’īṭah ends this passage is not a direct Qur’ānic quotation, so it is not clear why he feels justified in calling it a statement of God Himself. That said, the statement does reflect the idea, held in common by Christians and Muslims, that God is greater than any human capacity for describing him accurately.

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10 Keating 101-103; “Wa aqṣaṣ la-hā ḍan b’aqṣ qūhūnī ḍa ḍ Allah sabāḥānahu min āmar al-tażīlīt wa al-ta’ākād wa āmar al-ta’āsud wa al-ta’ā nus wa gūr dālak min safātīhu fa-ṣajabun bi-rā’a āū qās āū hajah min kītāb fa-waq’a qarībān min al-baqīḥah wa ʿagūna al-sā’il ḍī jūbihu šakarnā Allah ʿalā qīlak wa ʿān allā b’ādīlān minhā gūr mulā’im li-hā ḍī jamī’a ʿanḥā’īthu āū jalihā fa-dālak jamīl ḍuwa ʿalāṣiḏiqṣuṣafātīhu ḍī qūḥūhu ān taṣṣafūnī al-wāṣfānī fa-lā yanāl al-aqīl.”
Since this apophatic sense of God’s absolute transcendence is so important to the Islamic religious discourse, the statement also goes somewhat beyond establishing common ground and affirms a key Muslim assertion about God. Furthermore, although not a direct quotation, the statement does seem to echo certain Qur’ānic verses, in that it uses the same verb (Arabic waṣāla, to describe or predicate) that a number of these verses use to warn against some of the descriptive assertions that are made about God.

Some of these verses are clearly directed against polytheistic assertions or statements about God that would lend themselves to polytheistic interpretations (for example, 6:100, 21:22, and 37:159). Two other Qur’ānic verses, however, seem to give a more general warning against descriptions or predications offered about God. Surah 21:18, for example, represents God as saying, “We cast the Truth against Falsehood, and Truth knocks the brain out of Falsehood, such that Falsehood dies. Woe be to you, for the description you make!”11 Giving an even more general warning, surah 37:180 reads, “Exalted be your Lord, the Lord of Glory, beyond the descriptions (or attributions) they make of him.”12 Since these verses seem to issue such a broad condemnation of descriptions made of God, one or both of them, or perhaps a proverb derived from them, could lie behind Abū Rā’iṭah’s statement.

There is another consideration about this statement of Abū Rā’iṭah that is worth noting. Besides the Qur’ānic verses already mentioned, there are two others which use the same Arabic terminology about making descriptions or predications of God, but

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11 Bal naqdi bi-āl-ḥaq ‘alā āl-bāṭil fā-yadmağu hu lā-ādā hūa zāhiq wa lā-kum āl-walī minā taṣ išūn.

12 Subḥān Rabbika Rabb āl-‘azah ‘amā yāṣīfūn.
specifically with reference to the attribute of begetting a son. Surah 23:91 declares that
“God has not begotten a son, and there is none from among the gods with him…. God is
exalted above the descriptions (or attributions) they make of him.”13 In surah 43:81,
Muhammad is commanded, “Say: if the Most Gracious One had a son, I would be the
first among those to serve him. Exalted be the Lord of the heavens and the earth, the Lord
of the Throne, beyond the descriptions they make of him.”14 Given the existence of these
verses, Abū Rā‘iṭah’s strongly apophatic statement may be a rather sly way of raising the
issue of using the language of begetting in reference to God. As will be shown below,
Abū Rā‘iṭah’s fundamental position about the divine attributes can be summarized in two
points: 1) If it is not possible to use the language of begetting in reference to God because
of its creaturely connotations, then likewise it is not possible to ascribe any attribute to
God, since ultimately one uses the language of creaturely attributes in order to do so; and
2) human attributes are metaphorical reflections of divine ones, rather than the other way
around. In other words, the position that he takes in the passage quoted above may be
understood as a preparatory statement that draws on the terminology of the Qur’ān in
order to place the whole question of divine begetting in the context of the limitations of
language to describe God.

In Fā’āl-Tājusul, Abū Rā‘iṭah posits that a Muslim interlocutor may argue that
using the terms Begetter, Begotten, Father, and Son in reference to God necessarily

13 Mā ātahad Allāh min waliid wa mā kān māhu min ālāh.... Subḥān Allāh `amā yasifūn.

14 Qul ān kān li-al-Raḥmān walad fā-ānā āwal al-`aabdīn. Subḥān Rabb al-samāwāt wa al-`ārḍ
Rabb al-`arsh `amā yasifūn.
entails predicating of God everything that one would predicate of human fathers and sons. Rather than attempt to defend the use of these terms on Christian doctrinal grounds or purely rational grounds, he resorts again to Qur’ānic terminology:

If it follows from our description of God as Begetter and Begotten, Father and Son, that we are compelled to make necessary for Him all predications of creaturely begetters and begotten, fathers and sons, then [since] you would describe Him and we would describe Him as a Doer of things, so [too,] we must make everything necessary for Him that is necessary for someone who does something. But does a doer from among created things know how to do something without movement or place or time or thought or a tool or an instrument to make it, or anything else that we have not described? Then we must describe God, may He be praised! as not making [any]thing without these [things], as humanity needs them when it does something.15

Abū Rāʾīyah here draws upon a term that the Qur’ān itself applies to God in at least two verses. Surah 11:107 states, “Your Lord is the Doer of that which he wills.”16 In a very similar passage, surah 85:14-16 says of God that “he is the affectionate Forgiver of sins, Lord of the efficacious throne, the Doer of that which he wills.”17 Abū Rāʾīyah then imagines a dialogue in which his Muslim interlocutor argues that God’s doing is nothing like creaturely doing because of his absolute power. Rather than argue with this point, Abū Rāʾīyah affirms it and argues that in the same way, God’s begetting is nothing like human begetting. Just as God can be correctly described as a Doer because of his


16 Rabbak f‘a‘l li-mā yūrīdu.

17 Wa ḡū Ġl-Gafūr Ġl-wadūd ḡū Ġl-‘arṣ Ġl-majīd f‘a‘l li-mā yūrīd.
efficacious action of bringing into existence whatever he wills without any dependence upon a process of thought, the passage of time, the use of tools, etc., so also he can be described as Begetter and Father, or in the case of the second Person of the Trinity, as Begotten and Son without any dependence upon the various creaturely aspects of human begetting. By arguing in this way, Abū Rāʾiṭah uses the same technique as that used by Abū Qurrah and by the author of Ḥīṭatī, namely, placing his Muslim reader in the difficult position of either denying the legitimacy of Qur’ānic language about God or affirming the reasonableness of language used in Trinitarian doctrine. Furthermore, in the midst of articulating Trinitarian terminology, he affirms the principle that is perhaps most basic to all Islamic discourse about God: that he is utterly beyond and unlike his creatures.

In fact, Abū Rāʾiṭah not only affirms this principle of the divine transcendence and makes it central to his argument, but he goes a step further. In applying the idea of divine transcendence to the attribute of begetting, he argues that creaturely begetting is actually a metaphor: “How does one in reality become a father or a son? All of those who are called father and son among creatures are only called this as a metaphor, as the saying about from where [a child] is: he is given to [a father] from God.”18 Thus Abū Rāʾiṭah suggests that the divine attribute of begetting is not a metaphorical expression derived from the human attribute of begetting, such that Trinitarian terminology could be seen as anthropomorphistic (and therefore, in Islamic terms as širk). Rather, the human attribute of

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18 Keating 267-69; “Fa-min aīna yusūr āb haqān āā ibn? Fa-kul min samā ābān āā ibnān min al-maḥliqin fa-anāmā samā jīlak bi-āṣirārah min al-qūl minhu Allah al-thi.”
begetting reflects imperfectly and partially a divine attribute which is its source. He goes on somewhat later in the same risālah to argue similarly for all human attributes:

Just as God is living, hearing, seeing, knowing, and human beings are those [beings] described with these, [too], the identity between the names and attributes results from His gracious bestowal [of them] on His servants, so that they are named with His names and described with His attributes, [yet] the two differ in meaning.19

This way of thinking and speaking about attributes is quite similar to the mirror analogy in Abū Qurrah’s writings examined earlier, in which he emphasizes that a human attribute can exist only insofar as it is the dim and imperfect reflection of a real divine attribute, just as the features in a person’s reflection can exist only insofar as they reflect the existence of the real person’s actual features. Abū Rā’iṭah does not elaborate his notion that human attributes are metaphorical to the degree that Abū Qurrah articulates his mirror analogy. Nonetheless, the rhetorical effect is much the same: Abū Rā’iṭah’s Muslim reader is left with a choice between affirming that the attributes of begetting and being begotten do in fact exist in God, or else explaining how a human attribute can exist without a basis in the divine life.

Abu Rā’iṭah’s Use of Scripture

As has already been mentioned, Abū Rā’iṭah clearly belongs to the second stage of Arabophone Christian theology as described by Samir Khalil Samir, in which both scriptural and philosophical tools and arguments are used in the project of articulating

19 Keating 271-73; “Fa-ka-mā ʾan Allāh ʾhi samīʿa hasīr ʿalān wa al-ʿansān al-maṣūf bi-galal wa ṣatalq bī ʿal-āṣmaʾ waal-sīlat li-ʿamtonānuhu bihi ʿalā ʿabādhu bi-mā ṣmāhum bihi min ṣmā hu wa waṣīfhum bi-sī-latih muṭalālān al-mʿānā.”
Christian doctrine and defending it against Muslim criticism. In fact, he is keenly aware of the distinction between scriptural and philosophical approaches, sometimes explicitly commenting on his own methodology and his reasons for proceeding in particular ways or using particular types of evidence, as will be shown in further detail below. Two important background issues influence the way the Abū Rāʾiṭah goes about using scriptural arguments. The first is the continuing lack in his time of a complete and authoritative Arabic translation of the Bible. Keating has noted that when he quotes from the Old and New Testaments, he appears to be making his own translations from the Old Syriac version and that his translations of particular texts are inconsistent, suggesting that they were done on an ad-hoc basis over time, according to the needs of the moment.\(^\text{20}\)

This fact in turn suggests the transitional linguistic character of the time and place in which Abū Rāʾiṭah wrote. On the one hand, Arabic had not yet become so completely dominant that a standard Arabic text of the Bible had been produced, but on the other hand, Arabic was becoming sufficiently prominent that Abū Rāʾiṭah eventually compiled a list of his biblical proof-texts in Arabic, the ʿṢahādāt min qūl ʿal-Tūrāḥ wa ʿal-ʿĀnbāʾaʾ wa ʿal-Qadīsīn (“Witnesses from the Words of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Saints”)\(^\text{21}\) to serve as a kind of handbook for Christian apologists in debate with Muslims.

The second background factor influencing Abū Rāʾiṭah’s use of scriptural argument is the problem of ʿal-taḥrīf, the alleged interpolation and corruption of the Old and New Testaments. From early in the Islamic period until the present day, Muslim

\(^{20}\) Keating 304.

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 299-333.
theologians have asserted that all authentic prophets proclaimed a message that was substantially identical to the preaching of Muhammad, and that the reason for doctrinal disagreements among Jews, Christians, and Muslims is that no authentic copy of the original contents of the Old or New Testament exists. Rather, runs the Muslim argument, the Jewish and Christian scriptures as they are known are the result of alterations made by Jews and Christians to justify their heterodox beliefs as they drifted farther and farther from the various prophets’ original testimony and teaching. Against this backdrop of Muslim insistence on *al-tahrīf* as the origin of Jewish and Christian scriptures, the Christian apologist could not simply cite scriptural evidence and expect it to be fully convincing. That said, scriptural testimony could not simply be set aside, since as noted in both the preceding chapters, one of the central questions in Christian-Muslim encounters was which religious tradition could claim to be the authentic spiritual heir of the prophets.

Abū Rā’ījah attempts to take into account this methodological tension with regard to scriptural testimony, and as a result he takes the nuanced approach of incorporating select scriptural evidence from the Bible supported by both Qur’ānic and philosophical evidence. We can be quite certain that by the height of his career the issue of *al-tahrīf* was a significant factor in Christian-Muslim dialogue and that he was aware of the pitfalls of using scriptural evidence, because unlike the author of *Fī ḫalqāt* and Theodore Abū Qurrah, Abū Rā’ījah makes an explicit reference to the issue. Writing about the scriptural use of plural language in reference to God, he writes in *Fī al-Ṭalāṯ al-Muqadas:*
Now it is necessary for us to notice … that “God” is not counted as a single one, in keeping with the witnesses of the [sacred] books, cautioning the one who differs from us, and strengthening with support the one who follows us, even if the ones who differ from us on it declare it to be false when they claim we have altered [the sacred books] by adding to them and taking away from them.  

Keating argues that Abū Rāʿījah’s awareness of the problem of ʿal-tahrīf and its effect on Christian-Muslim dialogue substantially affected the particular scriptural passages that he was willing to bring to bear in his apologetical writings and to commend for use by other Christians. Writing about the selections that appear in his handbook ʿiḥādīt min ʿāl-Ṭūrāh wa ʿal-ʿĀnbīaʾ wa ʿal-Qadīm, Keating asserts that

… within limited confines he still employed passages from the Old Testament in his apologetical writings. He apparently did this because it was easier to provide convincing evidence for the Old Testament than for the New that it had not been tampered with, since the same texts had also been preserved by the Jews.”

Abū Rāʿījah made this type of argument explicitly in Fī ʿal-Tālūt ʿal-Muqadas:

Now, if they deny this teaching [i.e., multiplicity coexisting with oneness in God], and reject it, saying: “The prophets did not say this, rather, you have altered the words from their places, and you have made [the prophets] say what is false and a lie,” it should be said to them: If these books were only in our possession, and not [also] in the hands of our enemies the Jews, then, By my life! one could accept your teaching that we have changed [them] and substituted [words for other words]. However, if the books are also in the hands of the Jews, no one can accept your teaching, unless it were found that the books that we possess differ: [but] what is in the hands of the Jews is in harmony with what we possess.

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22 Keating 201-203; “Wā qad yājah ʿalnā ān mutḥābi ... bi-ʿān Allāh līs sādīda wāḥid fārada bi-ṣaḥādāt min ʿal-kutub ṭaqāṣān li-mān ḥālīmūna wa taṣdīdiḥā li-yaqīn mi-mān sāʿānā wa kān muḥālīmīnā bī-hā makdāhā bī-mā ʿadāna min tahrīfāna ʿaḥā bi-ʿal-zāda bāmuḥā wa ʿal-naḥāf minhā.”

23 Keating 303.

24 Keating 207-209; “Fā-ān inkarān hāḏā ʿal-qāl wa ḥaḍāḥu wa qālūn ān ʿal-ʿĀnbīyaʾ lam tanṭaq bihi
There would have been some methodological danger in arguing this way, since Abū Rāʾīṭah is asking his Muslim interlocutor to reject a mainstream Islamic doctrine about the scriptures as accepted by Jews and Christians, in favor of affirming his logical argument about the current state of those scriptures. Yet Abū Rāʾīṭah is clearly interested in affirming Islamic concepts and using Qurʾānic terminology to the highest degree possible, as already demonstrated. Thus there emerges one of the characteristics that most clearly distinguishes Abū Rāʾīṭah from the other early Arabophone Christian theologians considered here. On the one hand, he seems more knowledgeable about the text of the Qurʾān and more eager to make use of it than, for example, Theodore Abū Qurrah. On the other hand, he seems more willing to challenge his Muslim interlocutors about fundamental disagreements in the two religious traditions than other Christian apologists.

In summary, Abū Rāʾīṭah found himself in a place and time in which Arabic was becoming the regional lingua franca and yet its burgeoning dominance had not yet prompted the creation of an authoritative Arabic translation of the Bible, so like the author of *Fi taḥlīl* and Theodore Abū Qurrah before him, he got along by using his own translations of biblical proof-texts. But unlike these slightly earlier Arabophone Christian authors, he felt the need to take explicit note of the issue of *al-taḥrīf*, to weigh somewhat more carefully the scriptural passages that he would employ, and to blend biblical,

Qur’ānic, and philosophical argumentation such that no argument could be rejected by his interlocutors due to having been based on “interpolated” scripture alone.

An important example of this kind of argumentation is his assertion that the scriptures use plural language in reference to God, and that because of this usage it is necessary to understand that although God is one, there is within God some kind of plurality. Immediately after the passage from *Fi ḥ-Darātīq al-Muqadas* cited above, in which Abū Rā’iṭah makes note of the accusation of *al-tahrīf*, he builds an argument based on scriptural language, beginning with quotations from the Old Testament. First he assembles a catena of quotations from the Book of Genesis, including passages about the creation of Adam (Gen 1:26), the creation of Eve (Gen 2:18), the expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:22), and the confusion of human languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:7). In each of these quotations, God refers to himself using plural pronouns. Abū Rā’iṭah then includes a citation from the Book of Daniel, in which God speaks to Belteshazzar using a plural pronoun in reference to himself (Dan 4:31). By selecting these quotations, Abū Rā’iṭah has assembled testimony from both the Torah (*al-Tūrāh*) and the Prophets (*al-ʿĀbīāʾ*), thereby including two of the “units” of revealed scripture cited individually in the Qur‘ān. He then turns his attention to the Qur‘ānic text:

> You recall that in your book [something] similar to what we have referred to from the sayings of Moses and Daniel is written in accounts concerning God: “We said”25, “We created”26, “We commanded”27, “We inspired”28,

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25 E.g., surahs 2:34, 35, and 37; 7:166; 20:68; and 25:36. This usage appears 27 times in the Qur‘ānic text.

26 E.g., surahs 7:181; 15:26 and 85; 36:71; and 50:38. This usage appears 24 times in the Qur‘ānic text.

27 Surah 17:16 appears to be the only appearance of this construction in the Qur‘ān. Keating suggests surahs 10:24 and 11:40 as well, but these are examples of the noun “our command” rather than the verbal form.
"We destroyed"\textsuperscript{29} and "We annihilated"\textsuperscript{30}, along with many others comparable to these. Does one who thinks doubt that these words are the speech of several and not the speech of one single [individual]?\textsuperscript{31}

Abū Rāʾiṭah displays in this passage some key points of his apologetical method with regard to the use of scriptural arguments. Although it would be much easier to draw from the New Testament to build his case for multiplicity of persons in God, he selects texts only from the Old Testament here since he has established a rational argument which makes those texts less assailable. Furthermore, he has selected passages for which there are almost exactly parallel grammatical usages in the Qurʾān. He also displays the depth of his Qurʾānic knowledge by the number of examples he gives and the significant number of Qurʾānic passages represented by the expressions he mentions.

After listing these examples of Qurʾānic texts in which God is presented as speaking of himself using plural pronouns, Abū Rāʾiṭah anticipates an argument by his Muslim interlocutor that God speaks in the “royal we” in the Qurʾānic texts mentioned, and responds to such an argument on philosophical grounds. Noting that the use of plural pronouns by an individual is permitted not only in Arabic, but in Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac as well, Abū Rāʾiṭah argues that the usage is permitted due to the composite nature of human beings:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} E.g., surahs 4:163; 7:117; 21:73; and 35:31. This usage appears 24 times in the Qurʾānic text.
\item \textsuperscript{29} E.g., surahs 6:6; 10:13; 26:208; and 54:51. This usage appears 29 times in the Qurʾānic text.
\item \textsuperscript{30} E.g., surahs 7:137; 26:172; 25:36; and 37:136. This usage appears 6 times in the Qurʾānic text.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Keating 202-203; “Wā qad ḫakartum ān lī kitābukum maktūḥān ʾaḏān ṣabah nā ḥakarnā mīn qād Masā wa Dānīl ḥakātah ‘an Allāh mīn qulnā ḥaḥaqunā wā ʿāmarunā wā ʾaḥlukunā wā damarunā mīn nāzāʾ ʾir ʾi-haḍāli ḫafīrāh. Ḧaṭūka Ḧaqud yʾaqūd ān ḥaḍā al-qūl ʿātā lā qūl wāḥid fard?”
\end{itemize}
This is correct and permitted in a composite of different things, and a composition of members which are not similar, because it is one [thing with] many parts. The primary parts of the human being are the soul and the body. And the body is also a construction of various basic elements and many members. For this reason it is necessary that what you have described be clearly specified. As for the One, simple [God] Who is in agreement in all manners and does not have members or parts, how is it possible that He be specified clearly in the way you have described … when He is counted as one, just as you have asserted?  

Thus Abū Rā’īṭah uses the philosophical categories of composition and simplicity to interpret and clarify the use of plural pronouns in the Old Testament, as well as to pose an implicit hermeneutical challenge with regard to the text of the Qur’ān. By presenting the argument in this way, he presents to his interlocutor three possible choices: to reject Qur’ānic language about God, to affirm that language but deny that the usage has any correlation to ontological categories, or to affirm the language and admit that the plural usage points to some kind of multiplicity in God. The overall structure of his argument aligns the portion of Christian scripture that Abū Rā’īṭah believes can be presented as most acceptable to a Muslim, the testimony of the Qur’ān, and the philosophical categories for which there was so much interest among Muslim theologians and other intellectuals of the time. He concludes this portion of his argument with a statement that brings together quite succinctly all three of the sources that he has so skillfully woven together:

32 Keating 202-205; “Darāk saḥīḥ jāʾū fī źāl-mūʾlīʾ min ʿāṣāʾ muḥtallafah wa murakub min ʿaḍāʾ gīr mutaṣābiḥah. Li-ānā wāḥid kāṭīf āḥāzāʾ hu. Fa-ʿawal āḥāzāʾ min ʿāl-ānsān ʿāl-nafās wa ʿāl-jāsād. Wa an āl-jāsād ʿāḥāzā ʿālūn muḥbīnā min ʿârākān ṣātā wa ʿaḍāʾ kāṭīfah. Fā-li-darāk jāz an ʿunṭiqa ʿalā mā waṣāfuṭum. Fa-āma ʿal-wāḥid ʿal-bāsīṯ ʿal-mutaṣāfīq fī kūl ʿānḥā ʿhu ʿalāqāt lāʾ ʿaḍāʾ li-hu wa ʿaḥāzāʾ fā-kīf jāz li-hu an ʿunṭiqa bi-mā waṣāfuṭum ... āḥā huwā ʿadila wāḥid ka-mā zāmāṭum.”
So you should know that God is one and three when He speaks in both types of utterances: “I commanded” and “We commanded” and “I created” and “We created” and “I revealed” and “We revealed”. For “I commanded”, “I revealed”, and “I created” indicate that his ousia [Arabic ] is one, and “We commanded”, “We revealed”, and “We created” indicate three hypostaseis [Arabic ].

Having already built this case for unity and multiplicity existing simultaneously in God based on the language of scripture, Abū Rā’īthah then makes another scriptural argument in Fā’il-Tālīq al-Muqadas, this one based on the rather mysterious passage about Abraham found in Gen 18. This argument is also based on language used of God, but rather than arguing that singular and plural language are used of God with equal accuracy, he argues that the three beings that appear to Abraham are collectively addressed with singular terminology:

[Moses] reports in the Torah concerning Abraham, the Friend of God, saying: “God appeared to Abraham [while] he was before the door of his tent in the place of such and such. As the daylight became hot, Abraham sat before the door of his tent. He lifted his eyes, and beheld three men standing before him. So he stood, facing them, and bowed to them, and said: “Lord, if you regard me with merciful eyes, then do not pass by your servant.” Do you not see that those who Abraham saw with his own eyes were three in number, because he said “three men”, yet he called them one Lord …? Now the number three is a mysterion [Arabic ] for the three hypostaseis [Arabic ]. And he called them “Lord”, not “Lords”. [This is] a mysterion for one ousia [Arabic ]. So in three can be one, just as we have described.
Since Abū Rā’iṭah begins this argument from the experience of Abraham after concluding his previous argument based on scriptural language, it may be considered a separate “unit” of argumentation, leading to the question why he considered this additional argument necessary. His strategy here is to invoke the experience of the key figure of Abraham due to Abraham’s unique importance in the history of revelation. Since Abraham was simultaneously regarded as the spiritual progenitor of Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, and as the literal forefather of the Arabs through descent from Ishmael, he occupied a central role in the revelation of right worship. There was hardly any more formidable figure that could be invoked for the project of supporting Trinitarian doctrine in the Arabic language.

Furthermore, Abū Rā’iṭah has here structured his argument in a way that subtly aligns it with an important tradition in Islamic religious discourse. By focusing on what Abraham saw and what Abraham said in response, Abū Rā’iṭah forms a kind of Christian hadīth (“report” or “narrative”) in support of a Trinitarian understanding of God. The hadīth was and is a form of Islamic teaching in which a point of doctrine is supported not by quotations from the Qur’ān but instead by a short narrative from the life of Muhammad or from one of his original circle of companions. A hadīth provides guidance about right belief or right action by recounting how Muhammad or one of his close companions reacted to a given set of circumstances. In this passage, Abū Rā’iṭah has cast the scriptural material he is using in the form of a hadīth in order to enlist Abraham’s

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support for the idea that “oneness” and “threeness” are not mutually exclusive. Even the title by which Abraham is called here, Friend of God, is in parallel to the phrase “Companion of the Prophet.” Thus Abū Rā’īṭah has in this passage drawn upon the Old Testament, in keeping with the considerations presented earlier, to marshal two different elements from Islamic religious culture – the seminal figure of Abraham and the reliance upon hadīth to guide belief – in order to build an argument for Trinitarian doctrine.

Abū Rā’īṭah also marshals scriptural evidence to make another type of Trinitarian argument, built upon the triad of God, his Word, and his Spirit – the same type of argument that figured so prominently in Fī ṭafīḥ. Since, as noted previously, Abū Rā’īṭah seems to have been quite conversant with the text of the Qur’ān, one may reasonably suppose that he was familiar with the ways in which the terms Word and Spirit are used therein. Thus the resonances of those terms as described in the chapter on Fī ṭafīḥ above are quite relevant for the argument that he builds around the idea of a God/Word/Spirit triad. One appearance of this type of argument follows upon the arguments just described in Fī al-Ṭalāṭ al-Muqadas, while a very similar line of reasoning appears in Fī ṣabāt dīn al-Nāṣrānīah. In the former, Abū Rā’īṭah draws upon several passages from the Psalms and from Isaiah in order to argue for the God/Word/Spirit triad. He begins with Ps 33:6 and writes: “And David said in his book: ‘By the Word of God the heavens were created, and by the breath of it all of their hosts.’ Now David clearly expresses the three hypostaseis when he says God, and His Word, and His Spirit. In our description, are
we adding to what David describes?”36 In order to understand the use that Abū Rāʾīṭah makes of this verse, one must understand that the same Arabic word, rūḥ, is used for both “breath” and “spirit”, much like its cognate ruach in Hebrew or pneuma in Greek. Thus the God/Word/Spirit triad, although lost in the English translation, would be clear to anyone reading the original Arabic. One could argue that the quintessential Qurʾānic expression of God’s transcendent uniqueness is the ability to create.37 Thus Abū Rāʾīṭah has chosen a verse which associates this key Qurʾānic expression of divine power and transcendence, the ability to create, with both the Word and the Spirit. Lest the implication of divinity for the Word and the Spirit be lost on his reader, Abū Rāʾīṭah immediately follows this passage by quoting Ps 56:10, in which David asserts that he praises [Arabic sabahā] the Word of God. Can David himself, Abū Rāʾīṭah asks rhetorically, be one of those who offers praise to something other than God? Thus the Muslim reader is left with three implied choices: to demur from the strong Qurʾānic association of creation with the unique power of God, to assert that the seminal figure of David was in fact a polytheist, or to concede the possibility of a triad of God/Word/Spirit in which “threeness” is present without contradicting the divine unicity. In further support of his argument, Abū Rāʾīṭah quotes Ps 107:20, in which salvific and healing power are attributed to the divine Word, and Isaiah 48:16, in which the sending of the prophet Isaiah is attributed to the Spirit of God.

36 Keating 204-205; “Wa ʾān Dāʾūd qāl fi kitābuhu bi-kalīmah Allāh ḥalaqāt al-samāāt bi-rūḥ fīhi kuṣ qāṭīhā. Fa-qad li-fasāṭ Dāʾūd bi-āl-talaṭḥā aqānām ḥīṭu qāl Allāh wa kalimatihu wa rūḥīhu. Fa-hal zadnā fī waṣafūnā ʿālā mā waṣafa Dāʾūd?”

37 See surahs 2:117, 3:47, 6:73, 16:40, 19:35, 36:82, and 40:68, where God’s unique power is described by the formula “Be! and it is” (kun bi-yakūn).
Abū Rā’ījah includes a similar argument in his *Fī ḥabāt dīn āl-Nasraniyyah*. In this treatise, he structures his argument very similarly to the one described above, in that he describes the appearance of the three beings to Abraham (see Gen 18), but in a shorter form and in a more traditionally exegetical way, without the apparent intention to create an Abrahamic *ḥadīth* in support of the Trinity. He then transitions to an argument using the texts of the psalms, but here the argument is less developed, focusing on the divinity of the Word without dealing with the Spirit or establishing a clear God/Word/Spirit triad. Rather than Ps 33:6, he quotes Ps 119:89, writing:

> Then, David, the Prophet, verified [Moses’] statement, that the Word [of God] is a [self-] existent being, true God from true God, not an inconsistent Word, when he said in speaking to his Lord: “You are our eternal Lord, Your existent Word is present in heaven.” And also his statement: “To the Word of God I give praise.” The Word is, then, true God, deserving the praise of David and other creatures.38

The fact that there are two separate arguments here (the argument from Abraham’s experience with the three visitors and the argument from the psalms about the Word’s true divinity) appearing in the same order in the respective treatises, but appearing in a much less complete form than in *Fī al-Talīṭ al-Muqadas* suggests that *Fī ḥabāt dīn āl-Nasraniyyah* is the earlier of the two texts. Although he had apparently not yet developed the presentation of Abraham’s experience as a “Christian *ḥadīth*” nor the God/Word/Spirit triad, he was clearly attempting to adopt a somewhat Islamic mode of

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38 Keating 118-19; “*Tum ān Dāūd āl-nabi ḥaqqaqa qūlūhu bī-ān āl-kalimah dāt qa’īmah alāh ḫaq min alāh ḫaq lā kalām muntaqaq ād yaqūl fī qūlūhu lī-Rabbīhi bi-ānka Rabbuūā ābadān qa’īmah kalimatuka mūjūdah fī āl-samā’. Wa qūlūhu āḏān li-kalimah Allāh āṣbah. Fī-āl-kalimah āḏān alāh ḫaq mustawajab āl-tasbīḥ min Dāūd wa qirūhu min āl-ḥalā’īq.*”
expression since here he refers to David as “the Prophet,” a Qur’ānic rather than biblical title for the Israelite king.

Another significant difference with the argument as it appears here is that Abū Rā’ītah follows the quotations from the psalms with one of his quite rare New Testament citations:

In addition is what the Messiah, may He be praised! said to His disciples and His Apostles when He sent them to proclaim the truth, [and] abolish the invocation of many gods and worship of them, to announce and proclaim the One God, when He, the Praiseworthy, said to them: “Go and announce [the Good News] to all people, and purify them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and I am with you until the end of the world.”39

As already noted, New Testament quotations are rare in Abū Rā’ītah’s apologetical treatises, most probably because of the problem of al-tahrīf, the allegation of which he explicitly acknowledges. One apparent reason for the inclusion of the passage above, in which he quotes Mt 28:19, is to serve as a segue to another kind of scriptural argument in support of Trinitarian doctrine. Having made the two-fold argument from the Old Testament presented above (the experience of Abraham and the testimony of David about the divinity of the Word of God), and then having quoted Jesus mandating the Trinitarian baptismal formula, Abū Rā’ītah is left with an implicit problem of unity between the Old Testament and New Testament witnesses. He seems to interpret his Muslim interlocutor asking something like the following: “We acknowledge that Jesus

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was a prophet and taught true doctrine. How could it be, then, that he taught threeness in 
God, whereas such a thing was never taught by the previous prophets?” In response, Abū 
Rā’iḥah makes an argument based on the concept of divine pedagogy and a gradual 
revelation of the divine nature:

This description [of God as three and one], (as well as other things which 
God, glory be to Him! made known), which has never ceased and does not 
cease [to be true], was hidden from the forefathers because they were 
incapable of perceiving its meaning, was revealed to later [people] so that 
they would be more perfect in knowledge and understanding, and because 
the meaning available to them concerning the teaching and faith in [God] 
became [more] subtle and refined. The disciples preached [the description 
of God] in their dispersion [over the earth] to the ones who followed them 
and among others who described God with His honorable description, and 
by it proved [the disciples’] proclamation to be the true one, having [also] 
the power [to perform] countless other signs and every wonder, as we 
have described.40

This passage is noteworthy for two different reasons, both related to an inherent tension 
in the Qur’ānic text. On the one hand, this passage appears to be one of the cases in 
which Abū Rā’iḥah challenges an Islamic presupposition head-on. Since Islamic belief 
supposes the teaching of every authentic prophet throughout history to be identical, there 
would appear to be no room in Islamic thought for the idea of a gradually unfolding 
divine revelation. According to this conventional Muslim way of thinking, if Trinitarian 
doctrine were correct, it would have been explicitly taught by every prophet in history – 
the Jewish prophets of the Old Testament period, the various prophets sent to Gentile

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40 Keating 119-121; “Fa-dałak ṣaḥā lam tazal wa lā tazāl ka-ṭamāt ‘an āl-āwālīn li-ajazuhum ‘an āl-waqī’a 
‘ālā m’anāhā wa gū ḍalak minā Allāh lihu āl-hamdu āl-ā‘an bihi wa zaharat lī-l-āhīn lī-yakāmluhum fit 
āl-‘alam wa āl-m‘arafah wa li-nā laqaf wa dqū fī ‘āl-m‘anā āl-m‘ajīd fit hum min ‘al-qūl wa āl-‘āmān bihi wa 
itīhum d’ānā āl-‘ulāmīḏ nafsīn minhum man tāb‘ahum wa būn gīrīhum mi-man wașā Allāh lī-‘azīz 
ṣalātiwa bi-hā ḥaqaqīḏ d’awātīhum āl-ṣaḥīḥah āqṭadārān minhum ‘alā āl-‘āti al-gīr maḥṣā “adaduḥā wa al- 
jarā’ī fī kūlūm ka-mā waṣāṣuḥā.”
peoples, Jesus himself, and Muhammad. As previously noted, Abū Rāʾīṭah is noteworthy among the earliest Arabophone Christian theologians for his willingness to flatly deny core Muslim beliefs. Indeed, since he departed in this passage from his usual custom of avoiding New Testament citations, one may well ask why. He appears to have done so specifically for the purpose of introducing this idea of divine pedagogy, in which God gradually revealed Himself over time, first as one and later as three-in-one. Even in this context, Abū Rāʾīṭah characterizes the mission of Jesus in Islamic terms, emphasizing the work of Jesus in revealing God and instructing his followers in authentic worship, rather than emphasizing the sacrificial/redemptive role of Jesus as one might expect from a Christian theologian. Despite this concession to the Islamic conceptual framework, there is no denying that this passage contradicts a key Islamic tenet more directly than most early Christian Arabophone writings.

On the other hand, with his extensive knowledge of the Qur’ānic text, Abū Rāʾīṭah may be playing off a significant event in the history of the nascent Muslim community that was recorded and explained in the Qur’ān itself – namely, the change in Muhammad’s teaching about the qiblah, the proper direction for prayer. During the earliest portion of Muhammad’s preaching career, while still in his native city of Mecca, his adherents had followed the Jewish and Christian custom of facing toward Jerusalem to pray. After the famous exodus to Yathrib, known to later history as Medina, the

\[41\] In this category the Qur’ān mentions by name Hud (11:50) and Saleh (26:142).
Muslims adopted the custom of praying facing toward Mecca. The Qur’ān itself provides a theological explanation for this change:

The fools from among the people will say: “What has turned them away from the qiblah to which they were oriented?” Say: “Unto God are the East and the West. He guides whom he will to a straight path.” Thus We have made you into a balanced community, so that you may be witnesses unto the people, and the Messenger may be a witness unto you. And we made the qiblah to which you were oriented, but only to test those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels. It was a tremendous thing, except to those guided by God…. Turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque. Wherever you may be, turn your faces in its direction.

Although Abū Rā’īḥah does not mention this Qur’ānic passage or the event that it describes explicitly, his knowledge of the Qur’ān may have provided him with the knowledge that a change or development in teaching was not completely unknown in Islamic doctrinal history. Although the change in the direction of prayer may seem a minor matter to the modern Christian, it was in fact a significant event – a “tremendous change,” according to the Qur’ānic text – because it involved a deviation from the traditional Jewish and Christian practice by the nascent Muslim community, and the concomitant emergence of that community as a quite distinct religious tradition. The fact that the Qur’ānic text itself contains this defensive-sounding explanation for the change indicates both its psychological impact on the early Muslim community and the degree to

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which it seemed to be a contradiction of the notion that authentic doctrine, and the authentic worship derived from that doctrine, had never changed in the history of the world. This precedent in Islamic history may explain why Abū Rāʾīṭah is willing to deviate from his usual custom of avoiding New Testament quotations, in that he perhaps felt himself to be on solid ground in arguing for a gradually unfolding revelation.

**Abū Rāʾīṭah’s Use of Philosophical Tools and Arguments**

In addition to his apparently superior of knowledge of the Qur’ān, one of the things that distinguishes Abū Rāʾīṭah from the other Arabophone Christian writers considered so far is his much more extensive use of terminology and concepts from the Greek philosophical tradition, particularly Aristotelianism. Although this distinctive trait of his writings may be explicable in terms of differing traits of personality and background, it may well be explained instead by social and cultural developments in the Arabophone world. Since he seems to have been slightly younger than Theodore Abū Qurrah, there would have been a small chronological difference, perhaps twenty years or so, between the pinnacles of their respective careers. It is worth noting that during this very period Muslim intellectuals in the cosmopolitan parts of the empire, such as Damascus and Baghdad, were becoming more and more interested by and conversant in the concepts and terminology of Greek philosophy. Thus Abū Rāʾīṭah’s extensive use of these concepts may be understood as another method by which he attempts to express and defend Christian doctrine in a way which would have particular resonance with a Muslim audience of his time and place. Furthermore, as will be shown below, Abū Rāʾīṭah
consistently interweaves the use of philosophical concepts with the prominent Muslim doctrine of God’s utter incomparability. He does so in order to pursue an apologetical strategy in which a Trinitarian notion of God is shown to be uniquely compatible with both the demands of philosophy and the core Islamic tenet of God’s uniqueness.

As shown above, Abū Rāʾiṭah considered a Trinitarian understanding of God to be not only orthodox doctrine, but more “subtle and refined” (laṭāʿ wa ḍuq) than the Muslim teaching on God’s oneness. In Frāl-Ṭalāṭ al-Muqadas, he attempts to demonstrate this point using the categories from Aristotle’s Metaphysics. He poses the context of his argument by asking his imagined Muslim interlocutor whether the Muslim assertion that God is one is meant to say that God is one in genus, one in species, or one in number. He then argues that each of these understandings would be deficient: it cannot be said that God is one in genus, because that would indicate the presence of multiple species in God; it cannot be said that God is one in species, because a species is comprised of multiple individuals; and it cannot be said that God is one in number, because this would contradict the Muslim doctrine that nothing is comparable to God, since the created universe is full of things that are one in number.44

Abū Rāʾiṭah then goes on to argue that the key to understanding God’s oneness is another concept taken from Aristotelian philosophy: not the categories of genus, species, and number, but instead the distinction between ousia (jaṭṭ ḥār) and hypostaseis (aqānīm):

We describe Him as one perfect in ousia, not in number, because He is in number (that is, in hypostaseis) three. [This] description of Him is perfect in both ways: When we describe Him as one in ousia, then He is exalted

44 Keating, 172-75.
above all His creatures, be it His perceptible or His intellectually comprehensible creation – nothing is comparable to Him, nothing is mixed with Him, He is simple, without density, incorporeal, His ousia approaches everything closely without blending or mixing.45

By arguing this way Abū Rāʾiṭah achieves a brilliant synthesis of the Aristotelian concepts which were enjoying prominence in the intellectual life of the Arabophone world and the central Islamic doctrine of God’s absolute transcendence. He has already demonstrated that none of the categories from Aristotle’s Metaphysics provides a satisfactory way to categorize God’s oneness because each of them would violate the doctrine of divine incomparability. By understanding God’s oneness as consisting of an absolutely unique substance, Abū Rāʾiṭah is able to affirm both Aristotelian concepts and the divine incomparability, while simultaneously presenting his imagined interlocutor with three uncomfortable choices: to define the divine oneness in terms of an Aristotelian metaphysical category, putting at risk the divine incomparability; rejecting the Aristotelian categories altogether; or admitting that the Christian understanding of God’s oneness was more refined and did not place the doctrine of divine incomparability and the Aristotelian categories in competition with each other.

Throughout his writings, Abū Rāʾiṭah is eager to demonstrate when using the categories of ousia and hypostasis that the name referring to the ousia may be used as a general term or as a particular reference to the individual beings that share the ousia. For example, in Fī ṣūbūt dhī al-Naṣrānīyah, he devotes a lengthy passage to demonstrating that

this is the case when speaking of human persons. He notes that there are two different types of statements one may make that involve naming an *ousia*:

The first … is applied to the *ousia* of the thing … everything that is a component of [the thing] participates in it, without increase or decrease in its measure or its members… as when one says “living” and “human being”. The other [kind of statement describes each individual] member and its differentiation in itself … as when one says “Sa’d” and “Hālid”.

In other words, in the mundane use of language, when one says “human being,” one may be referring to the general concept of a human being, or one may be referring to a particular human being (i.e., a particular participant in the *ousia* of human being). The reason this point is so important to Abū Rā’īṭah is that he wishes to establish as philosophical common ground with the Muslims the idea that individual existents may be legitimately referred to by the name of the *ousia* in which they participate. Since this is the case, when the Christian calls the Father “God,” and calls the Son “God,” and calls the Spirit “God,” he is not thereby affirming the existence of three gods any more than he is affirming the existence of three different “humanities” when he calls Peter “human being,” and calls Paul “human being,” and calls John “human being.”

Abū Rā’īṭah makes this same point about the use of the name of an *ousia* in *Frīḍ-Ṭajasud*. In this treatise, he imagines that his Muslim interlocutor notes that a Christian would affirm the statement that Christ is God, and would also affirm the statement that God is three *hypostaseis*. Therefore, objects the Muslim, the Christian should affirm the statement that Christ is three *hypostaseis*, and yet Christian doctrine

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46 Keating 108-11; “... ʻāḥadhā waqʿa ʻalā jaʿāhar ʻāl-šī’... ʿāl-mašṭarak ūhī ʻal-jamī‘a ʻal-mutajazzā minhu bī-lā zādah wa lā naqṣān ʻalā qudrah wa taqtiʿahu.... ka-qūl ʻal-qāʿ ʻil bī wa ānsān.”
affirms that Christ is but one of the three hypostaseis, which would be appear to be contradictory. Abū Rāʾīṭah counters this objection based on the same two-fold usage of the name of an ousia:

According to us, the name “God” is [both] general and specific. The three are in general divinity and each one of them is the same as the other in quiddity, just as we have described concerning gold – all of it may be characterized as gold, even the smallest piece of it is also gold. However, we mean [here] that the incarnated One is divine, that is, one of the hypostaseis, and He is the Son, the living Word of God, eternally divine, not three hypostaseis. 47

Abū Rāʾīṭah anticipates that this line of argument - that God may be considered one in his transcendent and incomparable ousia but three in his hypostaseis - may be dismissed by his Muslim interlocutor as simply inconsistent:

If they refuse this description … and say … the one whose ousia is other than his hypostaseis, and whose hypostaseis are something other than his ousia cannot be described because it is contradictory … it should be said to them: Have we described [God’s] ousia as other than His hypostaseis as you have described? … We only describe [God] as unified in ousia and divided in the hypostaseis, and [God’s] ousia is His hypostaseis, and His hypostaseis are His ousia, as with the placement of three lights in one house.48

Although helpful in countering the posited Muslim objection, this explanation may be somewhat disconcerting for the modern Christian reader, perhaps at first reading even calling into question Abū Rāʾīṭah’s Trinitarian orthodoxy. There are two separate issues


48 Keating 184-85; “Fa-ān ānkarāh ḥādāh ʿal-safāh ... wa qāḥā ān ... man kān jāḥar gīr āḏānīmīhī wa āḏānīmūhī gīr jāḥarīhī lām yakun fī al-safāh muṭṭalāḥ ... yuqāl li-hum āḥāl wasāfnī jāḥarīhī gīr āḏānīmūhī ka-mā wasāfīmūhī? ... Ānāmā wasāfnī ʿanahu muṭṭalāḥ fī al-jaʿūḥar muṭṭalāḥ fī al-ʿāḏānīm wa jāḥarīhī huī āḏānīmūhī wa āḏānīmūhī hum jāḥarīhī bi-manzīlāh ʿaḏwāʾ ṭalaḥsh fī bī wāḥīd.”
with the passage as quoted here. The first is primarily a problem of translation. The Arabic word that Keating has here translated “divided” - *mutaraq* - should instead be translated “differentiated.” The second issue has to do with the relationship between the *jaūhar* and the *aqānim* as here presented. Taken out of context, it might appear that Abū Rā’īṭah’s description asserts that the two are identical, collapsing any meaningful distinction between them. On the contrary, since his entire argument here depends upon making a meaningful distinction between the *jaūhar* and the *aqānim*, it would make no sense for him to establish an identity between them. The broader context of his argument, together with his analogy of three lights placed together in a house, demonstrate that when he writes, “[God’s] *ousia* is His *hypostaseis*, and His *hypostaseis* are His *ousia,*” he means that God’s *jaūhar* is common to all three of the *aqānim*, and the *aqānim* exist in no state other than that of sharing a single *jaūhar*.

Abū Rā’īṭah’s further explanation of this relationship is important in revealing the degree to which he is willing to draw upon contemporaneous Muslim debates about the divine attributes and how they may be understood in conjunction with God’s oneness: “The *ousia* of the Godhead is the three *hypostaseis*, and the three *hypostaseis* of the *ousia* of the Godhead are the *ousia*. For the difference between the *ousia* [and] the single *hypostasis* is like the difference between a whole thing and one of its properties….⁴⁹ The term Abū Rā’īṭah uses here, rendered by Keating as “property” is *ḥūṣṣah*, rather than *ṣifah*, the term that is usually translated as “attribute.” But it is important to note that Abū

Rāʾīṯah argues that the divine jaṯḥar can be understood as the “sum total” of three distinct properties, with each property being one of the āqānūm. This fact is obscured by the fact that he then goes on to present a conventional account of the Trinity that would be quite at home in Western theological texts, in which each hypostasis is distinguished by a property unique to it: “the Father by His Fatherness, and the Son by His Sonship, and the Spirit by His Procession….⁵⁰ But a careful reading of the text shows that this passage is inconsistent and that Abū Rāʾīṯah uses the term ḫāṣṣah in two different ways. The first usage asserts that the jaṯḥar is equivalent to the three āqānūm taken collectively, and that each of the āqānūm is the expression or instantiation of a particular divine property. Thus emerges an account of the Trinitarian persons as three incommensurable divine properties, clearly distinct because each is different from the others, and with the ousia being the equivalent of these three incommensurable properties taken together. Abū Rāʾīṯah points out that this definition of the divine ousia is analogous to the definition of the human ousia, which can be expressed as “living, having the faculty of speech, mortal.”⁵¹ In his clearly different second usage of the term ḫāṣṣah, Abū Rāʾīṯah refers not to a property which is one part of the divine ousia, but to the relational property that characterizes each person of the Trinity. Clearly he does not intend this second usage of to be identical to the first, for then he would be defining the divine ousia as “having Fatherhood, having Sonship, and proceeding,” which would be a definition of what is common to the persons by the very properties that distinguish them. Significantly, Abū

⁵⁰ Keating 186-89; “ʾal-Āb bi-abwätih wāʾl-ʾIbn bi-binātih wāʾl-Rāʾ bi-ḥarājihī….”

⁵¹ Keating 188-89; “ḥī-manṭiq māʾī.”
Rā‘iṭah asserts that there is no other existing thing which has this kind of relationship between jaūhar and āqānīm. By doing so, he both proactively responds to an anticipated objection that his account does not align with common experience about things and affirms the Islamic doctrine that there is nothing that is like God.

Later in the text, Abū Rā‘iṭah again seems to approach the contemporaneous Muslim debates about the divine attributes and their relationship to the divine unicity when he responds to an imagined question from a Muslim interlocutor about the specific number of āqānīm in the Godhead:

Now if they say: “What prompts you to describe God … as three hypostaseis rather than ten or twelve [sic, should be translated as “twenty”], or fewer than this or more?”, it should be said to them: Truly we do not describe Him as three hypostaseis instead of one ousia. These three hypostaseis are one ousia in all aspects. It is not possible to find an equivalent or a likeness for this…. As we have already explained, God possesses knowledge and spirit, and the knowledge of God and His spirit are permanent and perpetual, not ceasing. For it is not permitted in a description of God … that He be described in His eternity without knowledge or spirit.52

This passage is in important one for understanding Abū Rā‘iṭah’s approach, not only because he reasserts that the jaūhar is the āqānīm and vice versa, but because he identifies the second and third of the āqānīm as knowledge and spirit. Spirit is not used here as the proper name of one of the persons of the Trinity, but as a quality or characteristic indicative of life and vitality. The association that he makes between divine

52 Keating 196-97; “Fa-ān qiñā mā ̣ā lādī d’aḵum ilā taṣuṯūn Allāh ... āqānīm ṣalatūn dīn ‘āṣarah āū ‘āṣīn āū āqal mīn ṣalak āū ̣ākṭar yāqīl li-hum ānā lam taṣaḥūhu ṣalatūh āqānīm dīn jaūhar wâhid. Fa-haḏa hi il-ṣalatūh āqānīn jauḥar wâḥid fī jami’a ̣ānāḥ‘a hi mā sabīl ilā ān yījâd li-ḏalak nażîr wa lā maḏâl.... Ka-mā ḍakarna ān Allāh dī ‘alam wa râḥ wa ‘alam Allāh wa râḥlu dā’imān qā’īmān lam yazalā. Li-ʿānāhlu lā yajūz fī ʿilāh Allāh ... ān yakūn muṣṭālān fī ʿazalatul bî-lā ʿalam wa lā râḥ.”
attributes and the three *aqānim* is even clearer in the original Arabic, because the phrase that Keating has chosen to translate “God possesses knowledge and spirit” might be more precisely rendered as “God is the possessor of knowledge and spirit.” Furthermore, the term “possessor” (*gūr*) is a relatively complex and multi-layered Arabic term that depending upon context may be translated lord, owner, or head. Thus it is itself indicative of a particular attribute, that of headship or dominion, and is also a term which appears in the Qur’ān in reference to God and thus would be familiar to a Muslim reader.\(^{53}\) Thus Abū Rā’īṭah draws upon an understanding of divine attributes that Christians and Muslims hold in common to present an argument for Trinitarian doctrine in which the Godhead is expressed as a triad of dominion, knowledge, and spirit. Each of these attributes or properties may be understood as distinct from the others since no two of them are commensurable. Taken together they may be, according to Abū Rā’īṭah’s thinking, understood as an approximate expression of the divine *ousia*, just as the human *ousia* is expressed as “living, having the faculty of speech, and mortal.” One must say that these three properties together constitute only an approximate definition of the divine *ousia* because, as is clear from Abū Rā’īṭah’s assertion that nothing is like God, He has these attributes in a way that is different from any of His creatures.

Another important area of exploration in *Frā-l-Tālīf al-Muqadas* in which Abū Rā’īṭah draws upon the philosophical tradition is his consideration of analogy (*al-qās*) and the way in which analogies may be made between God and created things. This is an

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\(^{53}\) See, for example, surah 40:15, where God is referred to as Lord of the Throne (*gūr al-‘arād*), surah 51:28, where He is called Lord of Power (*gūr al-qābah*), or surah 57:21, where He is referred to as Lord of Favor (*gūr al-fadlah*).
area in which he quite self-consciously draws upon the philosophical debates taking place among the Muslim intellectuals of his day, for he mentions them in a general way when he introduces the subject of analogy:

According to the *ahl ar-ra’y*, the analogy is limited to what is similar in one way, for the most part there is difference. If the analogy bears resemblance to what is compared in every manner, and there is no difference in any [part] of it, then there would be a question as to whether it is a sound analogy.

In *Fraḥāt dīn al-Naṣrāniah*, Abū Rā’īṭah articulates a second limitation on the use of analogy in theological discourse which also draws upon Islamic thought. He begins by noting that any analogue lies at some rational distance from the thing to which the analogy is made. But then he points out that this problem is greatly compounded when the thing for which an analogy is sought is God Himself, due to the ontological chasm that lies between Him and His creation:

The term “analogy” is used by those having knowledge besides for the exalted predication of God … for every attribute predicated of spirits and corporeal beings in general. And if our goal is to present the analogy … then effort and intense [care] in its correct [application] are necessary for us … on account of its distance from the things that are compared to it in all of its relations…. For that for which the analogy is sought is above every analogy found among what is intelligible and perceptible, as we have [already] described.

54 The phrase which Keating has here left untranslated literally means “the people of opinion.” The text provides no clue as to whether Abū Rā’īṭah has in mind any particular school of thought. Keating notes that the phrase “is probably a general reference to the group of Islamic scholars who were known for their extensive use of reason and opinion.”


56 Keating, 104-105; “Fa-ḥad al-qāṣ al-must’amal man qār al-m’arufah faḍālān ‘an šī‘ah Allāh … al-m’arifah ‘an kul šī‘ah nūṣāfah al-ʾarūkh wa al-ʾāṣān jamī‘ān. Wa aḍ gaḍirunā ḏakar al-qāṣ ... wajab ‘alnā al-ʾaṭihād wa al-mubālikah fi taṣlīḥhu ... āstās’aba li-b’adhu min al-āṣā’ al-muqāṣ ilhi kul
So, in summary, Abū Rā’iṭah describes three considerations in the use of analogy: first, that an analogue may be expected to be like the thing to which an analogy is made in only one way, but different from it in many ways; second, that the conceptual distance between the two means that great care must be taken in developing analogies; and third, that God transcends comparison to any created thing that is apprehended by the senses or even by the intellect, such that the first two principles are intensified for any analogy that is used to describe Him. These principles are an important aspect of Abū Rā’iṭah’s apologetical method, since the very question of divine analogy was controversial in Islamic thought. Only by emphasizing these principles drawn from Islamic thought about analogy does he establish sufficient common ground with his intended Muslim audience for the Trinitarian analogies that he explores in the text.

A particularly prominent analogy in *Fī al-Tālūt al-Muqadas* is Abū Rā’iṭah’s comparison of the three Trinitarian hypostaseis to three lamps in a house. He returns to this analogy a number of times in the treatise at hand, comparing the single light emanating from the three lamps to the divine ousia. He imagines that his Muslim interlocutor may challenge such an analogy on the basis that the three lamps suggest three different sources, such that the oneness of God is compromised by the analogy, even if the existence of the hypostaseis themselves is granted. Abū Rā’iṭah’s response to this objection is built on Islamic sources in two ways. First, following the principle articulated above about the parameters of an analogy, he argues that in order to be a sound analogy,

ānḥā’iḥi... Ān āl-multimas li-hu qaṣān y’alā ʿalā kul qaṣā mājūd min ʿāl-mʿaqūl wa āl-mahsūs ka-mā waṣaf nā."
the two things being compared need only be alike in a single way, and indeed it is anticipated that they will be different in more ways than they are alike. Thus the analogy between the Trinity and the three lamps placed together in a house is apt, in that there is a single point of correlation between the two: the existence of a shared *ousia* which cannot be differentiated among the three existing things. In fact, in order for the imagined Muslim objection to be valid, the Trinity and the three lamps would have to be alike in every way, which in turn would violate the Muslims’ own principle about how analogies work. The second way in which Abū Rā’īyah’s response draws upon Islamic thinking is, once again, the principle that since God is utterly transcendent, one need not apply to him the same principles that one would apply to created things:

> If God … were a luminous and perceptible light … each one of them would be in need of a cause from which it emerges, just as it is necessary that the perceptible lights have sources. [However,] when we briefly described the lights, which are above all of the senses and knowledge, we are not compelled to describe each one of them as having a cause. Rather, one of them is the cause of the other two, without beginning and without time.57

The term that Keating has here chosen to translate “knowledge” (*āl-‘aql*) would be better translated “intellection” or “process of cognition.” By noting that the three “lights” being described in the analogy – i.e., the three divine *hypostaseis* – are beyond anything that one perceives with the senses and beyond the normal processes of intellection, Abū Rā’īyah affirms a core Islamic tenet. But he also undercuts with a single stroke any objections which would be based on differences between God and perceptible things.

57 Ibid., “Fa-lu ān Allāh ... nūrān wa dā‘ maḥṣūs li-kān ... kul wāḥid minhā maḥtājān ilā ‘alīthi yahraj āl-ḏū‘ā‘ āl-maḥṣūsah ālatī ḥū maḥtājāh ilā āl-mā‘ādana. Fa-‘ānā ʿalīṣār waṣafū ʿl-‘aql li-ṣīḥā’ ʿalātaḥ ‘an āl-hā‘ās wa āl-‘aql jamīʿān la hā ṭūrī ilā ān naṣal il-kul wāḥid minhā ʿalāh baḥ ḥadhumā ʿalāh āl-ṣūnūn bi-lā bādī wa lā zamān.”
Abū Rāʾīḥah follows this argument with three other analogies, answering multiple anticipated objections along the way about whether these analogies deviate from the doctrine of God’s unicity. In so doing, he continues to anchor his Trinitarian argument in the two principles articulated above: the philosophical position that an analogy works by establishing a single point of similarity between two things, while accepting the fact that there are numerous points of difference between them; and the Islamic tenet that, because God is utterly beyond His creation, any attribute that is ascribed to Him is held by Him in a different way than the same attribute would be held by one of His creatures. The first of these analogies is the comparison of the Trinity to the triad of Adam, Eve, and Abel, in which the first entity is the source and origin of both the second entity and the third entity, but in a different way in each case:

The description of the property of one of them is not the description of the property of the other, because Adam is the begetter and not the begotten, and Abel is the begotten and not the begetter, and Eve is the one who proceeds from Adam … not the begetter or the begotten. Each one of these is inseparable from that which differentiates it from the other, yet the ousia is not different, as we have explained. And Adam and Abel and Eve are a mystery (Arabic sirr) for the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, to the extent that it is possible for what is perceptible and visible to be a mystery for that which is neither perceptible, nor visible.

58 The basic meaning for this Arabic term is “secret.” Like the word mystery, it can also be used to mean “sacrament.”

59 Keating 188-89; “Wa līsā sīlah ḥāṣah ʿahadhumā sīlah ḥāṣah al-āḥar li-īna Ḍām wālād lā wulīda wa Ḍābīl wulīda lā wālād wa Ḍāʿ āṣāni mahā Ṭām lā wālād wa lā wulīda. Lazam kul wāḥid minhum ḥāṣatīhā ālātī bihā yiḥālīl li-l-āḥar min gīr ān yūkūn al-jaʿithār muḥtaılıl kumā ḍakarna. Wa Ḍām wa Ḍābīl wa Ḍāʿ sīr al-ʾAb wa al-Ibna wa Ṭīḥ al-Quḍas bi-qādar mā yummīn al-maḥsūs al-maḥṣar ān yūkūn sirīn li-mā līsā bi-maḥṣūs wa lā maḥṣur.” It is perhaps worth noting that the term Keating has translated “description” here is sīlah, the same term that is sometimes translated “attribute.” So Abū Rāʾīḥah is here speaking of the distinctions among the three divine hypostaseis in the language of attributes, although exploring the implications of divine attributes in terms of the Islamic debates over unicity is not his primary purpose here.
Abū Rāʾīṭah anticipates that a Muslim may object that this analogy suggests three gods. Presumably the basis for this objection would be the fact that the ousia, although shared, is held by three distinct, individual beings. He answers this objection by articulating four different ways in which the Adam/Eve/Abel triad differs from the three persons of the Trinity. First, the three human persons had lives that were chronologically defined, with different beginnings, endings, and life spans. Second, they occupied different physical spaces in which they underwent bodily growth. Third, they were unequal in power. Fourth, they experienced interior conflict. By elaborating this list of considerable differences, Abū Rāʾīṭah brings his analogy in line with the two principles of Islamic thought articulated earlier. Since it is possible to identify a similarity between the Trinity and the Adam/Eve/Abel triad (a shared ousia common to three distinct individuals, one of whom is the source of the other two, but in two different ways), but a much longer list of differences, the comparison meets the definition of analogy that he adopted from Islamic thinkers of his time. By articulating the ways in which the divine persons occupy the relations of begetting, being begotten, and proceeding quite differently from the human persons, Abū Rāʾīṭah emphasizes that God is far beyond the limitations of his creatures and unable to be described fully in conventional human language, despite the usefulness of some analogies.

Abū Rāʾīṭah offers two other analogies: the triad of the soul, the intellect, and the faculty of speech, as well as the familiar triad of the sun, its light, and its heat. He presents these two analogies in the context of replying to a proposed Muslim objection that continuity (āṭīṣāḥ) and division (āṭiarāq) cannot be simultaneously present in the
same thing. Rather, continuity precedes and is ended by division, or else division is dissolved into continuity. Abū Rāʾīṭah responds by pointing out that although such is frequently the case, even in created things continuity and division can exist simultaneously in the same thing:

Now, what do you say about the soul and the intellect and the faculty of speech? Are they continuous or are they divided, or do they have both attributes, I mean continuity and division? Was the soul ever separate from the intellect and the faculty of speech, or one of these two from the others, then joined [together] later? Or is it not the case that their continuity and division [occurred] together from their very beginning, [so that] one of them did not precede the other? … Tell us about the sun and its light and its heat: is it continuous, one part with another part, or is it separate and not continuous? Or does it have both attributes together …? Now, does its continuity precede its division, or does its division precede its continuity? Or did it have both states together from the beginning …?

As with his other Trinitarian analogies, Abū Rāʾīṭah is primarily interested here in showing that the Christian way of understanding God’s oneness fits into both the definition of analogy affirmed by his Muslim interlocutors and with the idea that God is ultimately beyond creaturely comparisons. Indeed, he anticipates that the triads of soul/intellect/speech and sun/light/heat may inspire in his readers the idea that the three āqānām of which he writes are parts of God, and is careful to dismiss such an understanding as incompatible with the concept of analogy that he is using. In reference to these two triads, he writes that “… we only connect them analogously because of the
state of their simultaneous continuity and division, [where] one of them does not precede the other. And we have said before this point … that an analogy bears resemblance [to what is compared] in some aspect, but the difference is predominant."61 Thus the working definition of analogy is preserved, and even more importantly, Abū Rāʾiḥah makes clear that the differences between the Trinity and these triads of created things are greater than the single point of similarity that he is expressing.

The two light-based analogies used by Abū Rāʾiḥah in Frāʾal-Taʾā al-Muqadas also appear in his other treatises. In Frāʾaṭbār dīn al-Naṣrānīh, for example, he uses the analogy of three lamps placed together in a house to demonstrate that even among created things, it is sometimes possible to assert without contradiction that a given entity is simultaneously both “one” and “three”:

If they [i.e., the Muslims] say: “It is one particular, that is, counted as one, not three, in light”, we say: We do not count the light of all of them to [a single] one of the lamps which, in emitting its light, does not have [anything] particular apart from the [other] lamps. Nor do we see that its light takes something away, or deprives the other lamps of their [own] emission [of light]…. Now if they say: “[It is] three [lights]”, we say … There is no difference among them in the light and the illumination, and no separation in the place [of the light]. Rather, what is necessary for light is proper [to them] in all of their states. So they should know that the light described is one and three together [simultaneously]: one with regard to the quiddity of the light and its ousia, and three with regard to the number applicable to the being of the particular lamps.62

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61 Keating 194-95; “... Āṭaḥaddāhā qāsān li-ḥāl ʿāṭiṣāluḥā wa ʿaṭārāqthā jamaʿaʿān mʿān la m ṭaqaḍām āṭaḥaddāhā āl-ṣāḥar. Wa qad qulnā fi al-qās qabl al-muʿāfʿaʿān mā āṣbah fi bʿad waṣūhhu wa kān al-āṣḥulāf ḍalīlān ʿalahu.”

62 Keating 104-107; “Faʿ-īn qalāla ḍaʿī ṭāḥid ḍaṣṣah āl mʿādīl wāḥid lā ṭaḥṣal ḍī al-dīʿ qulnā lam nʿād al-dīʿ kūluḥli-bʿad al-muṣābīh al-ʿāqī ṭā ṭāḥṣal fi ṭāḥṣal dīʿ hu ḍaṣṣah gūhū min al-muṣābīh ṭaṣnā nāraḥu yugādar dīʿ hu ʿān wa lā yuṣḥal ʿūyūhū niʿ al-muṣābīh ʿaṣṣū ṭaṣnū ṭaṣnū... Faʿ-īn qalāla ṭaḥṣal qulnā ... līs būḥum ṣāḥulāf ḍī al-dīʿ wa ʿāl-anʿāraḥ wa lā ṭaḥṣal ḍī al-makān. Bah ḍaʿī mūlāʾimāh fi jāmʿa ʾalīṭaḥā al-muṣṭawajahā bī-ḥāl al-dīʿ lī-yʿalāṣā al-ʿaṣal-dīʿ al-muṣāf wāḥid wa ṭaḥṣal jamʿaʿān mʿān. ʿĀmā wā ṭaḥṣal ṣāḥulāf al-dīʿ wa ṭaḥṣal jāḥarūḥu wa ṭaḥṣal ṭaḥṣal ṣāḥulāf ḍī ʿaṣal al-muṣābīh al-ḥaṣ...”
In this somewhat more elaborated use of the three lamps analogy, Abū Rāʾīṭah emphasizes the equality in worth, dignity, and power of the three Trinitarian hypostases by noting that none of the lamps diminishes the illumination of the other two. This is also the analogy that Abū Rāʾīṭah seems to have felt came closest to the reality of the divine life, since he notes that there is no spatial separation in the place illuminated by the lamps, whereas elsewhere he had given spatial and physical separation as the main difference between the Trinitarian persons and the Adam/Eve/Abel triad: “They [i.e., the Trinitarian hypostases] are not like corporeal things nor like bodies, which are separated and divided, since they do not have a body nor flesh.” 63 Perhaps the lack of this clear difference based on spatial separation is why Abū Rāʾīṭah, at the conclusion of the passage cited above, felt the need to emphasize in a somewhat doxological fashion that “[for him] there is no likeness nor measure: [God is] one in ousia, eternity, knowledge, power, honor, majesty…..” 64

In this same treatise, Abū Rāʾīṭah uses the sun/light/heat triad as a Trinitarian analogy, and quite significantly for the purpose at hand, combines this use of analogy with the concept of attributes. In this remarkable passage, he clearly suggests some identity or correlation between attributes and āqānīmr.

[It is] that which is called “one sun” because of its genuine existence and uniqueness in its singularity, a being, one ousia, comprehending three

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63 Keating 114-15; “Līsat ka-āl-āṣām wa lā āl-āṣād āl-mutabāmah āl-mutafāraqah ād ḫā lisat bi-jasad wa lā jasam.”

64 Keating 106-107; “... Bi-ān lā sībih wa lā maqdār wāḥid fī āl-jāthar wa āl-ʿāzalīn wa āl-ʿalam wa āl-qiṣāh wa āl-majād wa āl-ʿazmāh....”
known properties, that is, the sun disc which is described with two substantial attributes, which are the light and the heat, since [the sun] does not cease to be described with the two [attributes], in that it does not cease to generate the light, [which is] generated simultaneously with the existence of the sun disc … without one of [the attributes] having existed prior to the other two.\(^\text{65}\)

In the account presented here, there is a clear distinction between properties (\(hūāṣ\)) and attributes (\(ṣiṭā\)), since there are three of the former and only two of the latter. The sun itself is presented as ontologically prior, with the light and the heat generated by it described as its attributes. Certainly the analogy of the three lamps and the analogy set forth in this passage are mutually contradictory, since in the former analogy it is not the case that two of the lamps are attributes of the other. But the fact that these analogies work in different ways would not make either or both of them untenable, according to the principles of analogy that Abū Rā’īṭah himself sets forth. As the texts themselves suggest, if the mutual incompatibility of the two analogies had been raised as objectionable, he would have replied that each of the analogues is like the Trinity in one way but different from it in many others, and that in any case God is ultimately beyond all of these comparisons to created things.

Abū Rā’īṭah makes another important point about analogy and its use in describing God in \(Fī āl-Ṭalū āl-Muqadas\). He argues that the assertion of divine oneness itself establishes a numerical analogy between God and the many created things which can be described as “one.” Furthermore, because the oneness that Christians ascribe to

\(^{65}\) Keating 112-13; “Āl-m’aqūl ʿalā ʿabah wajūdūhā wa ʿanfarādūhā bi-wihdānātihā šamsīn wāhdah dāt jāhil wāhid madrūkah jalaṭā ḥūāṣ m’ārūfah ʿā’ani ʿal-qūrṣ ʿālgī ḥūā ʿal-mūṣīl bi-ʿal-ṣiṭān āl-bāṭārātūn ʿalātī humā ʿal-nūr wa ʿal-ḥārārah mungu lam tazzal bi-humā muṣūlān ānahu lam yazal wālād ʿal-nūr miṭlādān bi-wajūd ʿal-qūrṣ ... bi-lā zamān sābiq li-wajūd aḥadhumā qabl ġarīhī.”
God involves the “subtle and refined” distinctions that Abū Rā‘īṭah has made using the Aristotelian metaphysical categories, this oneness is unique to God and therefore fulfills the Islamic dictum that “nothing is like Him” in a way that the oneness ascribed by Muslims does not:

What do you say about one human being, and one king? Is not each one of them a single [individual]? Which comparison is more important than what you describe? As for the Christians, they reject any comparison [of creatures] and likeness with [God] when they describe Him as three hypostaseis and one ousia…. When it is found that He is three hypostaseis and one ousia, then His description is above every comparison and likeness [with creatures], because it is not possible that a single ousia [having] three hypostaseis … exists in creation.66

By arguing in this way, Abū Rā‘īṭah uses an apologetical stratagem that has already been noted in the authors previously considered: namely, inverting an argument made by the Muslims such that it becomes an argument for the Trinitarian understanding of God. In this case, the idea is that Muslims pay greater honor to the divine unicity by asserting not only that God is one, but that He is so utterly unique and transcendent that there is nothing among His creatures to which he can be compared. Following on this assertion, the charge is made that Christians diminish the divine unicity and transcendence by a doctrine that implies the existence of three gods, or of a God comprised of three parts. Here Abū Rā‘īṭah argues, contrarily, that merely describing God as one makes every individual thing in the created universe an analogue to Him, and that in having one jaūhar without further distinction or refinement, the divine uniqueness is compromised.

Far from diminishing the divine transcendence, only a Trinitarian understanding of God preserves His utter uniqueness.

Another important philosophical concept that Abū Rāʾīḥah brings to bear in his defense of Trinitarian doctrine is that of causality. In *Fiʿl-Talūg al-Muqadas*, he imagines his Muslim interlocutor pointing out that, since the Christians refer to each of the three *āqānim* of the Trinity as “Lord” and “God”, then they should have no objection to speaking of “three Lords” or “three Gods.” In response, he argues that this line of reasoning would be correct if each of the *āqānim* could be considered a cause, but that it fails as a critique of Christian doctrine because only one of the *āqānim* can be considered a cause, while the other two are caused by the first. He emphasizes that this relationship of causality is a key aspect of understanding the Trinity correctly:

If it were the case that the books describe each one of the *hypostaseis* as Lord and God, without bringing any of the *hypostaseis* into relation with another, and it were necessary that each one of them is a cause, not caused, then what you have described is permitted and right. However, if it is true that the Son and the Spirit are from the Father, then there are not many causes, [nor are] three gods or lords ascribed [to God].

As with his treatment of analogies described above, Abū Rāʾīḥah here rather ingeniously blends two different principles, both of which are calculated to appeal to his Muslim audience. While causality is taken from the philosophical categories that were of such appeal to Muslim intellectuals of his day, the emphasis on God as the origin and cause of all things – including God the Father being the origin and cause even of the other two

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67 Keating, 208-209: “Laū kānat al-kutub mʿa wasafiḥā kul wāhid min al-āqānim rabhān wa ḥālan lun tuṣūra bʿad al-āqānim ilā bʿad wa wajhāt ān kul wāhid minha ʿalah la mʿāhil li-kān mā wasafiḥum jāʿizān mustaqīmān. Fa-āmā ād ḥaq ān al-ʾIbn wa al-Rūḥ min al-ʿĀb lam taṣur ʿallān kaṭīrah lam tunsība ḥālah jālataḥ wa la āribāb.”
hypostaseis of the Trinity – aligns well with the Muslim religious sensibility that carefully delineates ontologically between God and all else. Thus his argument from causality constitutes a two-pronged appeal to his Muslim readership. Like other apologetical stratagems used by the Arabophone Christian theologians reviewed here, the use of this argument seems designed to place the Muslim interlocutor in the awkward position of choosing between an admission that the Trinitarian understanding of God accords well with philosophical principles, or else dismissing the particular philosophical principle at hand – causality – as relevant for a discussion of God. The latter position would hardly be tenable, of course, due to the Islamic emphasis on this very attribute of God, as the origin of all.

Abū Rā’iḥah imagines that the introduction of the idea of causality into the discussion may prompt an objection from his Muslim interlocutor based on the chronological relationship between a thing and its cause. The objection is that causality and simultaneity are mutually exclusive, such that the Christian may either affirm that one of the āqānūm is the cause of the other two, and therefore exists prior to them, or else affirm that the three are co-existent, in which case none of them can be the cause of the others:

If the Father is the cause of the Son and the Spirit, as you have described, then it ought to be the case that the Father [exists] before the one of which He is the cause. And if the Father does not [exist] before the Son and the Spirit, and they exist eternally together, then one of [the hypostaseis] is not [more] worthy than the others of being the cause of [the others]. And your teaching that one is the cause of two is false.68

68 Keating 210-11; “Ar kān ʾāl-ʾĀb ʾālah ʾāl-Ibn wa ʾal-Rūḥ ka-mā wasaʾfum yanbaṭi ʾān yakūn ʾāl-ʾĀb ʾaqdūm mi-man hā ʾal-huʾ ʾālah. Fa-ʾan lam yakūn ʾāl-ʾĀb ʾaqdūm min ʾal-Ibn wa ʾal-Rūḥ wa atājābūm ānḥā
Although Abū Rāʾīḥah does not explicitly compare this argument to the one previously described based on continuity and division, the two arguments are in fact exactly parallel. In both cases, the imagined Muslim interlocutor detects what appear to be mutually contradictory attributes in the relations among the Trinitarian āqānūn as they are described by Christians. In both cases, the apparent contradiction arises because the Muslim assumes a necessary chronological component for the particular relations being described. Abū Rāʾīḥah’s awareness that the two are largely parallel cases is shown by the fact that he responds to both objections using the same analogy, that of the triad of the sun, its heat, and its light:

Some causes, such as you have described, [exist] before those [things] for which they are the cause. However, this is not as you have described with all causes. You see the sun, and it is the cause of its rays and its heat. In the same way fire is the cause of its light and its heat. And it is never lacking its light and its heat. The teaching about the Son and the Spirit from the Father is the same as this: [they are] two [things which are] eternal from [something] eternal, although the Father does not anticipate them.69

Abū Rāʾīḥah’s response subtly points out that the erroneous assumption in both objections is the inclusion of a chronological component. He notes that even with some created things such as the sun and fire, simultaneity and causality may cohere in the same relations between things, just as division and continuity may cohere. But his inclusion of

āzalān m’aān fā-līsā b’ādūhā āqān bi-mustāḥaq ān yakūn ‘alah li-b’ād dīn b’ād. Bāṣala qūlukum bi-ān ‘ala h āl-āqānūn wāḥid.”

the adjective eternal (āzād) subtly reminds the reader that the subject at hand – God – is beyond all chronological considerations. Abū Rāʾīṭah’s position might be stated as: even with the more rarefied of created things, a relation of causality does not necessarily imply a relation of precedence; therefore, how much more is this the case with God Himself, who transcends all of the temporal limitations associated with His creatures. Here, then, is another use of Abū Rāʾīṭah taking a key Islamic affirmation about God – his eternality – and turning it to his own apologetical purposes.

In a similar passage in Frāṭḥāt din al-Naṣrānī, Abū Rāʾīṭah suggests that these two divine attributes – eternality and causality – when taken together, suggest the possibility of multiple āqānīm in the Godhead:

As for the relationship of the Son and the Spirit to the Father, it is a substantial, unceasing relationship, because the Father is the eternal cause of the Son and the Spirit, for they are from Him (in spite of the difference of their properties) He is not from them, without being earlier or later [in time], two perfects from a perfect, two eternals from an eternal, because of the identity of each one of them with the others in every way with their ousia….⁷⁰

In other words, if God is eternal, and God is also a cause, then the possibility exists for there to be an eternal relation (āḍāfah) of causality. Although Abū Rāʾīṭah does not make the conclusion explicit, it is clear from his presentation that if no such eternal relation of causality actually exists, then God would have an unfulfilled potentiality, a state of things which he and his Muslim interlocutor would agree is impossible. Since, then, God is eternally a cause, there must be multiple āqānīm in the Godhead, which means that only

a Trinitarian account of God would satisfy the logical requirements of divine eternality and divine causality. Furthermore, by his clever use of the term “two eternals” (āzāli‘m), Abū Rā‘īṭah draws directly from the contemporaneous Muslim debates about the divine attributes and whether the positing of such attributes implied multiple eternal existents.

Abū Rā‘īṭah addresses another Muslim objection that is related to causality, although in this argument the term cause (‘alāh) does not appear. Rather, the argument speaks of a thing which has its origin in another thing, a relation that encompasses the notion of causality but also establishes closeness between the two things that goes beyond mere causality. The argument is that when a thing has its origin in another thing, the second thing is either a part of the first thing, or an operation of the first thing. This being the case, the second thing is not entitled to the name of the whole thing:

Either the Son and the Spirit are a part of the being of the Father when you describe them as being from Him, or they are His operation. How, if you say that they are a part of Him, then the part does not deserve the name of the perfect [whole], that is, “God”. And likewise, if [they] are his operation, in the same way they are not deserving of the name “God”, because it is the name of the perfect whole.71

In responding to this argument, Abū Rā‘īṭah makes use once again of Aristotelian metaphysics and argues that a thing may be legitimately described as a “part” by being part of a number (and therefore a perfect whole in itself) or by being part of a perfect whole. He asserts that each of the divine āqānām fits the first of these definitions, because each of them is one out of three. By answering the objection in this way, he is able to

71 Keating 212-13; “Āmā ‘an yakān āl-Ibu wa āl-Rūb b‘ad dār āl-Āb ād waṣāli‘umāhā minhu wa āmā f‘āluhu. Fa-‘ān qultum ‘anahā b‘adahu lam tastaḥaq āl-b‘ad tusmī‘ah āl-kāmāl ār ālah wa ān kānā f‘āluhu fa-ka-dalak ār‘ān lam yastaḥaq ism āl-ālah b‘ānahu ism āl-kāmāl.”
affirm the philosophical common ground (the metaphysical definition of “part”) and yet simultaneously affirm that God has no “parts” in the sense of divisions and thereby preserve an understanding of God’s oneness that his Muslim readers would affirm.

In addition to using this numerical understanding of “part” to reply to the objection, Abū Rāʾīṭah argues that there are two ways in which a thing may be from another thing that involve neither parts nor operations: the way in which one who is begotten comes from the begetter, and the way in which Eve came from Adam, yet without being his part, his operation, or his child. Significantly, Abū Rāʾīṭah concludes this portion of his argument by asserting that “truly God is above all attributes, and is not commensurate with the teaching in this regard.”

His argument here is substantially similar to his reply to the previous objection described, about a cause preceding the thing that it causes. As with the previous argument, he points out that even the more refined created things (in this case, human beings) serve as exceptions to the point being made by the Muslim interlocutor. That is, although in many cases a thing which comes from another thing is either a part or an operation of the first thing, the highest of creatures, human persons, have their origins in other created things without being either parts or operations. This being the case, he argues, how much more does God Himself transcend the philosophical principle being articulated, since He transcends all that can be said of His creatures.

72 Keating 214-15; “...ān kān Allāh ‘an kul ʿulūm mutʿahāhān wa lā bi-ḥṣab al-qūl ʿi hadā al-wajah.” The term that Keating translates here as “attributes” would be better translated as “description.” Abū Rāʾīṭah does not seek here to deny the validity of divine attributes, but to say that God transcends descriptions and that the analogies offered give an idea about the divine life but without encompassing it.
Abū Rā’iṭah’s Arguments Based on the Divine Attributes

Each of Abū Rā’iṭah’s treatises includes arguments for Trinitarian doctrine based on divine attributes. In Frāghāt dīn al-Nasrānīah, the argument is very brief and is “wedged in” between the argument based on a triad of sun/light/heat and the argument based on a triad of Adam/Eve/Abel, both of which have been described above. Having made an argument that the sun exists as an entity with a single ousia and three distinct properties, Abū Rā’iṭah proceeds as follows:

Now if this is possible of things created and made, should this be denied of the Creator and Maker, Whose remembrance is exalted? In this way, His being is described by His existence as living and speaking, with life eternal and a substantial word. His word is begotten from Himself from eternity without ceasing, and His life proceeds from Him without time: three existent properties (that is, three substantial hypostaseis), a Father, Who begets His Word ceaselessly, and a Son, Who is begotten without time, and a Spirit, Who proceeds from Him, without interruption, One God, one Lord, one ousia.73

Although the passage is short, a careful reading reveals a number of interesting features for the purpose at hand. The first sentence seems to argue, in a manner quite similar to Theodore Abū Qurrah’s writings, that if a given quality or perfection can be shown to exist in the created realm, then that same quality or perfection must be ascribed to the Creator as its source. Since, Abū Rā’iṭah seems to argue, the sun has been shown to exist as a single jaṭhar and three properties, the Muslim is faced with two choices: either to admit that a quality or perfection exists among created things without having its basis in a

73 Keating 112-15; “Fa-āḍā kān dālak munkanān min al-ḥalāṣāt al-munṣū’at fa-hal yunkira dālak fi al-Ḥalaq al-Ṣān a jala dīkārīku ka-mā wusīfa dātīhi bi-wajūdihi ḥān nājiqānu bi-ḥāaḥ āzalāh wa nuṭiq jaṭhārī. Nujīquhu mālīd minhu āzāl mungu lam yazal wa bāṭīhu munbaqāqah minhu bi-lā zamān ḥalaṭāh ḥūs ḥāṭāh ār āqānmā jaṭharāh Āḥān wālādān li-kalimatuahu mungu lam yazal wa Ibnnā mālīdān bi-lā zamān wa Rūḥān munbaqāqān minhu bi-gīr dārak Alāḥān wāḥidān wa jaṭhārān wāḥidān.”
similar quality in the divine life, or else God exists simultaneously and eternally as One and Three. Furthermore, since (as every Muslim would affirm) God is both living and speaking, one may discern that the three properties in the divine life are existing, living, and speaking.\textsuperscript{74} Taken together, the two parts of the argument may be taken to suggest that God exists with these three properties as the source and origin of all three categories of created beings – those that merely exist, those that both exist and are alive, and those that are existent, alive, and rational/communicative, although Abū Rāʾīṭah does not flesh out this particular metaphysical point here.

This passage is also quite significant in that it establishes a strict identity between the three properties presented and the three \textit{aqānīm} of the Godhead, accomplished by the use of the Arabic article \textit{ār}, translated here “that is” and appearing between the phrases “three existent properties” and “three substantial \textit{hypostases}”. Used like the Latin abbreviation “i.e.” is used in English, this article equates the one phrase with the other. By this assertion, Abū Rāʾīṭah separates his Trinitarian account from the conventional Western explanation. In Western formulae, each of the persons of the Trinity has a special property by which he is known and identified – the Father by the fact that He begets, the Son by the fact that He is begotten, and the Spirit by the fact that He proceeds. In Abū Rāʾīṭah’s account, God has the property of existence, and this eternal existence is the Father; God lives, and this eternal act of living is the Spirit; God is rational and communicative and this act of self-disclosure is the Son. This corresponds perfectly to the relationship between the \textit{jāūhar} and the \textit{aqānīm} that Abū Rāʾīṭah described above, in

\textsuperscript{74} The word \textit{nāṭiq} carries both the sense of “rational” and of “speaking.”
which the *jaāhar* is identified with the “sum total” of the *aqānīm*. Here he describes the *aqānīm* as “*aqānīm *jaāhartah,*” which Keating has translated “three substantial *hypostaseis,*” but which could also be translated as “three *hypostaseis* pertaining to the *ousia.*”

In *Frāl-Tālīt al-Muqadas,* Abū Rāʾīṭah develops a more elaborated argument for Trinitarian doctrine in which he draws heavily on the Aristotelian metaphysical vocabulary. He sets the stage quite early and unobtrusively in the treatise, in the context of a postulated statement of Muslim belief about God which focuses on a short list of divine attributes. He imagines his Muslim interlocutor asserting that “you agree with us, and give witness to the truth of what we possess, in as much as you do not deny our description of God as one, always was and always will be, living, knowing, seeing, hearing, having no partner…”75 In this way, Abū Rāʾīṭah shrewdly sets the stage for an examination of the divine unicity in relation to the divine attributes and vice versa.

Somewhat later in the treatise, after the discussion of God’s oneness in light of the distinction between *ousia* and *hypostaseis* discussed above, Abū Rāʾīṭah returns to the list of agreed-upon divine attributes. Basing his argument in the conceptual framework of Aristotle’s *Categories,* he poses the question as to whether descriptions of God as seeing, hearing, knowing, and the like, are absolute names or predicative names. In so doing, Abū Rāʾīṭah is shrewdly and simultaneously drawing upon the Qurʾānic use of these terms, the Aristotelian categories mentioned, and the contemporaneous Muslim debates.

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75 Keating 168-69; “… *Aqīq tamīnā wa ṣahādum ‘a[ lā mā fī āyadīnā bi-ānahu ḥaq min biḥū lam tānkārā ‘alnā waṣafīnā ‘ān Allāh wāḥid lam yazal wa lā yazāl ḫa‘ aḥlam bāṣīr samī‘a lā šarīk lī-bu…*”
about the relationship between God’s unicity and the divine attributes. Abū Rā’īṭah’s sudden reference to these descriptions of God as “names” rather than as attributes may strike the modern Christian reader as somewhat jarring, but in fact this is exactly how the text of the Qur’ān uses the terms, as proper names of God.\textsuperscript{76} Thus Abū Rā’īṭah had as his “raw material” an alignment of sorts between the Qur’ānic and Aristotelian vocabularies. Furthermore, his explanation of predicative names corresponds rather nicely to the implications of Arabic grammar which were beginning to give rise to some uncomfortable implications for Muslim theologians:

The predicative names … are related to something else [i.e., something other than the named thing] just as “knower” and “knowledge” [are related to each other], “seer” and “seeing”, “wise” and “wisdom”, and anything similar to this. So the knower is knowing through knowledge, and the knowledge is knowledge of a knower. And the wise person is wise through wisdom, and the wisdom is wisdom of a wise person.\textsuperscript{77}

In other words, for the attribution of a predicative name to be, there must be two distinct entities: the being to which the attribution is made, and the entity by which there is a basis for the attribution. Just as the concept of an attribution being a proper name provided an alignment between the Qur’ānic and Aristotelian vocabularies as described above, so this understanding of predicative names provided an alignment between Arabic grammar and the Aristotelian categories. The rules of Arabic grammar implied the existence of the same two entities described in Abū Rā’īṭah’s account of predicative

\textsuperscript{76} See, for example, surah 2:127, where God is called “the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing” or surah 42:11, where he is called “the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.” There are at least thirteen verses in the Qur’ān in which these three attributes are used as proper names.

\textsuperscript{77} Keating 176-79; “Wa āmā āl-āsma’ āl-muqādāhā āl-mansūhāh lā gīrūhā lā-kā-āl-‘ālam wa āl-‘ālm wa āl-baṣūr wa āl-baṣār wa āl-ḥākim wa āl-ḥikmah wa mā āshuḥ gālāk. Fa-āl-‘ālam ālām bi-‘ālm wa āl-‘ālm ālām ālām. Wa āl-ḥākim ḥākim ḥiḳmah wa āl-ḥikmah ḥiḳmah ḥākim.”
names: a being which is, for example, a hearer, and an act of hearing by which that being may be called a hearer.

Abū Rāʾītah then progresses to a discussion of whether the attributes of life and knowledge are eternal or acquired, and taking into account the mutually agreed-upon position that God has eternally possessed both life and knowledge, he concludes that these divine attributes are both predicative names and ones which by definition are eternal. Having established this point, and connected the philosophical terminology that he is using to both Qur’ānic terminology and Arabic grammar, Abū Rāʾītah zeroes in on the key issue at hand: how can the eternal attributes of life and knowledge, which according to both Aristotelian metaphysics and Arabic grammar must be considered as entities distinct from God Himself, be reconciled theologically with the divine unicity? In order to answer the question, Abū Rāʾītah makes a number of further distinctions:

Most certainly these are related to Him, that is, life and knowledge, either as other than Himself, as [one] partner is related to [another] partner, or as from Him. “From Him” also has two aspects: either [the attributes are] an act He has done from Himself, but we have refuted this [description of] the attribute … or they are from His ousia. And further, if they are from His ousia, then this has two aspects. Either [they are] something perfect from something perfect, or [they are] parts from something perfect. However, if [they are] parts, this is not possible in a description of God, because He is above this. So they must certainly be something perfect from something perfect.78

Having made his argument that God’s life and knowledge must be considered predicative names and eternal attributes, Abū Rāʾītah here plays the ultimate rhetorical “trump card”

78 Keating 182-83; “... al-mansībah ithi al-ḥaṣīāh ʾanī wa al-ʿalām ʾāmā ʿirāku ka-mā yansab al-ṣarīk ilā al-ṣarīk wa ʾāmā minhu. Fa-minhu ʾājdān ʾalā wajhīn ʾāmā ʾal fālā laʿalā minhu fā-qad naḍānāʾ anhu al-ṣīlah ... wa ʾāmā mā takūn min jaḥāruru. Wa ʾān kānata ʾājdān min jaḥāruruhu fa-qalak ʾalā wajhīn. ʾĀmā kāmalah min kāmal wa ʾāmā ʾābʾaad min kāmal. Fa-ʾāmā al-ṣīlah ʾābd fā-lā yajūz ʾif ʿilāh Allāh il-ʿāna m ʾalā ʾan qalak. Fa-ʾājīl la mahīlah ʾanahā kāmalah min kāmal.”
by introducing the possibility that life and knowledge be considered “partners” of God. The term that he uses here, šarīk, is frequently condemned in the Qurʾān and is closely associated with the term širk, which means association of a partner with God and is considered the gravest of sins in Islam. His final distinction, that if the attributes of life and knowledge pertain to the divine jaāhar, they must either be parts or “something perfect from something perfect” is a similar rhetorical coup de grâce, since the idea of “parts” in God would be abhorrent to Muslim and Christian alike. Abū Rāʾīḥah’s argument is meant, then, to marshal the requirements of Arabic grammar, Islamic affirmations about God’s life and knowledge, and the Aristotelian metaphysical categories in support of a Trinitarian understanding of God. According to this presentation, then, God has both life and knowledge as eternal attributes, distinct from Himself but real existent entities pertaining to his ousia, and these attributes are the Spirit and the Son.

Two other Trinitarian arguments based on divine attributes appear in Ḥāl-Tajasud. Since this treatise is concerned primarily with the Incarnation, the question at hand is not so much whether God can be understood as simultaneously one and three, but instead whether one may legitimately affirm that Jesus is God incarnate. This being the case, Abū Rāʾīḥah attempts to answer Muslim objections that Jesus could not be divine based on New Testament passages that seem to ascribe to him either ignorance or weakness. These arguments are significantly different from the argument presented in Ḥāl-Talḥī al-Muqaddas, but they are noteworthy both because of their basis in divine attributes and because of Abū Rāʾīḥah’s use of the Qurʾān in support of them.
To introduce the first of these arguments, Abū Rā‘ījah describes a Muslim argument against Christ’s divinity that he had encountered:

As for what they refer to concerning the Messiah’s knowledge … [saying He] was lacking knowledge of the Hour [of Judgment], and [consequently] they impose the status of a servant on Him, because, according to their suspicion, He is ignorant of this, their ill suspicion can be deterred and they can be turned back to what is correct, if it is not difficult for them to be fair.79

The reference is clearly to Matt 24:36, in which Jesus says that not even He Himself knows the timing of the world’s end, and that this knowledge is reserved to the Father.

Abū Rā‘ījah responds by arguing that Jesus’ statement is an intentional separation of Himself from knowledge that would be harmful in its effects on the disciples if revealed. Following the pattern already seen a number of times, in which the Muslims’ argument is inverted such that their objection becomes the basis of an argument for Christian doctrine, Abū Rā‘ījah contends that this statement of Jesus is actually an expression of divinity, since it is in keeping with God’s administration of the universe. This divine administration includes revealing what is helpful for humankind and concealing what is not, “because God does not reveal a matter nor keep it hidden from His servants, except for the purpose of their benefits and the cause of their usefulness.”80 By invoking the wise administration of all things, Abū Rā‘ījah is injecting into the argument a common Qur’ānic representation of God. Verses such as 3:173, 4:171, 6:102, and 39:62-63

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79 Keating 276-77; “Wa `aman mā qadaranā min `antil-lā‘īm al-Masih ... min `ālm al-sā‘āh wa ajābihum `alīhil-’akabīdith min ḥiyu jahal dalak ka-zanūnuhu fā-āsturidatā sū` zo-nūnuhum wuri dahum ilā al-ṣūāb gīr `asīr `ān aṣadāhā.”

80 Keating 278-79; “Li-‘āna Allāh līsa bi-mażhar āmar wa lā ḥajab min al-‘abād ilā li-sabab fā-nāf‘ahum wa ‘alāh sa‘lahhum.”
emphasize God’s sufficiency and excellence as the administrator of affairs for the good of humankind. It is not insignificant that in some cases, as demonstrated earlier, these descriptions are paired with assertions that God has no son specifically because He is sufficient by Himself, as in 4:171 and 6:101. Thus Abū Rā’iṭah takes a Qur’ānic attribution, that of God’s administrative sufficiency, which is linked in the Qur’ānic text with an argument against Trinitarian belief, and makes it the centerpiece of his response to the argument against Christ’s divinity. In responding as He did to the disciples, Jesus was in fact displaying the divine attribute of perfectly wise governance of those who trust Him.

The second of these arguments is based not upon apparent ignorance in Jesus, but upon an apparent defect of His abilities. Abū Rā’iṭah seems to have encountered Muslims who argued as follows: When His disciples James and John approached Jesus and asked for seats of honor on either side of Him in His kingdom, as recorded in both Mt 20:21 and Mk 10:37, He replied that such a position was not His to give. It would seem, then, that Jesus lacked the authority or the power to make a determination about their request. Therefore, the New Testament itself clearly teaches that Jesus had an attribute of weakness or inability and so He cannot be considered divine. As with the previous argument, Abū Rā’iṭah responds by arguing that in answering as He does, Jesus is actually displaying attributes in keeping with His divinity, rather than demonstrating a lack of authority or power. First, His response rebukes them for their ignorance of His own teachings, since He had already promised places of honor to all twelve of His inner
circle of disciples, as recorded in Mt 19:27-28. Second, His response encourages James and John on to greater virtue, according to Abū Rāʾīṭah’s interpretation of His words:

If this is as I have described, [the Messiah means to say]:
“What you [two] have asked of me is not mine to give. Rather, it is for you to strive for greater and higher virtue, through which you will attain what you ask of me. When you do this, you will receive what you ask of me by merit and worthiness, [for then] I shall give to you [two] particularly, apart from the other disciples.\(^8\)

In explaining the principle that greater progress in virtue could lead to greater reward, Abū Rāʾīṭah quotes surah 74:38 and also seems to paraphrase surah 18:110. So in an argument that parallels his apologetical strategy in the previous example cited, Abū Rāʾīṭah takes an event that is supposedly incompatible with the doctrine of Christ’s divinity, shows that the event actually represents Jesus as acting in the exact ways that one would expect God to act, and marshals the Qur’ānic text in support of his interpretation of the story.

In conclusion, the writings of Abū Rāʾīṭah demonstrate significant development in the apologetical project of articulating Trinitarian doctrine in Arabic. His knowledge of both the Qurʾān and the Aristotelian philosophy that was becoming a major intellectual force in the Arabophone world of his day allowed him to combine the language of the Qurʾān, Aristotelian metaphysical concepts, and the burgeoning debates among Muslim intellectuals about the implications of Arabic grammar for the divine unicity into powerful Trinitarian arguments based more or less entirely in the conceptual range of

\(^8\) Keating 284-85; “Wa ʿaḍā sār ṣār-ʿammar ʿalā wasaḥīt fi-ḥisā ʿaṭā ʿālā mā ʿāṣīmā ʾilā bāl ikhūmā ʿan tahraṣā ʿalā al-samāḥ ʾaṣāṣ ʿalā ἑα ἑαδί bii ἑε ἑε ἑε ἑε ἑε ʾilā mā ʿāṣīmā. Wa ʿaḍā lʾalumā gālak nātūmā m ā ʿāṣīmā ʾaṭā kum ἑε ἐ
contemporary Muslim discourse. This combination of sources also served as the
foundation for Abū Rāʾīṭah’s elaboration of a Trinitarian thesis based upon the divine
attributes, in which God as both eternal and cause must be eternally causing. Finally, Abū
Rāʾīṭah brought to prominence in Arabophone Christian literature the understanding of
the Trinity as an eternal triad of Existence, Life, and Rationality, with these attributes
understood as *aqānim* by which the divine substance could be defined.
Chapter 4: ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī

The final texts to be considered are the two known apologetical treatises of ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī, an adherent of the Church of the East. Even less is known about the life and career of ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī than about those of Theodore Abū Qurrāh or Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rā’īṭah. Indeed, for a long time the specific period in which he lived was unclear due to a lack of identifying data in the thirteenth-century Coptic bibliographies which have been of such importance for the history of Arabophone Christian literature. More recently, it has been demonstrated that he was a contemporary of the Muslim theologian Abū l-Hudārī l-Allāf, who died around 840, and was probably the target of Abū l-Hudārī’s treatise “Book Against ‘Ammār the Christian, in refutation of the Christians.”1 This places ‘Ammār historically as a contemporary of the other authors here considered and as a participant in the nascent project of articulating Christian doctrine in Arabic, in conscious dialogue with the Islamic religious discourse of the day.

The two treatises known to have come from ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s pen are the Kitāb al-burhān (“Book of Proof”) and the Kitāb al-masā’il wa al-ajwībah (“Book of Questions and Answers”). The Kitāb al-burhān is the shorter of the two works and includes essays on twelve topics that were conventional subject matter in Muslim-Christian debate of the time: proofs of the existence of God, proofs of the true religion, reasons for embracing Christianity, response to the Muslim accusation of al-tahrīr (interpolating or distorting the scriptures), the Trinity, the oneness of God, the Incarnation, the crucifixion, baptism,

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1 Griffith, Beginnings, 147.
the Eucharist, veneration of the cross, and the question of bodily pleasures in heaven. The *Kitāb al-masāʾil wa al-ajwibah* is quite different in structure, taking the form of a kind of apologetical handbook. The “questions” referred to in the title are not questions properly speaking, but suppositions having to do with Muslim-Christian encounter: “if someone says…,” or “if someone asks….” The “answers” of the title are given in the form of the Christians’ response: “then we say….” Since they belonged to rather different genres, it would seem that somewhat different audiences were envisioned for the two works, with the *Kitāb al-burḥan* being written with a broader audience potentially composed of both Christians and Muslims in mind, while the *Kitāb al-masāʾil wa al-ajwibah* reads as a text written for Christians only, formatted as a manual for those involved in theological debate with Muslims. Besides being the smallest corpus of writings among the three authors of known identity here considered, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s Trinitarian writings are distinguished by being the most oriented to philosophical concepts and arguments and the least concerned with the use of scripture. They are also the most concerned with establishing a particular Trinitarian account based on a single set of divine attributes, the triad of Being, Living, and Rational², as will be shown hereafter.

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² The Arabic term *nāṭiq*, translated here as “rational,” is difficult to render in English with a single word. It carries both the sense of “rational” and of “speaking.” The Arabophone Christian writers saw a connection between the idea of *nāṭiq* as “speaking” and the identity of Jesus as the Word of God, but I have chosen to translate it “rational” in part as a term of convenience because the adjective rational has its noun form “rationality,” while the adjective speaking has no such noun form in conventional English usage.
The Metaphysics of ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī

As already mentioned, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī focuses more on philosophical arguments, particularly Aristotelian metaphysics, than any of the other authors here considered. At one point in the Kitāb al-burhān, he gives a tidy synopsis of the metaphysical categories that he employs:

For you know that things are not devoid of four aspects: first the substance, for example “human.” Then there is the qa'nūm, for example, Moses, David, and Solomon. Then there is the power, for example, the heat of the fire and the rays of the sun. Then there are accidents, for example, blackness in black people and whiteness in white people. These four things make up the substances and the qa'nūm, because the substances all have a power … and they bear the accidents as well. Every substance also has two powers: for example, the earth has its coolness and its dryness; for another example, water has its coolness and its wetness; and for another example, fire has its heat and its dryness…. So these things are unified in their substances, but threefold in their qualities [m'aānīhā]. And the qa'nūm, for example, are Moses, David, or Solomon, and everyone standing independently from that which is outside itself. As for the accidents and powers, they are unified in their qualities and do not stand by themselves … for they are in need of substances to bear them and for them to exist in.3

This summary of metaphysical concepts has a number of noteworthy features. First there are the terms jaūhar for substance/ousia and qa'nūm for hypostaseis, borrowed from the Syriac tradition and already familiar from the writings of Abū Rā’ītah. Of the four

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“aspects” of a thing described, the substance and the qanūm are the two that are understood as enjoying a kind of ontological independence, existing in and of themselves, whereas the power and the accident exist only in substances.

Besides these four metaphysical building blocks, ‘Ammār significantly introduces another concept, the mānā or “quality.” Clearly the mānā is not intended to include the accidents of a thing, since it is defined in terms of the powers of the substance, which are themselves distinct from the accidents. Nor can the qualities be considered a separate, fifth metaphysical category, as ‘Ammār’s examples demonstrate. Since he asserts that a thing is “unified in its substance but threefold in its qualities,” but for each of the examples that he cites has named only two attributes, it would appear that the category of “quality” includes the identity of the substance, together with the essential properties by which that substance is defined. Somewhat conveniently for his purpose, he finds that things can be understood as having two such essential qualities, with the result that things in the natural world can routinely, perhaps even universally, be described as three qualities of a common substance.

‘Ammār considers the metaphysical apparatus that he has presented here to be the solution to a problem presented by Muslim controversialists of the period; namely, that oneness and threeness were mutually exclusive on a simple mathematical basis. According to this view, for Christians to affirm that God is one and to simultaneously affirm Trinitarian doctrine was not only theologically wrong, it was logically untenable based on the definitions of one and three. ‘Ammār makes this the first problem to which he responds in his longer treatise, the Kitāb ʿal-māsāʾil wa ʿal-ajwibah.
As for how one can be three and three can be one, by my life! Such a thing cannot be possible, for the number one cannot be the number three. But as for the quality which we intend to refer to in our teaching, we mean one eternal substance, eternally existing in three particular properties, pertaining to the substance, and neither separated nor divided. All three of the particular properties are of one eternal substance, which is not called “three” because of the definition of “particular property”, not separable nor divisible because of their origin and completeness. And the substance is not three, by the definition of what it means to be one – that is, oneness; rather, the three are particular properties.4

This passage recalls Abū Rā`iḥah’s emphasis that a given entity could validly be described with an attribute in one way, while the same attribute is denied of it in a different way. Bearing in mind the increasing value attached to philosophical sophistication at this point in the ‘Abbasid centers of learning, ‘Ammār appears to be following the same apologetical stratagem as his Jacobite peer; namely, representing Trinitarian doctrine as not only compatible with scripture, but also able to support a nuanced metaphysical treatment.

Somewhat later in the Kitāb al-masā’il wa al-aqwibah, ‘Ammār has a very similar passage explaining the metaphysical categories, but in this case he also explains why he does not use the conventional Arabic term for persons, ʾašhās, as a name for the ṣaqlīnūm:

> We do not call them three ʾašhās, and it cannot be imagined that one of us would call them ʾašhās, because for us ṣaḥās [singular form; “person”] refers to each body that is defined by its sections and limbs, which distinguish it

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from other bodies. Rather, we call them in the Syriac tongue three $\text{aqānim}$.\(^5\)

Thus ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī becomes the only one of the authors here considered to affirm explicitly the terminological debt owed by Christian Arabic to the Syriac language. It is perhaps noteworthy that he does so while explaining why a particular term carried with it connotations that made it unacceptable for use in a particular theological context. Perhaps as a member of the maligned “Nestorian” church he was particularly attuned to how the choice of terminology could give rise to a perception of erroneous doctrine even when there was no intent to affirm heresy. The particular reason for his objection to the term $\text{aṣhās}$ as a name for the three divine hypostaseis seems to be twofold. First, he understands the term to be one that is properly applied to corporeal and spatial beings. His second reason, somewhat easier to overlook, is that the term $\text{aṣhās}$ would connote too great a separation or division among the hypostaseis.

Taken together, these two passages reveal the metaphysical apparatus within which ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī attempts to articulate and defend Trinitarian doctrine. To summarize, each existing thing can be considered to exist simultaneously as one and multiple, since each thing has both its substance and the particular properties by which that substance is defined. Individual existents, which may share a common substance with others, may be called $\text{aqānim}$. Where these $\text{aqānim}$ are rational beings who occupy a corporeal existence by which they are defined and separated from other $\text{aqānim}$, they may also be called $\text{aṣhās}$, but since corporeality and division do not apply to the divine

\(^5\) Hayek 162; “Lām nasmūḥa ṭalāṭah $\text{aṣhās}$ wa lā yatūhumma āḥad ʿalīnā ānā samānhā $\text{aṣhās}$n li-ānā $\text{aṣhās}$ andānā kul jasam mahdūd bi-ṭaqāruhu wa jūrīlī tafsala bīnuhu wa bīn mā sūhū mīn al-ṭiyām. Bal samāmāhā bi-āṣān surānmī talaṭah $\text{aqānim}$.\)
hypostaseis, they may not be referred to by this term. The clear implication of this metaphysical schema is a kind of meta-trinitarianism, in which existing as both one and three is common to God and His creatures and thus is not the way in which God differs from the creation. Rather, one difference between God and His creatures resides in the presence or absence of spatial division and chronological difference among aqānīm of the same substance.

Another important consideration is the fact that, although according to ‘Ammār each existing thing has a kind of triune existence due to its substance and its special properties, the three qualities cannot be called aqānīm in the case of created beings. This distinction is due to the second great difference between God and His creatures. ‘Ammār offers as examples of the “trinitarian” existence of created things the triad of the soul, its word, and its life, as well as the common example of fire, its heat, and its light, but asserts that the three qualities in each of these existents cannot be called aqānīm. The divine hypostaseis can be called so

… because of the perfection and exaltedness of the Creator, which preclude that His Word and His Spirit are incomplete and imperfect entities. The qanūm, according to us, is a complete entity, not an imperfect one, and does need anything outside itself for its stability. This power which we mentioned in reference to the soul, the sun, and fire, is not a complete entity, but instead an incomplete aspect of the things in which they inhere, insofar as they are created, rather than the Creator. We did not give you the metaphor for the Creator from among created things as if created things were a perfect metaphor for the Creator. We called the three qualities found in the Creator, and by which He is known, aqānīm by reason of their completeness.6

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In this explanation one may discern a tactic familiar from the writings of Abū Rā`iṭah; namely, combining language about God that would appeal to Islamic religious sensibilities with the philosophical concepts then gaining such prominence among the Muslim intellectuals. With his insistence that the “qualities” discernible in the Creator must be understood differently because of God’s exaltedness, ‘Ammār affirms the ontological chasm between the Creator and creatures that was so important in Islamic religious discourse, but he has also aligned this emphasis perfectly with the purely philosophical definition of ṣanām. Additionally, he refers to the second and third “qualities” in God by drawing upon the Qur’ānic terms Word and Spirit, as the author of Ḍaṭṭah did so systematically and consistently at a somewhat earlier period. Finally, ‘Ammār carefully emphasizes that the metaphors offered for the triune life of the Creator are not intended to correspond to the divine life in every way. In doing so, he uses the term metaphor (miyū) rather than analogy(qīās), but his explanation recalls the explanation of the extent and limitations of analogy given by Abū Rā’iṭah, which as already described, was itself taken from the philosophical discourses of Muslim controversialists of the time.

‘Ammār’s use of the triad of God, His Word, and His Spirit seems to have given rise among his Muslim interlocutors to an accusation that this would seem to introduce a kind of dependency in God, which as already mentioned, would not only be a violation of both Christian and Islamic doctrine about the divine nature, but would also conflict with

the repeated Qur’ānic emphasis on God’s sufficiency as the administrator and governor of all things. In the longer of his treatises, the *Kitāb al-masā’il wa al-ajwībah*, ‘Ammār imagines that a Muslim may pose the problem this way:

Is He one who is in need of His Word and His Spirit, or is he independent of them? For if you claim that He is in need of them, you ascribe to Him compulsion, lack, and deficiency; and if you claim that He is independent of them, then you reject their permissibility, just as you have rejected from Him all those things superfluous in Him…

‘Ammār’s response is relevant for a consideration of his metaphysics because his answer to this challenge involves his understanding of the relationship between a substance and its properties. Since he has articulated an understanding of entities in which they are defined by their substance and the particular qualities that pertain to that substance, he argues that the language of dependency or need simply has no rational meaning in this context. Returning to the examples that he has already given, he suggests that asking whether God “needs” or “is dependent upon” His Word and His Spirit is equivalent to asking whether fire “needs” or “is dependent upon” its flames and its heat, or asking whether water “needs” or “is dependent upon” its coolness and its wetness. Since in each case, the two properties being mentioned are, in ‘Ammār’s terminology, “substantial and natural” to the entity being described, there is no logically permissible question of need or dependency.

‘Ammār goes on to make a distinction between the question posed and other similar questions about need or dependency in God: “But it is permitted for you to ask,

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7 Hayek 158-159; “Fa-hal hū mufṭāj ilā kalimatīhi wa rūḥī ām hū hū garā ‘anhumā? Fā-ān z’amātum ānahu il-humā mufṭāj fāqad wasaftūmāhū ilā āl-‘aḍḥarār wa āl-‘ajaz wa āl-naqṣān, wa ān z’amātum ānahu garā ‘anhumā, la-ān-fāhumā ‘aḍha‘ ān hu kamā taqātūm ‘ān hu mā kān ‘ān hu mustaţḥān….”
does the Eternal, Living, and Rational One need a place or position or hearing or sight, or anything that is created or made. For one will say to you: We seek refuge in His sublimity above all such needs.”

It would appear that ‘Ammâr has combined here two different categories – those of accidents (place and position) and those of divine attributes that are named in both the Bible and the Qur’ân (seeing and hearing). As will be shown later on, he considers the latter category to be composed of attributes which are in fact metaphors for the incommensurable qualities that he names in this same passage. The first category, on the other hand, he considers to be accidents pertaining to corporeal beings and thus to have no applicability to the divine. For whatever reason, he does not make this distinction here, even though it is clearly present in his writings elsewhere. Instead, he pursues the tactic of dismissing any suggestion of divine need or dependence based on the same Qur’ânic emphasis that appears so frequently in the writings of the authors here considered – God’s absolute transcendence above all such matters of created things. The distinction that he seems to want to make here is that the second question – whether God can be said to need or depend upon various accidents or qualities – can be answered theologically, but the original question – whether God can be said to need or depend upon His Word or His Spirit – is simply unintelligible. By answering in this way, ‘Ammâr seeks to place “Word” and “Spirit” in a different category than any other attribute. Furthermore, by mentioning the triad of God/Word/Spirit earlier in the passage and then changing his terminology to a triad of Eternal/Living/Rational later in his answer,

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8 Hayek, 159: “Bal ānamā yajūz li-ka ān tasā’l hal yaḥtāj āl-āzalī āl-bī āl-nāṭiq ālā makān ān mūḍ’a ān sam’ā ān baṣarānū ālā ārī sī’ minā ḫuliqa wa būrā’, fa-yuqūl li-ka: ʿārūḍ bi-jālulu ān yakūn ālā sī’ min ḫalāhī maḥṭāˇjīn.”
'Ammār seeks to imply an equivalency between the two, about which more will be said later.

Another challenge prompted by ‘Ammār’s account of the divine hypostaseis and answered by him within his metaphysical framework is that of how one can speak of God’s Word and God’s Spirit as distinct without introducing separation or division in the divinity. In response, he writes in the Kitāb al-burhān that

Christians do not admit any division or separation into the Creator, for division and separation pertain to bodies and God has no body. And we do not consider the subtle, spiritual soul9 to be corporeal, and so it is not separated or divided by the affirmation of Life and a Word in its substantial nature…. We perceive that fire is not corporeal, not divisible, and not separable in our affirmation of it having heat and light, and indeed we know the subtlety of the nature because it is not visible, not concrete, and not sensible; instead, it is concealed by its subtlety in bodies. We know also that the substance is not sensible and is not combusted with its heat, and along with this, we know that due to its subtlety, its heat and its light are apparent in it. From this, that which pertains to its substance – its heat and its light – is apparent in connection to, but distinction from, the substance. For you cannot separate or divide the qualities found in it, due to its subtlety.10

‘Ammār appears in this case to have conflated two somewhat different arguments into one response. On the one hand, he begins with the straightforward assertion that division

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9 The Arabic term naš that I have here translated “soul” can also, depending on context, be translated self, psyche, spirit, identity, or even person. For this reason, the term should not be assigned any significant theological import in this context. ‘Ammār is simply emphasizing God’s incorporeal and spiritual nature.

10 Hayek 55-56; “Wa lā yalazum ʾal-Nāṣrānta li-ḏalak ān takūn ʿadḥalat ʾal-Haliq tabʿaṭṭūn wa lā taqṣīmān, li-ʿaš ʾal-tabʿaḏ wa ʾl-taqṣīm ʿanāma yaqʿa ʾalā ʾl-ʾājīm wa ʾllāh ʾlis b-i-jām, wa lam naru ʾl-naš al-ḥarāraṯa li-ḏalīlṯin taqṣimāt wa lā tabʿaṭṭūn wa ʾl-taqṣīmān bi-ṭabābī ʾl-ḥiḥaṯ wa ʾl-kalimāṯ li-hā fī gāḏ jāḥaḥaḏ.. Wa lā rāʾmat ʾal-nār taqṣimāt wa lā tabʿaṭṭūn wa lā ʿanqimāt bi-ʿaḥbāṭunā li-hā ʾl-ḥarāraṯa wa ʾl-ḏāʿ wa ʿanāma li-n-ʿalām ʿanāḏa al-ṭabābī ʾl-ḥaḥīṯa wa lā maḥāsah wa lā maḥṣūsah baʿl muṣṭaḵnah bi-ṣaḥaḥaḥa fī ʾl-ʾājīm, wa ʿanāhu jāḥaḏ lā yaḏas bi-hā wa lā yuḥriṣ bi-ḥaḥrāraḥa, wa māḏalak, min laṭṭuḥa, tī-ḥaḥrāraḥa wa dūḥā mūḥām tiḥa wa li-hā. Wa ka-ḏalak yāḏaḏ ʿaḏ-dhāḥaḥa bi-iṭalāqūḥa wa bi-gīrūḥa mā li-hā fī ḍāṭuḥa min ʾl-ḥaḥrāraḥ wa ʾl-ḏāʿ fa-lam ta nqāṣm wa lam tatājazāʾ mā laṭṭaḥā ḍhā wa wujūḏ ʾal-māḏūn tiḥa.”
and separation pertain only to corporeal beings, which would mean that they are necessarily unintelligible when speaking of God. He proposes the familiar example of fire, with its qualities of light and heat, as an “incorporeal” existent that may be ascribed particular properties without introducing severability or divisibility. On this point, of course, the modern reader may well object to the argument based on the fact that fire may in a sense be incorporeal, but it is certainly not *immaterial*. Lacking the insight into the physical universe provided by modern science, this distinction was lost on ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī. But ‘Ammār quickly leaves behind his example of fire in favor of a purely metaphysical argument: that the nature and substance of a thing is incorporeal and immaterial regardless of the corporeality of the thing itself, and the qualities of a thing pertain to its nature and substance. Although the point is not stated with precision, he seems to be saying that articulating the qualities by which a thing is known could never be considered to introduce severability because of the incorporeal, immaterial aspect of the substance itself. So in a sense he presents a kind of double-argument that speaking of God’s Word and God’s Spirit does not introduce any possibility of separation or division; first, because the *substance* of all things is incorporeal, even though most substances reside in and are expressed by bodies, and second, because God is incorporeal in a more absolute sense.

In the *Kitāb al-masā’il wa al-ajwibah*, ‘Ammār expresses much the same argument, but adds another element:

Regarding parts and divisions, these are not among the attributes of that which is incorporeal, nor of what exists eternally. Indeed these are attributes of temporal and composite bodies. As for your saying that
mastering the creatures and administering these arrangements [i.e., of the universe] is a proof of one Creator, Living and Wise, we do not contradict you. For we told you straightforwardly that He who created the creatures by His Word and His Spirit is without doubt one in His absolutely singular substance by reason of His nature, to which separation cannot attain and which division cannot encompass.\(^{11}\)

So in addition to corporeality, in this treatise ‘Ammār mentions eternity as a reason that the affirmation of God’s Word and His Spirit does not introduce division or separation in the divinity. Clearly this is the argument that most completely distinguishes between God and created things on this question of division and separation.

Thus there can be discerned in ‘Ammār’s treatment of this point a kind of graduated scale of arguments. His argument based on the immateriality of the nature of things makes no distinction whatever between God and created things, since all natures are themselves equally immaterial, even though some are the natures of material things. On a second level is the briefly stated argument based on a consideration of fire, with its qualities of heat and light. This argument makes a distinction between corporeal and non-corporeal things, but still places God in the same category with those created things that have a “subtle” nature. Only the third argument, based on the divine attribute of eternity, makes a distinction between God and all created things. Although all three arguments are articulated using the vocabulary of Aristotelian metaphysics, and therefore are based in a category of discourse that would have been common to Christians and Muslims, presumably this last argument with its clear distinction between God and all other things

\(^{11}\) Hayek, 152-53; “‘Amar al-ajza’ wa al-ab’aad fa-lisa min siit matisa bi-jasam bal ma lam yazal mujudan bi-azadatih. Bal dalak min siit al-ajsam al-muhabadat al-mul’alaf al-murakabah. Fa-‘ama quhuka bi-an ataqan haqqa al-huluq wa ahkam haqqa al-nazam dal’ala Haliq wahid bi-hakim fa-gur mardud alika. Wa qad aghbaraka anlan bi-an alagri haqqa al-huluq bi-kalimatih wa rihhi la majlal wa wahid fi ja’iharu mandarad bi-jabahu la yadrahu tab i’tad wa la yanahluhuj taqir’.”
would have been somewhat more palatable to a Muslim interlocutor. We have no information about the chronological relationship between the *Kitāb al-burhān* and the *Kitāb al-masā’il wa al-ajwibah*, but it is plausible that this additional layer of argument based on the divine attribute of eternity may have been a refinement based on the response of his Muslim interlocutors to ‘Ammār’s first two arguments. In such a scenario, ‘Ammār would have been challenged based on the lack of a clear distinction between God and created things inherent in the first two arguments, and when preparing a handbook for those who would engage in theological dialogue with Muslims, would have added the argument based on eternality so as to make a stricter separation between God and all created beings, in keeping with this central principle of Islamic religious discourse.

Another objection that ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī answers using the apparatus of Aristotelian metaphysics is the suggestion that speaking of each of the divine hypostaseis as “God entire” (*alāh kāmil*) necessarily entailed the enumeration of three gods. ‘Ammār’s resolution of the problem lies in the relationship between substance and hypostasis. He presents his case as follows:

… We say that the Father is God entire, meaning that He is an eternal, particular, complete substance. And the Son is God entire, meaning that He is an eternal, particular, complete substance.\footnote{It is not clear why ‘Ammār mentions only the Father and the Son here, with no mention of the Holy Spirit. Hayek’s critical edition of the text does not indicate a lacuna in the manuscript at this point.} Therefore all of them together are one complete God, with one eternal substance that is common and complete…. It is not necessary for us, if we say that each one of them in His particularity is a complete substance, to say that the three together are three complete substances…. Or do you not see that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob … are not together three complete substances, but there is
common to the three of them one complete common substance? Nor is it necessary for us to name the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit three complete gods; if they were different in substance, there would be in the grouping of them three complete substances, which would mean being numbered as three complete gods.13

Interestingly, ‘Ammār does not in this passage use the term *aqānim* for the three divine hypostaseis, preferring instead to refer to each in His particularity (*ḥāṣatihi*). But there can be no doubt, given his definitions described above and the example of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he offers here, that he is building his argument on the distinction between substance and hypostaseis. Taking his previous arguments described above into account, the distinction between how Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob exist as three *aqānim* and how God exists as three *aqānim* would be clear. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob can be described as “three men,” even though they share a common substance and nature, because of their corporeality and temporality. Having established that the presence or absence of corporeality and temporality makes a significant difference in how one can speak of the relationships among multiple *aqānim*, ‘Ammār is able to extend that argument to address this objection. With Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the common substance means that one cannot describe them as “three humanities,” although one can still say “three men” because of the divisions in time and space existing between them. Similarly, the common substance in the divine *aqānim* means that one cannot describe

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them as “three divinities,” but taking God’s incorporeality and eternity into account additionally rules out saying “three gods.”

‘Ammār elaborates on the relationship between substance and hypostasis a bit later in the text of the Kitāb al-masā’il wa al-ajwibah. In doing so, he suggests that the term “substance” may be used in two related but different senses, and that the two different uses result in a different enumeration of the entities being described:

Regarding the name qanūm, it does not follow and does not concord with the name “particular substance” in every instance. Rather, we say that each one of the group Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is a complete qanūm, and likewise in its particularity is a complete substance. Then we would say that the three of them considered collectively are three complete substances. But it is not permitted that you say that the three considered together are three complete substances, because the complete and common substance will not permit you to place the name of enumerated substances upon an assemblage of āqānīm of the same general nature.14

So it would appear that, in addition to the meaning of the word “substance” as he has used it thus far, ‘Ammār is willing to admit of a more restricted sense in which the term substance can also be applied to a particular instantiation of the general substance.

Another way of expressing this would be to say that the presence of Abraham constitutes the presence of a complete substance, even though every existent of that substance is not present. ‘Ammār is clearly concerned that this refinement of the way the term substance may be used will cause the distinction between substance and qanūm to be lost, because he immediately follows the clarification by saying that if the qanūm always corresponded

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to the “particular substance,” there would be no need to use both terms. He argues that both terms are necessary because the substance is the expression of what is required by the essential nature of a thing, whereas the term qanūm makes it possible to express that the particular existents of the substance are not parts, powers, or accidents.

Seeking to demonstrate the reasonableness of his argument through analogies involving created things, ‘Ammār turns to his familiar examples of fire and water:

But you see that when three flames of fire are ignited, each flame thus lit is a form standing by itself, as each one of them is a substance complete in its essence, each fire being complete in its essence and its nature. In numbering it, you have no choice but to say three flames and three things, but as was made clear, there are not three fires nor three substances, but only one fire and one substance. Likewise, if you saw three drops of water, each is a form standing on its own and a substance complete in essence and nature. If you saw the three of them grouped together, you would have no choice but to say three drops and three forms, but you cannot say three waters and three substances, but only one water and one substance.15

In both cases, the principle articulated above holds true, in that the substance is present whole and entire in each of the three flames or drops, and yet there is only one substance, whole and entire, in the totality of the three entities.

Attribution and Language about God

Another important aspect of ‘Ammār al-Baṣṭī’s Trinitarian writings is a well-developed theory of attribution and the uses of language in reference to God, with

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15 Hayek, 174; “Ilā tarā ān ṭaḥā š’al min nār, kul š’alah minhā šabāh qa’im bi-nafsīhī āḏ kul wāḥid minhā jāiḥar kāmil ʾl gāţīhī āṯ nār kāmilah bī-ʿāmiḥā wa ṭaḥā’ahā, ān min b’adʾ āḍadahā, lām yakūn lika muḥš min ān ṭaqūl ṭaḥāḥa ʾl wa ṭaḥāḥah ʾāšāʾ waḍākin, kāmā waḍāka, lā ṭaḥāḥah nīrān wa lā ṭaḥāḥah jūḥūr bal nār wāḥidah jāiḥar wāḥid. Wa ka-dalak ʾaḏā rāʾṭ ṭaḥā qatārāt min māʾ, āḏ kul qatrah minhā šabāh qa’im bi-nafsīhī āṯ jāiḥar kāmil ʾl gāţīhī wa ṭaḥā’ahī. Fa-ʾaḏḏā āradaṭ ān taʿjamal ʿaḍaduḥā lām yakūn lika muḥš min ān taqūl ṭaḥā qatārāt wa ṭaḥāḥah ʾāshāʾ wa lā yastaqīm lika ān taqūl ṭaḥāḥ ʿāmiḥah wa ṭaḥāḥah jūḥūr; bal māʾ wāḥid jāiḥar wāḥid.”
particular reference to the language used in both the Bible and the Qur’an. In the

*Kitāb al-burhān*, ‘Ammār articulates the first principle of his theory of attribution by
insisting that any descriptor applied to a thing must correspond to an attribute which is
present in the thing being described. Furthermore, to deny the presence of the attribute is
to affirm the opposite descriptor:

> It is clear that one does not call a thing “living” when there is not
established for it [an attribute of life, nor does one call a thing rational
unless it has a]¹⁶ word, on the basis of which we describe it so. It is also
clear that if one is deprived of life, he must be described as lifeless, but
God (blessed be He) is exalted beyond that.¹⁷

‘Ammār follows this introduction with an argument based on the descriptor “seeing,” in
which he insists that one must either affirm that a given being is “seeing,” in which case
one must also affirm the presence in the thing described of an attribute of sight; or else
one must describe the same being as “blind.” Finally, he structures an identical argument
around the descriptor “rational.” In making these arguments, ‘Ammār seems to have been
taking a cue directly from the internecine debates that were beginning to occur among
Islamic scholars about the implications of the rules of Arabic grammar. Such rules could
not be lightly shaken off by those who affirmed the revelation of the Qur’an; since God’s
speech was in Arabic, the divine revelation and the rules of Arabic grammar were
inseparable from one another. According to these principles, predications or *sifāt* imply
nouns, which in turn signify extant individual actions or entities. Thus to say that “God

¹⁶ There is a textual lacuna in the manuscript according to Hayek’s critical edition; the words that appear in
brackets are my supposition.

¹⁷ Hayek, 47; “*Faqad waḍḍaha ānahu lä yasmīhuhu ḥān ād lam yaqbat lihu ... kalimah ‘alā mā waṣaffā
min ḍalak, wa ānahu qad ā’dama ḍahhu al-ḥizāh ṣaṣīrahu mūṭān, jala Allah wa t’aḍlā ‘an ḍalak.”
hears” or “God sees” is to posit an act of hearing or seeing, which exists in God and can be thought to be in some sense distinct from him. In other words, despite the absolute unicity by which the Qur’ān described God, the Arabic language in which it was written implied some kind of multiplicity in God in order for predications of Him to have any basis. Thus ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī was making a point about the language of attribution which drew directly from a source that his Muslim interlocutors would have found undeniable – the Arabic language of the Qur’ān – but which implied some kind of multiplicity in God.

‘Ammār was not hesitant to press this point. Drawing upon two of the Qur’ānic descriptions of God18, he writes:

Indeed it is clear [that in no way are] the attributes of Life and Wisdom expressed except by the names Life and Wisdom. Their meanings are denied and it becomes necessary to describe Him as “not living” and “not rational,” in the case where one declines to affirm of Him a Word and a Spirit…. And it certainly follows from the denial [of a Word and a Spirit] from the Creator that He is represented as mortal, lacking life and lacking a word, like the idols which were called gods. God in His books reproaches those adherents who follow gods who have no life and no word….19

In this remarkable passage, ‘Ammār first appropriates the Muslim debates about predications and multiplicity in God. He then aligns two divine attributes affirmed in common by Christians and Muslims, Wisdom and Life, with the second and third hypostaseis of the Trinity, God’s Word and His Spirit – which also happen to be Qur’ānic

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19 Hayek 48; “Faqad waqafa ... yanhu'a al-ba‘a ...” The first set of brackets represents a lacuna in the manuscript and the text within the brackets is my supposition.
terminology, as has already been shown. He then posits that the implications of
attribution in Arabic on the one hand, and an absolutist understanding of the doctrine of
\( \textit{al-ta‘āhad} \) on the other hand, are inherently in conflict, implicitly giving his Muslim reader
a very uncomfortable choice between denying all predications of God or admitting some
kind of multiplicity in Him. Finally, in a rhetorical tour de force, he inverts the Muslim
accusation of \( \textit{sīrīk} \) by suggesting that a God stripped of His Word and His Spirit is simply
one of the lifeless, mute idols condemned in the scriptures, which he slyly refers to as
“God’s books,” tacitly including even the Qur’ān.

Having affirmed an understanding of attribution that was current among his
Muslim interlocutors and then turned that same theory to his own apologetical purposes,
‘Ammār then turned his attention to defending the use of metaphor (\( \textit{mi‘īl} \)) when
describing God. He does so in a way that is similar to the approach taken by Abū Rā’ilah:

The metaphor is not the likeness of a thing which corresponds to the
likeness in every respect. As in the case of a human being, if you were
asked to make a likeness of some ruler that you had not seen, you could
not make the likeness move; nor would it see, nor hear, nor smell, nor
taste, nor walk. And so someone may say to you: He moves, sees, hears,
tastes, smells, and other similar things, but the thing [you have made] has
none of these traits, so how can you say you have made his likeness? This
would be treating you harshly, for it is not possible to make a likeness that
is in all ways similar to him of whom it is a likeness…. And therefore it is
not possible for us to give you a metaphor for the Creator that fits in every
way from among created things, because they are not like Him, and you
will not find among created things a complete likeness for the Creator…. 20

20 Hayek, 50; “\( \text{Wā ‘al-mi‘īl lā yakūn mi‘īl ‘al-sī’ al-adīf yuḏūrāb lihu ‘al-mi‘īl fī kūl sī’}. \text{Kāmā nā ‘aṣūnān la‘a}
śā’laka ān ‘īmāl lihu mi‘īl b’ad man la‘m yarhu min ‘al-malāık fī-mi‘īlātuhu lihu fā-lam yajādahu
yatahara ku wā la yabsar wā la yas‘m‘a wā la yachts wā la yants fā-qāla lika: Fūlān yatahara
wa yabsar wa yas‘m‘a wa yachts wa yas‘m‘a mā āshab dālak, wa haḏ‘ā liša ‘alā sī’ min haḏāhī al-ḥāṣīl,
kūl sī’, li-‘anāhu lā yasbāhahu wā la tajād fī ‘al-malāıkūn kāmilān mi‘īl ‘al–Ḥalīq…”
As had already been shown, ‘Ammār al-Basrī sometimes hesitates between language that emphasizes the absoluteness and utter transcendence of God (which places him more firmly on common ground with his Muslim interlocutors) and language which suggests that God may have some things in common with created beings, especially those of a more “subtle” nature. By articulating the principle described here, ‘Ammār is able, like Abū Rā’īṭah, to draw from examples of created things and yet avoid accusations by Muslims that he has compromised the divine transcendence. Furthermore, as shown earlier, by affirming this principle, he is pursuing a form of discourse that was in keeping with the dialectical principles expressed by the Muslim scholars of his day.

In seeking metaphors from among created things to demonstrate that a given thing could be simultaneously three in one sense and one in another, ‘Ammār calls upon the familiar examples of the sun and fire, but also contributes another metaphor that is less common among the Arabophone Christian authors here considered, that of the human soul:

… We perceive the soul, for which we affirm the word and the life, and by this we do not describe three souls…. By the correctness of affirming the life and the word as substantial qualities of the soul, the soul is described as being living and rational…. The soul and its word and its life are one soul…. And the threeness of these things does not contradict their oneness, nor does the oneness contradict their threeness.21

It is quite noteworthy that ‘Ammār offers this example because it goes beyond the rule about metaphors that he has articulated. Whereas the other examples used in this section

21 Hayek, 49; “… Narā ʾal-nafs, ʾād tubūtāt līhā ʾal-kalimah wa ʾal-hūšah, lam tasar li-dalak talāṭah ānfs…. bi-saḥah ʾal-hūšah wa ʾal-kalimah li-l-nafs faṭḥārhah šārita naṣṣān ḥīthā nāṭiq.... Faqad tujīda ʾal-nafs wa kalimatīhā wa ḥaṣṣātānaṣṣān wāhidah.... Wa lam yubīla taǧtūhā taṭḥīdāhā wa lā taṭḥīdāhā taǧtūhā.”
of the text, fire and the sun, have in common with the divinity only the fact of threeness-in-oneness, in the case of the soul the particular qualities that he attributes to it are the same as the qualities that he attributes to God. As has already been shown, he equates the Holy Spirit with the presence in God of an eternal attribute of Life, just as he equates the Word with the presence in God of an eternal attribute of Rationality. So by speaking of “the soul and its word and its life,” ‘Ammār articulates a triad that is almost identical to “God and His Word and His Spirit.” This metaphor would seem, then, to be in a different category from any other comparison or language about God that ‘Ammār offers. Taking into account the fact that ‘Ammār ultimately makes a case for understanding the Trinity as a triad of eternal attributes of Being, Living, and Rational, there would appear to be a kind of ontological correlation between created things and God insofar as every created thing participates in the attribute of existing, a subset of existing things participate in the attribute of living, and a subset of living things participate in the attribute of rationality. As shown earlier, ‘Ammār posits a kind of trinitarian existence for all beings, with each being defined as a triad of its substance and its two principal attributes. Thus the human soul would be understood in this schema as the pinnacle of the created world, since it has the same principal attributes as the Trinity, albeit not eternally so, and therefore belongs to the only class of material beings to participate in all three of the Trinitarian attributes.

Even with such a close comparison between the Trinitarian life of God and the human soul, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī is eager to emphasize the extreme limitations of human language in making predications about God. In order to do so, he focuses on the
quintessential Qur’anic expression of God’s uniqueness, His role as creator, and explores
the differences between God’s act of creation and human acts of creation:

There is nothing corresponding to His essence to show you, and no
similarity between His operations and the operations of His creatures. We
find that every maker of a thing among creatures and its act of making is
not free with regard to its making, for the thing is made by the movement
of the maker’s bodily members and the use of its limbs. Its movements are
conducted according to its limitations, and its limbs are used according to
its composition and formation, which in turn are fashioned according to
the composer and former that preceded it in composition and formation.…
But truly we know, since we find [God’s] nature to be exalted beyond
these attributes, that we find creating and causing things to be done
according to His being, for indeed He causes things efficaciously and
wisely without movement, and heals, intends, or wills without effort or
supplies.22

Having focused on God’s absolute uniqueness as Creator and expressed the ontological
chasm existing between Him and his creatures, even when those creatures engage in
activities that are somewhat similar to His, ‘Ammār then goes on to claim this very fact
as support for his Trinitarian doctrine. He argues that the activities through which God
brings about the creation of things – intending, willing, and executing – are unintelligible
except in the case of one who possesses the attribute of rationality. Rationality, in turn,
can only be attributed to a being that is living. In other words, the fact that human beings
speak of God as “making” or “creating” something is ultimately an indication of the
presence of these eternal attributes of Life and Rationality, since the usual attributes one

22 Hayek, 149; “Fa-lā naṣīr lihu it jā‘haruhu wa lā šibh bīn al‘zāluhu wa al‘aḏḏ ḥulquhu. Wa ḡalāk ānā
wajāḏnā kul šān‘a šī’ wa ṣāliḥu min al-mahlīqān lā yahlā ‘anda ša‘ītuḫu ḡalāk ‘al-śī’ min taḥriḵ ā‘dā’hu
āṣṭamāl jāzāīrhu wa kānaṭ ḥarākāțahu taḍal ‘alā ḥudādāțahu wa jāzāīrhu taḍal ‘alā tarkībīhu wa tā‘līfīhu,
wa ān tā‘līfīhu wa tarkībīhu yadalān ‘alā mī‘lī‘ murākah mūtaqādām lihu ṣāliḥu wa wâlī tarkībīhu. Bāl
bi-haq n‘alām āḏ wajāḏnā ḡāțīhu muṣ‘āliḥ ‘an ḥaḏāhi al-ṣīṭāṭ ‘um wajāḏnā lihu ḥalaqān hādāgān
āḥḍāțhu wa kānuḫu ānāma āḥḍāța ḡalāk āmīrān wa ḥīκmān dūn ḥarākāh wa ‘alīy āḏ muṣ‘āh āḏ ārāḏāh
dūn kulāh wa mu‘tiṇah.”
might associate with acts of creation, such as the movement of limbs, are not to be predicated of God. It can be only through attributes of Life and Rationality that God makes and administers the universe, and following the principles drawn from Arabic grammar described above, these attributes signify the presence of entities in God that both pertain to His substance and yet are in some sense distinct from Him. By arguing in this way, ‘Ammār follows a pattern found in the writings of all the authors here considered – i.e., appropriating the very concepts that Muslims use to argue against Trinitarian doctrine and making them central to the argument in favor of Trinitarian doctrine.

Having suggested that the name “Creator” as applied to God and the description “creator” as applied to human beings mean rather different things, ‘Ammār attempts to use a similar kind of argument to overcome the Muslim objection to calling two of the divine āqānūn by the names Father and Son. He points out that, like the term Creator, the terms Father and Son have quite different meanings when applied to God, and argues that Muslims should appreciate this based on their own use of language to describe God:

I believe that they do not understand “father” and “son” except with regard to material things and sexual reproduction … just as they reason from created fathers and their sons, and the difference of their persons and the variation of times and places between them. And it was for that, that we said to them: Renounce your description and your naming of Him as compassionate and merciful, for we do not reckon that you consider compassion and mercy except as accidents…. Renounce your description of Him as mighty and conquering, for you do not consider mightiness and conquering power except with regard to tyrants, oppressors, and ones who are blameworthy…. And refrain from your description of Him as wrathful and angry, for you do not consider wrath except in regard to changeable beings, passing from one state to another.23

23 Hayek, 165-66; “Āman ājul ānahu ulla y’aqalūn ābān wa ībnūn ilā bi-mubād’āh wa jamā‘a....
In this passage from the Kitāb al-masā‘īl wa al-ajwibah, ‘Ammār has constructed a subtle and multilayered argument in defense of traditional Trinitarian language about God. On one level of the argument, he has implied that by automatically assigning to the names “Father” and “Son” creaturely associations, the Muslims who object to these names have in fact abandoned their own religious principle that nothing is like God. On a second level, he has introduced a tension between terminology about God that would have been familiar from the Qur’ān and from Islamic religious discourse on the one hand, and the concepts from Aristotelian philosophy then gaining currency among the Muslim intellectual classes on the other hand. By pointing out that some of the words used to describe God in the Qur’ān refer to accidents and others imply mutability, ‘Ammār seeks to place his Muslim interlocutors in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between traditional Islamic language about God and the linguistic strictures that would be imposed by careful adherence to philosophical principles. They could avoid having to make such a choice, of course, by arguing that language implying accidental properties, mutability, corporeality, or temporality in God was simply metaphorical and intended to be understood in a different way when applied to Him – in which case they would be affirming exactly what ‘Ammār is claiming about the use of the terms Father and Son.
‘Ammār returns to this same idea later in the text in one of the rare passages in which he calls upon scriptural evidence. He does not quote the biblical text directly, but makes a number of allusions to Old Testament passages in which God makes predications about Himself using terminology that the Bible also applies to human beings:

For He named Himself King, and Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar were called kings, and David and Solomon were kings. He named Himself God, and Moses His servant was called a god. He named Himself Lord, and some of the people were called lords. He named Himself Powerful, and Samson was called powerful. He named Himself Wise, and Solomon was called wise, and so on with many other names, almost without end. It is not the case that agreement in the names necessitates agreement in the meanings as well.24

‘Ammār’s list of biblical references is somewhat reminiscent of Abū Rā’īṭah’s use of scripture, in that they are all taken from the Old Testament. There was probably a two-fold motivation behind limiting his selection of biblical allusions in this way. Although he was not as focused on the accusations of āl-taḥrīf as was Abū Rā’īṭah, ‘Ammār was certainly aware of the problem and makes reference to it in the opening paragraph of the Kitāb āl-burhān.25 Sensitivity to this issue would have caused him to be more willing to use Old Testament than New Testament references, since with the same scriptures being used by the Jewish scholars taking part in the theological debates of the early ninth century, they were less vulnerable to accusations of being interpolated to support


25 Hayek, 46.
Trinitarian doctrine. As with the other authors here considered, ‘Ammār would have been keenly aware of the Muslim claim to be the theological heir of the authentic religion of the Old Testament. Thus using this list of names and predications of God, many of which are also used in the Qur’ān, would present a strong challenge to the Muslim interlocutor, offering him a choice between denying the validity of language about God or admitting that the same words can be used to describe God and to describe human beings, but with quite different meanings due to the ontological chasm between God and His creatures.

This list of examples differs from the earlier passage about predications used of both God and created beings in a subtle but important way. In the earlier passage, ‘Ammār points out the ways in which Muslims describe attributes of God. But in this passage, he uses examples of how God has described or named Himself. So he has significantly raised the level of the evidence being cited, from human testimony about God to God’s own witness about Himself. In doing so, ‘Ammār implicitly appropriates the Muslim theory of scripture, in which the actual language of God is transmitted to human beings, who act in a purely passive and receptive capacity. In other words, ‘Ammār argues in the context of a theological and religious culture in which it is not possible for his interlocutor to say that the language about God found in scripture was in part a human construct. Rather, in calling upon God’s self-descriptions in the Old Testament which were echoed in the Qur’ān, ‘Ammār was invoking the highest possible testimony for how the same words could be used to make analogous predications about God and about human beings.
‘Ammär’s position that the same descriptor or predication could have different though related meanings when applied to God and to human beings is not limited only to descriptions or predications given in common language. Rather, he makes it clear that even the metaphysical terminology which he puts to such extensive use should also be understood as pointing to a somewhat different reality when applied to God:

We have used for these eternal properties the well-known name of 
\( \text{aqānim} \), due to their completeness and their exaltation beyond names of powers or accidents, not because they are \( \text{aqānim} \) as \( \text{aqānim} \) are commonly known. Similarly we have used the name substance for the eternal essence, which is the will attributed to Him, not because He is a substance [as substances are commonly known]\(^26\). It is not necessary if we name His particular properties according to this sense, to call them three substances.\(^27\)

Thus ‘Ammär gives an almost apophatic explanation for his use of the term \( \text{aqānim} \); its use is primarily intended to convey that the three entities referred to as such are neither accidents nor powers. In the final analysis, when the term is applied to God, it tells us more about what the three are not, than about what they are. Similarly, the term “substance” is not intended to place God in the same category as any other existing thing, nor even to establish a metaphor for Him.

**A Triad of Properties: Being, Living, and Rational**

In addition to being concerned with proving that the language of description and predication applies to God quite differently than it applies to His creatures, ‘Ammär al-

\(^{26}\) Hayek’s critical edition of the text indicates a lacuna at this point. The words in brackets are my supposition based on the context and structure of the passage.

\(^{27}\) Hayek 175; “\( \text{Ajrnā ‘alā hādhā al-hūas al-‘azalihā āsmā’ al-‘aqānim al-m’ārāfah, li-kamālihā wa ‘alāhā ān āsmā’ al-qāw wa al-‘ārād al-muqṣarāh, la li-‘anāhā āqānim ka-al-‘aqānim al-m’ārāfah. Ka-mā ānā ānāmā ānjrnā īsm al-jāthar ... al-dāt al-‘azalihā ārādah āgbūt ānūhu, la li-‘anāhū jāthar ... līsā yālamnā āglā nahu samīnā hūṣūhu ‘alā bāglā al-m’ānā ān ān nasmīhā jālaqah jūhār.”
Baṣrī is also eager to demonstrate that two particular terms are in a class by themselves when applied to the divine life. These terms, not surprisingly, are “Word” and “Spirit.” Contrasting the use of these terms with all of the other expressions that may be used to describe God, ‘Ammār writes:

Some have described God … by two eyes, two ears, two hands, two legs by way of expression and metaphor. But they do not do so with regard to their description of His Word and His Spirit by which He created the creatures and by which He orders affairs. Not a single one of them says that God created the creatures by His hearing or His sight or His ears or His eyes or His hands or His legs, or by anything other than His Word and His Spirit. And God … was mentioned in some of His books as creating the creatures or accomplishing things by His hand or by His arm. You must know that this saying “His arm” and “His hand” refers to His command, His power of forbidding, and His will, generated of His Word and His Spirit….

So it would appear that ‘Ammār goes so far as to deny that these two terms are metaphorical when applied to the second and third divine hypostaseis. His treatment of these terms in this passage is particularly noteworthy, insofar as he links them directly with God’s act of creation. As already demonstrated, ‘Ammār argues elsewhere that the attribute of being Creator is inherently linked with qualities of Life and Rationality, which in turn indicate the presence in the divinity of two other āqānim. By using the terms Word and Spirit in this passage, rather than the terms Rational and Living, he picks up that same argument within the context of discerning what is metaphorical in the

traditional and scriptural language about God, but does so in terms that appropriate
Qur’ānic terminology and subtly injects the question of the relationship between God,
His Word, and His Spirit, which is unresolved in the Qur’ānic text itself.

Although he argues for understanding Word and Spirit as something other and
higher than metaphor when used in reference to God, ‘Ammār still seeks to emphasize
that these two terms refer to properties in God that are more exalted than the properties in
human beings or other creatures that may be referred to by the same words. In the
Kitāb al-burhān, he writes:

We do not want, by our saying “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”
anything more than to affirm correct doctrine; namely, that God is both
living and rational. For it is the Father that has moved us to the position
that He has the qualities of Life and a Word. This life is the Holy Spirit,
and the Word is the Son, not as if we would ascribe to God all that pertains
to us in regard to ownership or procreation, for God is very greatly exalted
above that, just as the word is begotten by the mind [with no corporeal or
sexual process]. Yet God is above even this, due to His subtlety and
incomprehensibility, because of which He is not apprehended even by the
imaginations of the purely spiritual angels or the prophets sent by Him.

Provided that the supposition presented in the translation above to supply the words
missing from Hayek’s edition is correct, ‘Ammār here presents a kind of tripartite
hierarchy of meanings for attributes. On the most basic level, such terms have a common
meaning as they are applied to created beings, as when a man is said to be father to his

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29 According to Hayek’s critical edition of the text, there is a two-word phrase at this point that is,
according to his footnote, “difficult to understand.” Perhaps ‘Ammār used very obscure terminology or
perhaps the text was corrupted in transmission. The words in brackets in the text as translated here
represent my supposition.

30 Hayek 48-49; “Lā naraḍ bi-qulunā al-Ab wa al-Ibn wa Rūḥ al-Quds ākār mīn τassistant this document. As for the natural text, it appears to discuss the relationship between God, His Word, and His Spirit, examining a specific text from the Kitab al-burhan by 'Ammar. The document highlights the use of Qur'anic terminology and the question of the relationship between God, His Word, and His Spirit, noting that this relationship is unresolved in the Qur'anic text itself. It also discusses the subtlety and incomprehensibility of God, emphasizing that these terms refer to properties in God that are more exalted than properties in human beings or other creatures referred to by the same words. The text references a specific passage from the Kitab al-burhan, discussing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and their attributes, contrasting their use in human context with their application in the divine context.
son, and this connotes both physical generation and priority in time. On a second level, attributes may be taken as descriptions of a purely spiritual or noetic reality, as when the word is “begotten” by the mind. On the third level of meaning are the exalted divine properties which such attributes are intended to describe in God. The fact that ‘Ammār is positing a difference between the second and third levels of attributive meaning is underscored by the fact that he says God’s “subtlety and incomprehensibility” prevent even the angels and prophets from direct apprehension of Him. He does not choose these two groups only because of their closeness to God. Rather, he emphasizes the incorporeal nature of the angels by describing them with the adjective “spiritual” (rāḥānāt), suggesting that they have a particular affinity for spiritual or noetic realities. If God’s begetting of a Son or generation of a Word were to be understood at this level of meaning, then, it would be apprehended by the angels. Similarly, against the background of Islamic prophetology, in which prophets are believed to receive their divine messages in a mechanistic, word-for-word fashion, the prophets would be understood to have a particular affinity for receiving and understanding words from God. If it is admitted that neither of these groups apprehend the divine substance, then the attributes described by words of begetting, life, and issuance of a rational word must exist on a completely different ontological level than the same language even when applied to the least corporeal and most noetic activities of human beings.

Another aspect of ‘Ammār al- Баṣrī’s treatment of the divine Word that should be taken into consideration is the way in which he treats the concept of the “word” in general. In the Kitāb al-burḥān, he writes that
... the word has four aspects; among them, the sounded word made by the voice; the visible word made apparent by a line of writing; and the word begotten in the soul which does not pass the lips, is not set down with ink and does not appear to the eyes; and also the power of the soul from which comes the possibility that we express the word and that we decree things, administer affairs, establish the world, and subjugate beasts. This power of the soul resides, according to the doctrine of the Christians, in the Word of God, and moreover, in the perfection by which idols fall short.31

In addition to the common understandings of the spoken word, the written word, and the thought word, then, ‘Ammar includes a fourth element of meaning, the word as a power of the rational soul. In describing this power of the soul, his choice of examples is significant, because as already explained, the capacity for decreeing, administering, and so forth is a Qur’anic way of describing not human beings, but God Himself. To intensify this allusion, ‘Ammār goes on to state explicitly that this power of the soul is present in the Word of God. There are a number of important implications for proceeding in this way. First, his description here suggests that the power of the human soul to issue a word of command or administration is in some way a reflection or echo of the divine power by which all things were made and are governed. This account recalls the teaching of Theodore Abū Qurrah that descriptions of human attributes are in fact metaphors for divine attributes, with the latter occupying a kind of ontological reality of which the former are only a pale reflection. Second, by introducing this fourth element of meaning,

31 Hayek, 49; “... ʿal-ḥaţam ʿalī ṣābā‘ah ʿayjūh: ʿa-mīnhu kalām mashuf ʿa yazhuru ʿal-ṣūt, wa minhu kalām muṣār ilīhu yazhuru ʿal-ḥaţ wa minhu kalām muṭawalīda fi ʿal-nafs lam ʿa-bīrahu ʿal-ṣilatān wa lam yataḥḥān ʿal-mīdād wa lam yazhuru li-laiinn, wa minhu ʿal-qūhā al-ʿalāt li-l-nafs al-ʿalāt bi-hā ʿāmka ʿan nūzārū ʿal-kalām wa naḍdaru ʿal-ṣāt “wa naḍdaru ʿal-ṣāt “wa ṣāt “wa ṣāt “wa ṣāt “wa ṣāt. Fā-lī-qalāk, ʿal-qūhā li-l-nafs qūh āh din ʿal-naṣrāmāka fl kalimah Allāh, wa fīg qalāk fl ʿal-kamāl bi-mā taqṣarāʾ anhu ʿal-ṣīḥām.” The term that I have translated “word” here is not the most basic term for word, kalimah, but instead kalām, which can also be translated with the terms speech, saying, utterance, discourse, etc. It would seem that ‘Ammār chose this word in order to speak as broadly as possible about the generation of ideas and communication, and also to connect the concepts of kalimah and naṭaq, the “rationality” that entails the facility for communication.
‘Ammār suggests another layer of meaning for the Qur’ānic teaching that Jesus is a “word from God,” a phrase that the Qur’ānic text applies to Jesus alone among the prophets. If one limits the meaning of “word” to the written or spoken word, then perhaps this expression could be understood in a way that is limited to Islamic prophetology, despite the curiosity of Jesus alone being given this appellation. But if the word is extended to include as well a power of the rational soul that is directly related to the attributes of mastery and administration, then it becomes extremely difficult to understand “word from God” as a merely prophetic title. ‘Ammār seems to be following the technique so often found in the writings of the authors here considered, of placing the Muslim in the uncomfortable position of either denying the validity of the language of the Qur’ān itself or else denying the metaphysical understanding of “word.”

Thus when ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s treatment of the terms Word and Spirit is taken into account along with the rest of his theory of metaphysical and linguistic considerations applied to God, one arrives at a synthesis of his Trinitarian account that can be described as follows. God’s attribute of being Creator necessarily implies properties of Life and Rationality. The attributes of Life and Rationality in turn imply the existence of entities within God that are in some sense distinct from Him, although one in substance because the properties are substantial properties pertaining to the divine nature. Both the Bible and the Qur’ān refer to these properties as God’s Spirit and God’s Word, although the Bible is clear about the relationship among God, His Word, and His Spirit, while the Qur’ān leaves the relationship unexplained. Since Word and Spirit are used in the scriptural language about God to name the substantial properties through which His
attribute of being Creator is expressed, these terms are necessarily in a different category of language than other terms such as God’s sight or God’s hearing, which are metaphorical and when analyzed refer in fact to operations of His Word and His Spirit. Therefore, in order to affirm “Creator” as a proper description of God, one must affirm three divine \(\text{aqānim}\), and since the three are co-eternal, with no distinctions of time or chronological priority, and incorporeal, with no distinctions of spatial dimension, they are one in substance, such that their affirmation entails no denial of the divine unicity.

As has already been shown, ‘Ammār is eager to position Word and Spirit, along with what he considers their equivalents of Rationality and Life, as something other than metaphorical language about God. Another important aspect of his Trinitarian account is his exploration of how these same attributions differ from other divine attributes. In the Kitāb al-burhān, ‘Ammār suggests that in dialogue with Muslims he had been challenged as to why, if the divine \(\text{aqānim}\) corresponded to eternal qualities of the divine substance, and thus were in fact divine attributes, there were only three such entities. Even on the basis of biblical and Qur’ānic language alone, one could name many divine attributes, which according to ‘Ammār’s logic could result in the affirmation of many \(\text{aqānim}\) in God, rather than just three. ‘Ammār represents his Muslim interlocutor as putting the question this way:

When you attribute to God the Word and the Spirit, and say that He is imagined to be three \(\text{aqānim}\), why is it that you do not attribute to Him also hearing, sight, wisdom, knowledge, efficacy, power, clemency, intellection, compassion, nobility, existence, kindness, will, and similar things, which also pertain to the substance? For just as you call Him living and rational, and therefore attribute to Him life and a word, so also you call Him hearing, seeing, wise, knowledgeable, efficacious, powerful,
clement, forgiving, compassionate, noble, magnanimous, willing, and such things.32

The Muslim interlocutor represented here bases his objection in the same principle of Arabic grammar on which ‘Ammār has built his argument. Although the structure of the argument is not as apparent when the text is translated into English, the objection correlates adjectival forms with predicative nouns, on the basis that any attribute implies the existence of a noun, which in turn indicates the existence within the subject described of an entity that is metaphysically distinct from the subject, and by which the attribute is valid. So, for example, since the Christian will readily admit that God is compassionate, why does he not also affirm a fourth qanūm of Compassion?

As explained previously, part of ‘Ammār’s answer to this problem lies in a description of all things as existing in a kind of “trinitarian” fashion, being understood to have both their substance and the two primary properties by which their substance is defined. Another part of his answer is his linkage of Word and Spirit to the absolutely unique role of God as Creator, understanding the act of creation to entail Rationality, which in turn entails Life. But in the context of this challenge, ‘Ammār undertakes a more detailed response to the problem of the particular attributes here articulated.

The first aspect of his argument is to present a kind of ontological framework for the entire created, material order, revolving around three fundamental attributes of being, life, and rationality:

32 Hayek, 52; “Fa-ād qad ḥūṣba il-lah al-kalīmah wa al-rūh fa-qalta ānahu wuhimā ṭalātah āqānūm, fa-līma lam taṭbat lihu āḏān samʿān wa baṣārān wa ḥakīmah wa ʿālmān wa qāh wa ʿafūwān wa mārafaḥ wa riḥmah wa karīmān wa waṣīdān wa nʿamah wa ʿārādah wa mā ṣibḥa ḍalak jāḥarāth ʾāḏān. Fa-ānṣa kamā ṣurūtahu ṭīḥa nāṯīqūn fa-ṭḥata lihu baṣīḥah wa kalīmah, ḍalak samīṭahu samʿān baṣīrān ḥakīmān ʿālmān qādīn qūṭūn ʿafūwān ḍalīlān raḥīmān karīmān maʿāmān marīdān wa mā kūn bi-ḍalak šabīhān.”
We regard life and rationality to be fundamental to the nature and constitutive of the substance.... We consider the earth to be lifeless, and with regard to the bodies formed from it, the difference between the earth and what is formed of it is the quality “life.” We call those bodies, distinct from the quality life itself, “living things.” Then we consider the living things to be differentiated by the quality “reason,” and so we call some of them – i.e., human beings – rational, and those remaining which are not rational we call by the names of “beasts” and “livestock.” There is no hearing, seeing, clemency, forgiving, kindness, generosity, and nobility apart from the condition of the substance, and its condition does not differentiate some beings from others. Because we see within the same substance some hearing and some not hearing, some seeing and some not seeing, some forgiving and compassionate and some unforgiving and not compassionate, some generous and noble and some not generous and not noble, so the substance is not differentiated by these kinds of differences and is not changed by its condition into a different substance....

The properties of life and rationality, then, serve as the distinguishing features that differentiate classes of created beings, and so it is on this basis that they are believed to enjoy a kind of ontological priority. This schema extends the principle articulated by Theodore Abū Qurrah – namely, that no human attribute can exist without being grounded in a divine attribute of which it is the dim reflection – to the entire material created order. Even the earth itself reflects the most basic divine attribute of being, while the lower animals reflect both the attributes of being and of living, and the rational animal, the human being, reflects all three attributes of being, life and rationality.

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This passage may at first appear to conflict with the basic theory of Arabic grammar on which ‘Ammār has constructed his argument. Since the various attributes treated here are described as “conditions” of the substance, it would appear that there is no entity within the subject described to serve as the predicative noun by which the attribute is valid. However, he goes on to explain how each of the attributes mentioned here fits into his Trinitarian account based on the attributes of Being, Life, and Rationality. ‘Ammār first treats the two attributes which are descriptions of sensory perception, seeing and hearing. He argues that “it is not necessary to ascribe them to God substantially, for these are constructive operations in composite bodies, and God has no body to execute such operations. Indeed, we intend by our expression that He hears or sees, to express that He knows.” This pair of attributes are the only ones that ‘Ammār treats in this way, more or less dismissing them as purely metaphorical. In a sense, though, he has merely displaced the objection onto a different attribute, for certainly his Muslim interlocutor could respond that the attribute “knowing” should entail a fourth qanūm of Knowledge. ‘Ammār sets aside this possibility temporarily and deals with the divine attribute of knowledge later in the text, as will be shown below.

Next ‘Ammār discusses an attribute called the “efficacious will” or “operative will.” ‘Ammār defines this concept broadly enough to include both the capacity of animals for achieving things according to their instincts, and the human will, or “will of choice” (ārādah āḥtār). Since according to his definition the will is common to both the

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34 Hayek 53;"Fā-lā yajah ān tūjabhumā lī-lah ja‘āharān. Li-anahumā ḥāriḥān rukibutā fi ājsād mā‘īlah, wa lā jasan lī-lah turkiba fūhi ħāriḥān. Wā ānumā ārādūnā bi-qulūmā sim‘ān bū‘ārān.”
lower animals and human beings, ‘Ammār argues that it is not one of the attributes that distinguishes one class of beings from another:

… We are distinguished from the beasts not by what we have in common with them – namely, life – but by what is distinct in us – namely, reason. Likewise, it is not the will which separates us from the beasts, which in fact groups us together with them, because wills are found both in us and in them. The distinction is reason; specifically, the reason of choice, which they lack because they act under coercion.35

Since a thing must be alive in order to exercise a will of either kind, the attribute of will would actually seem to pertain to the attribute of life and serve as an ontological dividing line being those entities that have the attribute of being only, and those that have both the attributes of being and living. ‘Ammār, however, does not pursue this line of reasoning, probably because it does not end in an association with the divine attribute of Rationality. Instead, he chooses to dismiss the attribute of will as not pertaining to the divine substance since it is shared not only with rational beings but also with the lower animals.

‘Ammār argues that a third group of attributes – justice, compassion, nobility, generosity, kindness, clemency, and forgiveness – are in fact attained rather than eternal attributes, because they describe His relationship to created beings:

… These are operations to which He attained after His act of creation. For if He punishes accordingly as His creatures deserve, He is called just; and if he has mercy upon His creatures, He is called compassionate; and if He bestows magnanimity on His creatures, he is called noble; and if He is generous and kind to them, He is called generous and kind; and if He forgives and pardons them, He is called forgiving and clement.36

35 Hayek, 54; “Wa ka-dalak anfiṣahā min al-buhā’im līsa bi-mā yajim’anā m’ahā min al-ḥuḍah lakin bi-mā ḥasanā bihi min al-naṭiq. Wa ka-dalak līsa bi-l-ṣāḥāt anfiṣaḥā min al-buhā’im k-ṣaḥīnahā anā m’ahā fihā fa-ṣāḥir al-ṣāḥāt al-miṣyūdāh līnah wā fihā līnah, bi-faḍilah al-naṭiq, bi-ṣāḥir, wa līnah bi-ṣāḥir al-naṭiq, bi-ṣāḥir.”

36 Ibid., “Fā-anāmah hā aṭā’al munqaṣū sār ilthā fi ḥalaqaṭu. Fa-ṣāḍī ʿaṣāqabāḥum bi-ṣātahqāqīḥum sunūhā
He goes on to argue that every attribute in this category is made possible by the presence of the more fundamental attribute of Rationality. It is the power of reason that makes possible operations such as these, which is in turn why these descriptions are never attributed of the lower animals, who lack reason even though they have the attribute of life. ‘Ammār’s argument, then, implies two distinct reasons why the attributes listed here need not imply the existence of other āqānūm. First, he has made clear throughout his argument that one of the most important ways that the divine āqānūm differ from others is their eternality. Since these attributes are acquired by virtue of the relationship between God and His creation, they cannot be said to be eternal, having a specific beginning at the dawn of God’s relationship to the created order. ‘Ammār is able to argue in this way without introducing mutability in God because the basis of these operations, the divine qanūm of Rationality, is itself eternal. The second reason is that the attributes here, specifically because they are operations of the reason, cannot be considered apart from Rationality. In a sense, to say that God is just, noble, generous, and so forth, is to say the same thing – namely, that God has the attribute of Rationality – in a number of different ways.

The next set of divine attributes that ‘Ammār treats are those of “power and strength.” He argues that these attributes can refer either to physical strength and power, in which case they cannot refer to God because of his incorporeality, or to spiritual strength:

‘ādlān, wa āḍā raḥamahum sumūhu raḥīmān, wa āḍā tafaḍala ‘alihum sumūhu karīmān, wa āḍā jādā wa ān’ama ‘alihum sumūhu jastān mu’āmān, wa ‘alā ‘anhum wa ġalāra lihum sumūhu ‘alūdūn wa ġalūrān.”
Regarding the spiritual kind, it is like the strength of the subtle soul; i.e., its word, by which it can discourse upon things and forbid things, listen to entities and obey them, command the obedience of beasts which are physically stronger than itself, administer the affairs of the world and govern its organization. The power and strength of God … is like the strength of the soul which we have mentioned – i.e., His Word, by which he established the heavens and the earth.37

The identity that ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī establishes between the eternal Word of God and the quality of Rationality has already been demonstrated at some length. It is clear, then, that when he says that the power and strength of God are the Word by which He created all things, he is defining the attribute of power as an operation of the Rationality, much as he did with the previous set of attributes described above. Although ‘Ammār does not go so far as to assert that the divine power and strength are acquired attributes, it is noteworthy that he associates them so closely with the act of creation, which was the same association that justified referring to the previous set as acquired attributes. The distinction between that group and the present pair of attributes is that power and strength are demonstrated in the act of creation, whereas the others were expressed in God’s treatment of His creatures after the act of creation.

After his examination of power and strength, ‘Ammār considers the attributes of wisdom and knowledge. In doing so, he becomes the only author among those considered here to make explicit reference to some of the Greek writers whose works were having such a profound impact on the intellectual landscape of the Arabophone world of his time:

37 Hayek, 54; “Wa āmā āl-rāḥānī fa-ka-qūah āl-nafs āl-lajīfah ʿanī kalimatihā ālatī ḥāruat biḥā ṣamāḥa wa ṣabīḥa fa-samʿatu ʿal-ṣāḥā wā ṣaṭʿat biḥā, wa ṣaṭʿat biḥā ʿal-ṣāḥā im ālatī hā ḥā qawā miḥwā ʿabdān biḥā, wa sāsāt āmār āl-ʿālam wa ḥiṭmat tadābūrīru biḥā. Fā-qudrah Allah wa qūṣūru ... kā-qūah āl-nafs ālatī ḥā ḥārīmā ʿanī kalimatihā ālatī qūmūt āl-samāʾ wa āl-ʿārṣ.”
We call rational entities wise and knowledgeable, as we call Aristotle wise, for the greatness of his teaching set down in his books of reason; and we call Galen knowledgeable because of what he set down and achieved in his books on medicine. Wisdom and knowledge are referred to the word, for they are not attributed to anything other than the entity with a word. For if you see the entity with a word achieve those things attained by what is characteristic of the word, for that reason his word is called knowledgeable. And if we see him attain by it the reasons and causes of things, it is called wise.

As with the other attributes treated by ‘Ammār, wisdom and knowledge are considered to be related directly to the Word or quality of Rationality. In this particular case, the association is especially strong because ‘Ammār argues that, in the case of the human being, it is not the person himself who is ultimately referred to as wise or knowledgeable. Rather it is his word which achieves those appellations. By extension, then, the attributes Wise and Knowledgeable, when applied to God, are attributed directly to His eternal Word.

While the list of divine attributes treated here is certainly not an exhaustive account of every attribute mentioned in the Bible or the ‘Qur‘ān, it is expansive enough to appreciate how ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī would likely respond to any other attribute that might be named. In each case, the attribute is ultimately reducible to be a metaphor for, or an operation of, the qualities of Life or Rationality. Therefore, there is no reason to posit an additional qanūm for any of them, because the eternal qualities of Life and Rationality account for the affirmation of these attributes in God.

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In conclusion, the Trinitarian writings of ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī may in some respects be considered the culmination of the theological trajectory of the other authors considered here. His metaphysical schema is as completely developed as that of Abū Rā’īṭah, but he contributes some important further enhancements: the concept of the “quality” (m‘anā), which may be either the identity of the substance of a thing, or else the power of the substance by which the substance is defined; the idea that even created things exist as simultaneously one and multiple because of the oneness of their substance and the plurality of their qualities; and the refusal to apply the term āḏḥāṣ to the divine hypostaseis in order to avoid implying any possibility of either corporeality or division in the divinity. Like the other authors here considered, ‘Ammār sought to exploit the Qur’ānic uses of the terms Word and Spirit but his account fully aligns these two terms with the divine attributes of Rationality and Life, with all other scriptural divine attributes being considered as either non-eternal attributes defining the relationship between God and His creation, or else reducible to the incommensurable three attributes of Being, Life, and Rationality. Finally, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s writings take the Islamic emphasis on the utter uniqueness and transcendence of God to its limit, suggesting that both the language of attribution and the language of metaphysical analysis have fundamentally different meanings when applied to God than when used of created beings.
Conclusion

The Trinitarian speculations of the anonymous author of *Fitaylta*, Theodore Abū Qurrah, Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rāʾīnah, and ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī might be summarized in the following seven points. First, they attempted to appropriate Qur’ānic language and Islamic religious idiom, particularly the Qur’ānic uses of the terms “Word” and “Spirit” in reference to God in order to build their case. Second, they constructed their arguments using a selective and nuanced approach to the biblical sources, particularly as time went on and the allegation of *al-tahrit* became an apologetical challenge, calling primarily upon the prophets as allegedly common ground with Muslims. Third, as Greek philosophical concepts, particularly Aristotelian metaphysics, became more prominent in Arab Muslim society, they drew upon this common intellectual ground in an attempt to show that Trinitarian doctrine was supported not only by the prophets and Qur’ānic terminology, but was also more intellectually gratifying from the point of view of metaphysical considerations. Fourth, they attempted to maintain a consistent focus on the absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God, a point so central to Islamic theology and piety, as the touchstone of all their argumentation. Fifth, they attempted to establish that in order for a human attribute to exist, it must have a divine attribute as its source and origin, while emphasizing that the same named attribute may refer to related but different realities in God and in human beings, owing to the ontological difference between God and His creatures. Sixth, they sought to draw upon the implications of Arabic grammar and the resulting Islamic debates about the relationship between the divine attributes and
the oneness of God in order to construct a Trinitarian account in which God may be understood as possessed of three eternal and incommensurable attributes, indicating the presence of three divine \( \tilde{a}q\breve{a}n\breve{m}m \). Lastly, in pursuing each element of their apologetical strategy named here, they sought to invert Muslim arguments, making the Qur’\ャnic proof-texts and other tools used in anti-Trinitarian arguments by Muslims the very materials from which they constructed their Trinitarian arguments.

Certainly this apologetical literature of the eighth and ninth centuries constitutes a bold and intellectually adventurous experiment in apologetical theology. But does it have continuing relevance for Christian-Muslim encounter, or even for Trinitarian theology more broadly, in the modern age? Conversely, should it instead be looked upon as a theological curiosity at best and an aberrant theological dead-end at worst? When Hans Urs von Balthasar sought in the middle of the twentieth century a ressourcement that would overcome what he saw as the ossification of the theological enterprise, he wrote:

There were any number of theses deserving of development which the Fathers initiated, and which, subsequently, as theology became systematized, were held unsuitable, unimportant, and so left in abeyance…. What a wealth of material is to be found in Thomas, what a variety of approaches and aspects he suggests, how numerous the hints and promptings scattered at random through his works….\(^1\)

Von Balthasar, like others of his generation including Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner, saw in the theological speculations and suggestions of both the Church Fathers and of Aquinas many side-paths and byways that, although not part of the main thoroughfare of systematic theology, were well worth exploring for their complementary insights. One

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might take the point a step further and suggest that, if we are to understand the God of revelation to be infinite and boundless, as the Cappadocians so often remind us we must, then there may well be infinite “standing-places” from which to contemplate the divine life, with correspondingly infinite possibilities of expression, so long as actual contradiction of revealed truth is avoided.

With this line of thinking as one’s trajectory, one may well regard the project of commending faith in Christ and adherence to Christian doctrine in the terminological and conceptual range of Islamic religious discourse as one of the great unfinished projects of theological history. A full accounting of the factors that caused this bold venture to all but disappear from the theological landscape would need to encompass, among other factors, the turning away of Muslim theologians from falsafah in the later Middle Ages, the reduced social standing of Christians in the caliphate as time wore on, and the tendency in later periods to characterize “Christian-Muslim encounter” in political and military terms, rather than in theological and academic ones. In any event, such an accounting would be out of place here. For the purpose at hand, it is sufficient to suggest that, like the enrichment and revivification that Von Balthasar could imagine flowing from his proposed patristic and Thomistic ressourcement, there are opportunities both for enriching Trinitarian theology and for enhancing Christian-Muslim theological encounter by revisiting and further developing some of the Trinitarian speculations of the early Christian Arab theologians considered here.

It is not necessary that each point made by these four authors be considered equally valid and equally worthy of further development. Perhaps the two most
“culturally bound” aspects of the Trinitarian accounts described here are the appropriation of Aristotelian metaphysics and the theological implications of Arabic grammar. In each of these cases, there is a systemic and internally consistent structure of thought which may produce compelling implications for those who affirm the necessary presuppositions. Yet neither of them offers the kind of universal adherence that would make them a tool of systematic theology across cultures and languages (although, of course, Aristotelian metaphysics has had a much broader cross-cultural appeal and adherence than Arabic grammar). In a relatively recent but very brief assessment of the way in which a doctrine of the Trinity based on divine attributes found its way into Coptic tradition, Mark Swanson distinguishes between the routine demands of systematic theology and “apologetical utility.” For Muslims or others who embrace Aristotelian metaphysics or are interested in the demands of theoretical Arabic grammar, these aspects of the arguments explored here may continue to be “apologetically useful.” Since the study of Greek philosophy and other classical literature no longer holds the position as intellectual common ground between Christians and Muslims that such study held in eighth and ninth century ‘Abbasid Baghdad, classical philosophical concepts are unlikely ever to be as important to Christian-Muslim theological encounter as they were in that time and place.

The more general project of commending Christian doctrine in Islamic and even Qur’anic terms is of obvious interest and value. Yet such a project, were it to be renewed in the context of formal academic theology, would undoubtedly provoke considerable

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controversy. This is so because such an endeavor touches directly upon one of the most fundamental questions of theological method: how closely correlated are the contents of revealed truth and the form of its doctrinal expression? One has to admit, in the case of the early Arabophone Christian writers treated here, that at times their way of describing God’s interaction with His creation, while admirably attempting to bridge the conceptual gap between two distinct religious traditions by means of Islamic idiom, sometimes verged upon a representation of Christ and his redemptive work that could be reasonably accused of departing from scripture and Christian tradition. Three examples that present themselves are the reliance upon the prophetology of the Qur’ān, a conception of Christ’s mission that at times almost limited it to establishing authentic worship of the one true God, and the mechanistic and passive sense of the inspiration of scripture. Yet none of these authors, while engaged in so bold an experiment, ever crossed the line into undeniable heterodoxy.

Among the points most relevant and most worthy of further consideration is these authors’ exploitation of the Qur’ānic use of the terms “Word of God” and “Holy Spirit.” This is an area that should be further explored for three distinct reasons. First, the bare fact that these terms are used in a post-Christian text which bears evidence of direct Christian or quasi-Christian influence (such as the inclusion of materials from the apocryphal gospels) suggests the need for exploring how these terms came to be used there and what resonances they may have originally carried. Second, the fact that the Qur’ānic text leaves the relationships among God, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit unexplained calls for theological inquiry and for a frank assessment of the theological
coherence and consistency of the Qurʾān itself. Third, as demonstrated above, these terms are often used in relationship to Jesus (for example, with Jesus alone among the prophets being called “a word from God” and likewise alone among the prophets being “supported by the Holy Spirit”). Thus there is an unresolved tension in the Qurʾānic text itself about who and what Jesus Christ is, and such a tension is fair ground for investigation from the point of view of apologetical theology.

What of the attempt to develop a theology of the Trinity based on three incommensurable divine attributes? On the one hand, it must clearly be said that what has been meant by the term hypostaseis and what has been meant by the term attributes in traditional Western Christian theology are distinct concepts which do not overlap. In the conventional theological usage of Western Christianity, attributes are predications of the divine substance and therefore by definition are common to the three divine persons of the Trinity. On the other hand, the Arabophone Christian authors presented here do not, when analyzed carefully, attempt to make a direct and straightforward correlation between attributes (ṣilāt) and hypostaseis (āqānim). Instead, what can ultimately be discerned in their work (particularly the writings of ʿAmmār al- Başrī, who among this first generation of Christian Arab apologetical theologians develops the idea most completely) is the suggestion that all discourse about divine attributes must be based on two fundamental principles. First, because of God’s exalted and transcendent nature, all language of attribution must be understood to mean something different than the same language applied to human beings. Second, within the attributions or predications made about God in the language of the Bible and the Qurʾān, some are purely metaphorical,
while others are ultimately reducible to three attributes which are neither further reducible nor commensurable with each other. These three most essential predications are described not as attributes but as the principles of the divine substance.

While not proceeding in terms of divine attributes, Western Christian theology has traditionally ascribed to each hypostasis of the Holy Trinity a unique property: the Father begets, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds. Furthermore, it is understood that the language of begetting and proceeding is applied to God in a completely different way than the same language would be applied to human beings. These properties and the mutual relations established by them are further understood to be eternal. In a sense, then, both the traditional Western Trinitarian theology and the approach via the divine attributes by the apologetical theologians considered here could be described in the same broad terms: one transcendent God, who cannot be encompassed by human language, but who can be truly affirmed as having three distinct eternal properties, each incommensurable with the others.

The early Councils and Fathers seized upon the philosophical concepts available to them to explore this reality and of course, their endeavor was not without its own controversies, including the fundamental question of whether such a metaphysical apparatus could be applied to the data of revelation, a problem captured succinctly in the famous rhetorical question of Tertullian’s, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

Modern Christians are inclined to forget, since the metaphysical speculations of the patristic era have been enshrined in dogmatic definitions and systematic theology, that

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3 Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, vii.
the use of such tools was a conscious choice by bishops and other theologians to draw upon extra-biblical resources for the exploration of revealed truth. This suggests in turn that the Trinitarian speculations of the authors presented here could become the basis of a renewed theological exploration of Trinitarian doctrine. Just as the language of begetting, when used of the Trinitarian hypostaseis, refers to an ineffable reality to which we can only approach with the language of creaturely attributes while acknowledging that we “see through a glass darkly,” so also the language of God’s “rationality,” understood as the eternal attribute of self-communication, similarly falls short of the reality that it seeks to describe, and yet does in fact tell us something of the relationship between the first and second hypostaseis of the Trinity. One could similarly explore a parallel between the understanding of the Holy Spirit as eternally proceeding and the description of the Spirit as the predication of the eternal life of the Trinity. Ultimately the touchstone for such a renewed theological endeavor must be the humble and habitual affirmation of the most basic Islamic religious sentiment: like Him there is nothing.
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