

Christological Debates in the “Hijri” Mediterranean: Timeless Arguments, New Sources

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Bio

Clare Wilde is a scholar of Qur'anic studies, Arabic Christianity, and late antique Christian-Muslim intellectual history. Her work examines Christian Arabic texts, Syriac and Arabic religious traditions, and the ways early and medieval Christian writings engaged the Qur'an and Islamic discourse. She has published on the utility of Christian Arabic texts for Qur'anic studies and on the Qur'an in early Melkite texts. Her scholarship is especially concerned with how Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions interacted across languages, polemical settings, and shared scriptural inheritances.

Abstract

After the Arab, Muslim conquests, Christians not only continued their Christological debates, but added a new source to bolster their arguments: the Arabic Qur'ān. Although not everyone in the caliphate was Muslim, the arrival of Arabophone Muslim rulers, whose calendar started with the Hijra (the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622), altered not only administrative structures but the very language of the diverse communities. This common language, Arabic, bridged confessional communities and saw the emergence of a new body of Christian apologetics. In their defense of Christianity, Christian Arabic texts would reference the Qur'ān, but also ancient Greek texts – in Arabic translation, some of which are lost to us. This

paper examines the arguments and sources of a unique manuscript from St. Catherine's monastery, highlighting its multi-cultural, multi-confessional and multi-linguistic elements. Sinai Ar 434 demonstrates unusual familiarity with the Qur'ān and tafsīr, as well as the Christological debates of the late 6th and early 7th centuries. The Christian author of Sinai Ar. 434 appears to have a liberal understanding of "revelation" (shar') and "inspiration" (ilhām), even placing the Qur'ān among the "books of God." His arguments may have been directed at Monophysite Christians, as well as Muslims. Further research into the manuscript's provenance and the as-yet-undeciphered terms therein is a desideratum.

Keywords: MS Sinai Arabic 434, Melkite, Qur'an, Christian Arabic, Hijri, Maximos the Confessor

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1.1 Introduction

Situated near Jabal Musa in the southern Sinai peninsula, a location commonly associated with biblical events such as the burning bush (Rubin, 2014) and Moses’ receipt of the Ten Commandments, the monastery of St. Catherine is the world’s oldest continuously used Christian monastery (established by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century CE). It is also the world’s oldest continuously operating library,¹ with its collection of manuscripts² surpassed only by the Vatican’s holdings. Despite its physical location on Egyptian land, it is under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, and many of its holdings seem to have been produced in Jerusalem or its environs (e.g. Mar Saba). (Rapp, 2020, pp. 65–66) Although today threatened by contested real estate development designed for luxury tourism,³ the library’s holdings have long attracted the interest of foreigners. Perhaps the best-known of these is Constantine Tischendorf,⁴ who, after allegedly seeing the oldest complete copy of the New Testament there – in a box of kindling – eventually managed to “borrow” it – a “borrowing” that has lasted over two centuries, with the manuscript now in the possession of the British Library. Understandably, St. Catherine’s monks subsequently have been reluctant to open their library to researchers – with some notable exceptions. For example, in 1949, researchers under the auspices of the Library of Congress were granted permission to photograph and microfilm many of its holdings.⁵ And, after Israel’s occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, Israeli researchers were allowed to photograph the remainder of the collection in 1968.⁶

While most of the collection is Greek, there are also texts in numerous other languages - including Arabic texts written by Christians. Sinai Ar 434 (Griffith, 2006a; Haddad, 1985; Roggema, 2025) is one of these Christian Arabic holdings. This collection of Christian homiletic

writings (entitled MIMARS, from the Syriac and Arabic word for “sayings”) comprises 255 folios (available as digitized microfilm from the Library of Congress).⁷ While the photographs of the manuscript were completed on 31 May 1950, the various texts contained in the folios were copied between 1137 and 1139 CE. One of these texts, comprising 20 pages of about 15 lines of naskhi Arabic script, spanning folios 171r to 181v, was copied nearly a millenium ago, on 11 of Shawal 533 Hijri (folio 181v, which translates to 11 June 1139 CE) – although it was likely composed earlier. (Roggema, 2025, p. 60)

1.2 Hijri Christians?

That a copy of a Christian Arabic text would use the Islamic dating system merits our attention. While many Christians had marked time with the Julian calendar (although there have been various Christian calendars⁸), the lands ruled by Muslims adopted a lunar calendar whose beginning was the emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622, 10 years before Muhammad’s death. Although caliphates, religions, linguistic-ethnic groups and geography have varied, the Hijri calendar has consistently marked the passage of time in the lands ruled by Muslims. Although some non-Muslims living under Muslim rule continued to use their own dating systems, (Sahner, 2023, p. 394) they surely were aware of the Hijri date (as coins, for example, increasingly used the Hijri calendar). (Wurtzel, 1978; Treadwell, 2011; Amitai-Preiss, 2002) As with the Arabic language, many would also use the Hijri calendar (as with the text we are discussing), often in parallel with their traditional systems.

Scholars have struggled with labelling the lands and peoples of large swathes of the formerly Roman and Sassanian Empires and their hinterlands that were rapidly conquered by successive (Muslim) caliphates. (Robinson, 2003; Sahner, 2023; Goitein, 1968) Labels such as “Islamic” (as with “Christendom”) connote a uniformity that, despite undeniable shared

elements, belies the reality of diverse peoples living in different times and places. (Brown, 1996; Heck, 2009; Rippin, 2008) Indeed, non-Muslims often out-numbered the Muslim population (which was also neither ethnically nor doctrinally uniform). (Sahner, 2023, p. 387, n. 21) Marshall Hodgson (Hodgson, 1974) therefore suggested “Islamicate” rather than “Islamic” for the lands and people under Muslim rule. As Sahner has noted, periodization (Peter Brown’s Late Antiquity, Garth Fowden’s First Millennium) has “potential to house a diversity of fields [and peoples, author’s note] that are usually treated apart under one roof.” (Sahner, 2023, p. 407)

In the following, “Hijri” is employed as an indicator that the discussion involves individuals that have been colored by cohabitation with Muslims, in societies in which (the state’s interpretation of) “Islam” has a dominant socio-political position (akin to “Christianity” in medieval Christendom). In a “Hijri” environment, non-Muslims could be invaluable civil servants, even as political minorities living under the “protection” of the Islamic state (as dhimmis). (Cohen, 1999) While this has been interpreted as a state of subjugation unacceptable to modern liberal political sensibilities, (Ye’or, 2002) such a reading is inevitably colored by pre-modern and modern European treatment of its minorities (from the pogroms to the Holocaust).⁹ Hijri texts, including those written in Arabic, are far from uniform and often engage Islam, or Muslims, or the Qur’ān. But the tone is as varied as the authors’ personalities were likely to have been. They do not always address Islam - and, when they do, they can either be deeply respectful of Islam, the Qur’ān or the Prophet Muhammad, or bitingly critical.

This label in no way intends to treat non-Muslims superficially and in a manner that subordinates their history to that of their Muslim rulers and neighbours. [Nor does it intend to imply that] these communities—massive

and culturally vital,...—owed their existence then and their significance now to their relationship with a dominant culture associated with Islam and Muslims. (Sahner, 2023, p. 392)

Rather, it acknowledges the significance of the Arabian prophet and the Qur’ān, even on those communities who did not heed his message. In many cases, the languages, socio-political status, and political structures of the various peoples of the southern and eastern Mediterranean, as well as the Fertile Crescent and Persia, quickly changed after the followers of the Arabian prophet began conquering Byzantine and Persian territories. (Griffith, 2006b) They were living in a distinctly “Hijri” society, distinct from life under Byzantine, or Persian rule: one that owed its current form to the message brought by the Arabian prophet and his Arab – and other – followers. Naturally, the peoples who were so impacted reflected on their changed circumstances, eventually in the language of the Qur’ān itself. A parallel might be drawn with diaspora Judaism: they, too, have been shaped by the “foreign” cultures under, and with, whom they have lived for centuries. The effects of cohabitation is seen in the dress, food and even language of the diverse Jewish communities of, for example, Europe and Iran.

1.3 Questions for the Anonymous Monk, Answers for a Noble Sheikh

Variouly termed “Answers for the Sheikh” or “Questions and Answers, Rational and Divine,” (Roggema, 2025, p. 59) the Anonymous Monk’s text in Siinai Ar. 434 is a unique manuscript (that is, no other recensions have been discovered), with few obvious lacunae in the text (one notable exception being the bottom of 174r).¹⁰ The scribal introductory and concluding colophons are both present (folio 171r, 181v). Both the respondent (a Melkite¹¹ Orthodox monk priest) and the questioner (a noble Sheikh) are anonymous, although in the style of polite correspondence,¹² the respondent praises both his interrogator’s character (folio 171r, line 14; folio 171v, lines 7-8) and intent (folio 171 v, lines 5-8), and invokes God’s blessings upon him

(folio 171r, lines 14-16; 171v, line 6). Even though the text is framed as a Christian response to a devout Muslim with genuine questions about Christianity, the sheikh seems to have derived the questions from a malicious source, a “Response to the Christians” authored by an ignoramus.¹³

The monk presents these questions (which relate to the Trinity and Incarnation) (Griffith, 2006a; Roggema, 2025) and “answers, rational and divine, from the illuminating books of God.”¹⁴ In a common apologetic move, (Griffith, 1994) rational proofs (‘aqliyya, using human logic) as well as God-given (ilāhiyya) examples from scripture (revelation/law: shar’ and prophetic sayings) - are adduced in support of the claims of his (orthodox Melkite) Christian truth, together with attestations from (Greek) philosophy. He employs terminology familiar from early Christian theology, in which Greek terms were used to formulate Christian concepts (e.g. logos or hypostatic union) and scriptural citation, from the Bible and Qur’ān – and even themes from Jewish tradition¹⁵ and classical Islamic exegesis.

While his use of Bible and Qur’ān have been discussed elsewhere, (Griffith, 2006a; Roggema, 2025) his familiarity with Islamic exegesis is evidenced in subtle allusions. At the beginning of his work, he mentions that the divine essence (jawhar) only speaks from behind a veil, noting that the Qur’ān also mentions this (cf. Q 42:51).¹⁶ He goes on to cite a number of examples of God’s veiled appearance,¹⁷ including the “boxthorn tree” (شجرة عوسج) – the tree that Muslim exegetes have identified as the burning bush.¹⁸ Later in his argument, although the Qur’ān does not contain a direct account of the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes (which is found in various renditions in the New Testament; cf e.g. Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 8:1-9), the monk mentions this miracle (as “by his divinity”) and states that “this is in the Qur’ān in Sūra al-Maida.” Indeed, while Q 5:112-115 mentions Jesus’ disciples asking for a “table” to be sent from

heaven, the exegetical tradition explicitly links it to the multiplication of “loaves” and “fishes” (cf. Muqatil, Tafsir ad loc.).

1.4 Syriac Christology?

The monk also insists that Jesus revived the dead “by the power of his divinity” (bi-idhn lāhūtihi) – a subtle correction to the qur’ānic “by my permission” (i.e. God’s permission: bi-idhnī, Q 5:110) but also had human activities (fi’l) like eating.

“He eats by the actions of his humanity, just as God, exalted be He, ate in the house of Abraham, the ‘third of three’ [ثالث ثالث sic., folio 176v line 2, without the dots on the initial “thā” of either word; cf. Q. 5:73] in person [بالعين sic] in the saying of the Qur’ān. Has the story of the guests of Abraham come to you - the noble ones are present as three aqānīm when they said ‘My son upon you salām salām salām’ (peace peace peace).¹⁹

Griffith has persuasively argued that the qur’ānic phrase “third of three” (e.g. Q 5:73) (Griffith, 2007) is a “Syriacism” present in the qur’ānic text (Griffith, 2007, 2012a) - and that it is a phrase familiar to the Anonymous Monk. (Griffith, 2006a) In Syriac tradition, thlīthāyā (‘one of a triad’, or ‘treble one’) is used for “one of the Trinity,” that is the Father, Son and Spirit – but also for other triads, such as Christ’s three-day stay in the grave. As the Anonymous Monk references the qur’ānic ‘one of three’ in connection with Abraham’s three visitors, Griffith posits that the Anonymous Monk was clearly familiar with the “traditionally Syriac sense of the epithet that stands behind the Qur’ān’s phrase, ‘one of three’.” (Griffith, 2006a, pp. 22–23) The monk then links this trinitarian reference to the guests of Abraham (Q 51:24-25), as the aqānīm of the lord, explaining the three guests were God’s three “hypostases’ [aqānīm] when they gave the

three-fold greeting. He explains that “the three means the ‘persons [ashkhās], the properties [amlāk], the hypostases [aqānīm] of the Lord [al-rabb]’”. (Griffith, 2006a, p. 23)

While the Qur’ān does not specify the number of guests or a three-fold greeting in this encounter (Q 51:24-25), Islamic tradition generally understood the guests as three in number.²⁰ The monk’s insertion of the three salām’s is also in keeping with the troika of types contained in the Syriac thlīthāyā. The monk’s formulation emphasizes the Christian belief in the visitors as the three persons of the Trinity, (Grypeou & Spurling, 2009; Witztum, 2019) an understanding seen as early as Cyril of Alexander (d. 444 CE). (G. Benevich, 2017, p. 46) Maximus the Confessor (d. 42/662) also saw this meeting as Abraham being enlightened with the knowledge of the “Holy Triad and Monad.” (G. Benevich, 2011, p. 122) Indicative of the extent to which Trinitarian discussions permeated the pre-Hijri Mediterranean, the monk also invokes the Hebrew Bible directly– in transliterated Hebrew, nonetheless - as a Trinitarian testimony: “I AM WHO I AM, ADONAI, ELOHIM”²¹ (انا اھيا شراھيا ادوناي انا الوھيم).

As seen here, although the monk is intimately familiar with the Qur’ān, he never loses sight of the truth of Christianity, nor, as argued below, the pre-Hijri and ongoing (Keating, 2003) disputes with other Christian communities.

1.5 Melkite-Maximian-Orthodoxy?

Shortly before the Hijri era, the Christian Mediterranean was embroiled in debates over how Jesus was both human and divine – a debate that the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) had attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to resolve and which is reflected in the Qur’ānic discussions of Isa b. Maryam (e.g. Q 4:171; 3:45). Christians, especially those who came to write in Arabic, soon incorporated these verses into their (already ample) arsenal of Christological apologetics.

One year after Muhammad's death, the Patriarch of Alexandria attempted to bridge the difference between Christians who disagreed on whether Christ's human and divine natures were separate, or united. The solution proposed was that he had two natures – but one “[human-divine: theoandric] activity” (monenergism). Despite the Patriarch of Constantinople's prohibition of any discussion about the number of activities in Christ, a year later, the Patriarch of Jerusalem argued against monenergism, saying it was too close to Monophysitism (the anti-Chalcedonian position insisting on the “oneness” of Christ's nature that is held by a number of Christians in the region – like the Copts in Egypt, until today). Five years later, an imperial edict promulgated an alternate solution: Christ had only one (divine) will: monothelitism. A decade later (648) another imperial declaration forbade any discussion of the wills or energies. Despite this prohibition, in the following year, the Pope called a synod, condemning these heresies – and the heretics who had promulgated them. But the synod was seen as seditious; the Pope was arrested and exiled, as was a Byzantine monk (Maximos) who was considered instrumental in the formulation of Rome's position, emphasizing the duality of Christ's actions. Maximos died in 662, having had his tongue cut out and right hand cut off. Today considered a Confessor on account of his sufferings for his faith, in 680-681 Maximos' position was vindicated by the Sixth Ecumenical Synod. (Louth, 2015)

His writings were very popular with Christians of the Melkite persuasion who opposed imperial and ecclesiastical attempts at reconciling the various Christian groups after Chalcedon as compromising or betraying the true religion. For, as seen from the above time line, Christological controversies did not die out, or fade into the background, even in the midst of the Arab conquests of the Levant and Egypt in the first Hijri generation (Damascus came under Arab rule in 12/634, Jerusalem and Antioch in 15/637, Alexandria in 20/642). And, if the admittedly

polemical reports of the early Arab conquests are to be trusted, Christian rivalries continued unabated, even amplified, under the new overlords. (Penn, 2015)

The leaders in the Hijri era were uninterested in the nuances of Christian theological disagreements; to a follower of Muhammad, anyone who professed Christ's divinity was in error. But, perhaps due to a lack of administrative personnel and a subsequent lack of state control, in the first century and a half of Arab rule, Christians were allowed to practice whatever form of their heresies they wished, as long as they did not disturb the public order – even, in some cases, expanding their missionary work and church building.²² This also meant that there was now a more even political playing field, as it were: formerly heretical or marginalised groups – such as non-Chalcedonian Christians and Jews, whose activities had been formally restricted by successive (Byzantine) imperial edicts²³ - were now “equals” before the law, with an equal chance of jockeying for favor with their new overlords. No longer were the Christians who professed Constantinople's creed favored; as the Arab state was not yet centralized, traditional elites – especially those with a conversance in Arabic – tended to be employed by the state, as with the family of John of Damascus. (Griffith, 2016) But by the 170s/790's the caliph Abd al-Malik's reforms brought a greater degree of oversight and a reshuffling of local elites; trade routes had changed, as well – and by the 3rd/9th century, Melkites had lost their traditional hold on power in both Antioch and Jerusalem. (Although the Byzantine reconquest of Antioch in 969 sparked a cultural revival for Arabic-speaking Melkites in the region, including translations of Greek Fathers such as Maximos. (Treiger, 2015, p. 192)) The (unintended) consequences of the new regime is starkly outlined in documents from the early Arab rule of Egypt, in which the Melkite presence rapidly declined to be replaced by a native, non-Chalcedonian (Monophysite, but more properly termed Miaphysite, for their emphasis on the oneness of Christ's nature)

Coptic population. (Christides, 2017; Jones, 1959; Kościelniak, 2022; Pahlitzsch, 2015; Suermann, 2006) Similarly, the non-Chalcedonian (also Miaphysite) Jacobite population of Syria may have risen to prominence at the expense of the Melkites, especially after the reforms of Abd al-Malik (ca. 170/790). (Abu-Munshar, 2014; Wood, 2015, pp. 25, 32–33) Perhaps for this reason, Melkites were quick to adopt the language of their new rulers, and Qur'ānic and Islamic tropes for their own apologetic purposes, which now, as Anastasios of Sinai notes (ca. 2nd/8th cent.), had yet another target: not just non-Chalcedonian Christians, but also Arab rulers. (Griffith, 1987; Lamoreaux, 2000)

Against this background of swift social change, the reader is struck by Maximian hints in the Anonymous Monk's text, which may indicate an earlier stage of Melkite apologetics in the face of Islam, and account for the differences between the Anonymous Monk and other Melkite apologists.²⁴ In particular, his mention of “two modes of action [fi'layn]” and “two species/characters” [naw'ayn], “two natures/dispositions” [tab'ayn], unmingled and unmixed”²⁵ has strong resonances with Maximos' emphasis against the Miaphysite position.²⁶ His emphasis on the two actions of Christ may be more significant than his avoidance of speaking “clearly of Jesus, the Word of God, the Son of God, ...incarnate in two natures and one divine hypostasis, as God in person.” (Griffith, 2006a, p. 38) For if the opponent were Monophysite Christianity, Jesus as Word and Son of God was not a disputed topic, nor was Christ's divine Sonship. Rather, the difference lay in the understanding of how the divine and human aspects of Christ manifested themselves (e.g. as one, or two, actions or wills, in his divinity and humanity).²⁷ And, although the language was now Arabic, and the administration was now Muslim, the confessional differences remained.

The Anonymous Monk's emphasis on the dual actions of Christ points to a continuing rivalry of Chalcedonian and non Chalcedonian Christians, and a concomitant desire to assert the "orthodoxy" of his [Melkite] Christology. The framing of the "truth" of the dual nature of Christ's "actions" within a letter to a "Muslim" indicates that he may have been writing when a group with a rival Christology, that emphasized the "oneness" of Christ's actions, had found favor with the Muslim rulers. The text's ability to reconstruct Hebrew phrases in Arabic (e.g. Exodus 3:14), coupled with its albeitly polemical allusions to specific Jewish groups, represents "a level of reference to Jewish information ...very rare in Christian Arabic texts," (Griffith, 2006a, p. 38) but which may be in line with its claims of Jerusalem as the provenance of the text: it is structured as a "response to the enlightened question" posed by a "sheikh excellent in his Islam" to a "priest monk" in "the city of the holy house" (i.e. Jerusalem).²⁸ His equal dexterity with Greek texts also points to a Jerusalem, or at least Palestinian, provenance, where Graeco-Arabic bilingualism existed at least until the 13th century. (Treiger, 2015, p. 201, n. 57) As he incorporates Melkite, dyophysite, theology into his writings without allusion to a specific text (in contrast to his naming of Greek philosophers), I posit a familiarity derived from a reading of the Greek original, rather than a reliance on an Arabic translation.

1.6 Graeco-Arabic in Christian Hijri Texts

As the Melkites, those who adhered to the dyophysite Christology Maximos defended, were the first Christian community to write in Arabic, (Griffith, 1997) Maximos' ideas were central to their theological formulations (Griffith, 2012b) – even if there is, as yet, no evidence of a systematic translation of his works until a later period. (Treiger, 2015, pp. 201–203) Indeed, in the words of a 7th/8th century Syriac Vita of Maximos, he is accused of leading astray all of Africa (Brock, 1973, p. 318) and, after he went to Rome,

“the Arabs seized control of the islands of the sea, and entered Cyprus and Arvad, ravaging them and taking [their inhabitants] captive; and they gained control over Africa and subdued nearly all the islands of the sea [i.e. the Mediterranean]. For, following the wicked Maximos (Treiger, 2015), the wrath of God punished every place which had accepted his error. (Brock, 1973)

If there was still enough knowledge of Greek to read Maximos’ works, and if his ideas were still very much “alive,” a systematic translation of his works would have been unnecessary. Rather, especially in a bi- or even tri-lingual environment,²⁹ such translations would likely have been devoted to works that were not in common circulation (as was the case with the “translation movement” in Baghdad). (Treiger, 2015, p. 203) Our monk’s rendering of Maximian concepts into Arabic, coupled with his allusions to Greek philosophers, lends support to his being well-versed in Greek.

While the dual arguments of reason and inspiration were common in his milieu, the intellectual argumentation arguably had its basis in Greek philosophy. Indeed, the chief hallmark of the rational (‘aqliyya) responses are that they come from the human mind (‘aql). In his response to the first question, these ‘aqliyya responses include analogies with the natural world to help explain Christian theology, techniques familiar from Patristic writings³⁰ (folio 172r: the Triune divinity is likened to the Sun, from which light is born and heat emanates, without changing the divinity; folio 172v, the analogy of 3 drops taken from 3 seas is also employed: the nature is water – the one jawhar, while the names of the three seas differ). In his answer to the second question, the union of the jawhar of God in a human body “that has two types of natures, one complete man in its fullness neither mixed nor mingled” is likened to fire in iron,³¹ or fire from flint.

For the monk, the writings of the (Greek) philosophers appear to bridge the proofs arrived at by the human mind and the God-given revelations, as he indicates the Greek wise men were “inspired” (capable of “inspired prophecy by a non prophet”).³² While some of the Greek figures are readily identifiable from the letters of the names or the subsequent discussions in the text (such as Hermes Trismegistus [the Greek meaning of which he explains in Arabic], Hippocrates, Socrates, and Diogenes)³³, others remain elusive (a Greek philosopher, a sage (Roggema, 2025, p. 68)), reflecting the diversity of the reception of Greek thinkers (for example, the lists of the “seven sages” from Greek history found in Arabic doxographic materials differ substantially from contemporary classifications).³⁴ As Benevich suggests in his comments on Shahrastani’s (d. 547/1153) categorization of Greek philosophers, we may have to “leave aside our contemporary understanding” (F. Benevich, 2022, p. 360) of which Greek philosophers a Hijri Mediterranean Christian would be citing in support of his arguments, rather than trying to force our assumptions into awkward lexographic formulations.³⁵ Besides the possibility of the Anonymous Monk referencing a text lost to subsequent generations (as in the quotation of كتاب السبعة احجار “Kitāb al-Sab’a Ahjār” – presumably an Arabic translation of a Greek title ascribed to the Hermetic tradition, folio 179v, line 11), and the varied uses to which Greek thought was put (for example, by Muslims and Christians, of different sects), the identification of elusive names is further complicated as various collections of Greek wisdom circulated, and in different languages, in the Hijri Mediterranean. A number are lost, or survive in damaged manuscripts. (Esots, 2023, p. 75)

1.7 Concluding Discussion

The Anonymous Monk reflects the multi-layered nature of Christian apologetics in the early Hijri period as Arabic bridged multiple Christian denominations that were now under the

caliph. (Suermann, 2019) He evidences intimate familiarity not only with the Qur'ān, but also with Hebrew, Syriac and Greek. In addition to Christian theological arguments, he incorporates allusions to Islamic interpretive traditions, as well as Greek philosophical texts. He is also familiar with various Jewish polemics against Christianity.

Unlike more sensational apologies or polemics (e.g. that of 'Abd al-Masih al-Kindi),³⁶ the monk maintains a respectful tone towards Islam, Muslims and the Qur'ān throughout – even appearing to include the Qur'ān in the “books of God” (Nickel, 2020) (although his approach is admittedly a fine example of “prooftexting” (Swanson, 1998) – cherry picking passages that suit his argument). Again, in contrast to a number of other Christian responses to Islam (in Arabic, such as al-Kindi or other languages, such as John of Damascus), rather than ridiculing challenging Qur'ānic passages, the monk provides subtle rereadings of - or does not address – Qur'ānic passages that contradict Christian theology. (Swanson, 2010) For example, he emphasizes that miracles (such as creating a bird from mud, or healing the sick) were accomplished through Christ's own divinity, not the permission of God, subtly altering Qur'ānic wording (e.g. Q 5:110)³⁷ to accord with Christian theology. The idea that God does not appear except from behind a veil (Q 42:51) runs throughout his discussion of the *ittihad*, with numerous references to the Messiah as the divinity “veiled” in human flesh appearing throughout the text, as well as other examples of God's veiled appearances (e.g. the burning bush, the ark of the Covenant).

Despite his erudition, the Anonymous Monk leaves his reader with a number of questions. Firstly, is a “sheikh” actually the intended audience? Although there are numerous allusions to the Qur'ān, which is occasionally identified as “your book,” giving credence to the claim of a Muslim audience, Christianity is positioned vis-à-vis Judaism in a few significant

passages at the end of the text. This may be an employment of a classical “trope” (Jew as enemy, standing in reality for Muslim).³⁸ This understanding is underscored by his rendition of the opening of Q 2, Surat al-Baqara.³⁹ Facilitating his Christian gloss, he reads, and writes, the initial “separated” letters م ا ل م as a single entity: الميم, noting that as “al-mīm” is the beginning of “the name ‘the Messiah’,” underscoring his argument that the Qur’ān itself, by saying “‘that’ (rather than ‘this’) book in which there is no doubt” (Q 2:2), is in fact asserting the truth of a book other than the Qur’ān – and that it must be the Gospel, following as it does from “the M” of Q 2:1. (Griffith, 2006a; Roggema, 2025; Wilde, 2019) In this reading, the Qur’ān vouches for a scripture relating to Christ, presumably the Gospels, rather than itself! The disconnected letters that initiate a number of chapters of the Qur’ān⁴⁰ have long been an interpretive puzzle, but it would take someone with intimate familiarity with the Qur’ān and Muslim interpretations to zero in on this particular passage in support of the veracity of Christianity. Although later Christians (such as Paul of Antioch) would pick up on this interpretation of Q 2:1-2, to my knowledge the Anonymous Monk is the earliest Christian text to demonstrate such intimate familiarity with this Qur’ānic text and its interpretive dilemmas.

But, even with the Anonymous Monk’s remarkable familiarity with the Qur’ān, the numerous arguments and allusions particular to intra-Christian debates should not be overlooked. For the monk, and his audience, were aware of the claims to orthodoxy of non-Chalcedonian Christians. When, and where, however, is yet to be definitively determined. The translation of Greek texts, including those of Maximos the Confessor, in late 10th century Antioch, could explain the monk’s Maximian references to “two actions.” But, his general familiarity with Greek (and Hebrew, and Syriac), as well as his highly sophisticated manipulation of the Qur’ān, argues for an individual well-versed in a number of “divine sciences” attempting to employ his

knowledge in the service of his Christian faith in the Arabic idiom of his milieu. In this, he is reminiscent of Michael of Mar Khāriton, (Ryrie, 2011) who exhorted his brothers to curtail their allusions to complicated (Greek) theological texts, and to translate their thoughts into Arabic, as many in their congregation were not so learned as they were. (Treiger, 2015, p. 202)

The anonymous monk concludes his treatise by alluding to “defective” (nāqisa) Judaism, which he contrasts with “complete” (tāma) Christianity (folio 181r) - notably avoiding mention of Islam, except insofar as the Qur’ān is among the testimonies to the truth of his, Christian, understanding of the Messiah. Even the excellent sheikh, to whom he was addressing his responses, is absent from the concluding folios (which, however, appear truncated). Although scholars have noted the tactic of veiling criticism of Islam through arguments against Judaism,⁴¹ the monk frames his argument squarely in a qur’ānic verse about the divisions within the “Bani Isra’il” – the party who believed and that which did not (Q 61:14); the monk specifies that the believing party were those who believed in the Messiah, the truth of whose divinity is attested not only by his own followers, but also the Qur’ān, Gospel, Prophets and philosophers.⁴² Of course, this implies that Muslims who do not admit the divinity of Christ are not heeding their own “book of God.”

The Christian author of Sinai Ar. 434 appears to have a liberal understanding of “revelation” (shar’) and “inspiration” (ilhām). His apparent inclusion of the Qur’ān among the “books of God” is a notable aspect of this text. But, as the Qur’ān is also included in a liminal space between the ‘aqliyya’ and ‘shar’ arguments (e.g. 176r), the reader is left wondering whether, for the monk, the Qur’ān was closer to the “Inspiration” of the philosophers (ilhām) than biblical revelation (shar’). Like his forefathers, did he mine texts from outside his tradition for arguments supporting his Christology? Just as he and earlier Christian apologists used works

of ancient Greek philosophers, or Jewish polemics, the Anonymous Monk selectively uses the Qur'ān in support of his Christian truths – although his motivation for terming it among the “books of God” merits further research. Additionally, further research into the Greek texts and authors referenced by the Anonymous Monk, as well as the history of the other texts in Sinai Ar. 434 (and nearby manuscripts) may deepen our understanding of the author and the time and place of the composition of this unique Christian Hijri text.

Notes

1. <https://crc.blog.fordham.edu/arts-culture/mount-sinai-monasticism-collections-and-archives/>
2. <https://www.sinaimonastery.com/index.php/en/library>
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c707kx2nk7go>
4. <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/archaeology-today/archaeologists-biblical-scholars-works/tischendorf-codex-sinaiticus-oldest-new-testament/>
5. <https://maryjahariscenter.org/resources/manuscripts-in-st.-catherines-monastery-mount-sinai-library-of-congress>
6. <https://blog.nli.org.il/en/stcatherines/>
7. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/amedmonastery.0027939088A-ms/?sp=10&st=list>
8. For some examples, see Emmel (2019) and other contributions in the volume.
9. For comparison, see the various connotations of the term “ghetto” in Schwartz (2019), and for a nuanced reading of the Venetian ghetto, see Segre (2025).
10. Griffith (2006a) notes the final answer also appears truncated.
11. Termed “king’s men” as they professed the Chalcedonian definition of Christ’s human and divine natures united in one hypostasis of the person of Christ, as defined at the imperially-approved Council of Chalcedon [451 CE].
12. On which see most recently Rutten et al. (2026); for an excellent overview of manners in this respect, see Stroumsa (1999).
13. Folio 171v.
14. Folio 171r, lines 2–3.
15. Folio 171v.
16. Folio 171v.

17. Folio 171v, lines 13–14.
18. Muqatil, Tafsir ad Q 28:30.
19. Folio 176v.
20. E.g. Muqatil, Tafsir ad Q 51:24: Gabriel, Michael and another angel.
21. Exodus 3:14, folio 172v.
22. In contradistinction to some of the stipulations of the “Pact of Umar.” See <https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/source/pact-umar.asp>. See also Wood (2015, pp. 27–28).
23. See for example, Title 1, point 3 in the Justinian Codex, at https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Anglica/CJ1_Scott.htm#1
24. Griffith’s Melkite apologists generally speak of two natures in one divine hypostasis (uqnum) or ‘person’; see Griffith (2006a, p. 37).
25. Sinai Ar 434, f. 176r–177v. Discussed by Griffith (2006a).
26. For Maximos’ wording, see Clarke (2025, sec. 4), available online at <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/5/591>; Bieler (2016, p. 66).
27. For the Late Antique debates over, and significance of, two “wills” and two “actions” in Christ, see Hovorun (2008); Allen (2015).
28. Folio 171r, line 11ff.
29. On Graeco-Arabic bilingualism, see esp. Treiger (2015, pp. 201–202); Griffith (1986).
30. E.g. the Cappadocian fathers.
31. Folio 175v; an analogy favored by Maximus the Confessor; see Clarke (2025, sec. 4).
32. Folio 179v, lines 15–16.
33. Folios 179v–180r.

34. See the discussion and works cited in F. Benevich (2022, esp. p. 360); see also Esots (2023).
35. For example, folio 180r, line 3 appears to allude to a sage (الحكيم) who spoke of a “king of all” and his “eldest son.” Due to the orthography of the text, the sage’s name could be rendered اغترمينوس—but this is one of multiple possible permutations. Is this related to Neoplatonism? Orpheus? Zeus? See Tzamalikos (2016); Athanassakis & Wolkow (2013); de Jáuregui (2010).
36. An English translation of which is found on pp. 24–46 of Newman (1993); see Nickel (2020, p. 257) for discussion of al-Kindī’s text and its reception in modern scholarship.
37. Folio 177v.
38. Griffith (1988). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20101059>
39. Folio 179r.
40. The disconnected letters that initiate a number of chapters of the Qur’ān have long been an interpretive puzzle, but it would take someone with intimate familiarity with the Qur’ān and Muslim interpretations to zero in on this particular passage. See Stewart (2012); Massey (1996); Jones (1962).
41. E.g. Griffith (1988); Kitsos (2021).
42. Folio 181r.

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