

BODILY RESURRECTION IN THE QUR'ĀN AND SYRIAC ANTI-TRITHEIST DEBATE

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Abstract

When considering the content and polemical strategies of certain passages in the Qur'ān, the history of the short-lived Tritheist movement merits further analysis. This Miaphysite Christian faction was accused of confessing a triple Godhead and denying a physical resurrection. In the half century prior to the emergence of the Qur'ān, lively debates took place among Miaphysite Christians in Egypt, Syria-Palestine, and Arabia over Tritheism. Syriac-speaking Arab Christian leaders accused the Tritheists of polytheism for denying God's unity and of pagan unbelief for rejecting the resurrection of the original human body. This collection of anti-Tritheist literature makes critiques of positions not unlike several passages in the Qur'ān, as both claim to be directed at polytheists and unbelievers, and both assume knowledge of biblical material and Syriac-speaking Christian texts. Biblically and theologically based critiques in the Qur'ān appear to show familiarity with anti-Tritheist polemics. This article makes the case that particular verses in the Qur'ān reflect knowledge of Miaphysite anti-Tritheist critiques of Tritheist positions on God and the resurrection, that certain passages were modeled after the polemical reduction of opponents' positions found in anti-Tritheist literature, and that the content and method of anti-Tritheist literature was repurposed for alternative polemical uses. These features include anti-Tritheist claims that Tritheists were unbelievers, that they divided God's unity, that they were pagans and polytheists, and that they denied the bodily resurrection. The Qur'ān's parallels with anti-Tritheist content and rhetorical method in certain cases suggests its production was part of the wider discussions taking place in the Middle East at the turn of the seventh century.

The Debate on Resurrection (*Qiyāmah*) in the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān is replete with references to eschatological problems concerning the resurrection of the body, the time of the resurrection, and the promise

of a final judgment.¹ Many of these qur'ānic passages are constructed in the form of a dispute with an antagonistic audience. Some of these qur'ānic passages accuse their opponents of denying the resurrection in some sense. Throughout the Qur'ān (13:5, 17:49, 17:98, 19:66, 23:35, 23:82, 27:67, 32:10, 34:7, 36:78, 37:16, 37:53, 44:34–36, 46:17, 50:3, 56:47–48, 79:10–12),² these skeptics make several claims, including: (1) the resurrection cannot be physical and equally a new creation; (2) a body cannot be raised up from dust or bones; (3) the bodily resurrection is based upon ancient tales; and (4) there will not be a resurrection.

One main question that the Qur'ān replies to is whether the resurrected body will come from the original physical body or whether it will be a new creation (*khalq jadīd*). In some cases, this question is answered by citing biblical material that presupposes that the audience is familiar with such stories. According to Q al-Sajdah 32:10, some question: “When we have gotten lost in the earth, shall we indeed [return] in a new creation?” The reference to the angel of death (32:11) and the book of Moses and the “Sons of Israel”³ (32:23) suggests these people were knowledgeable regarding Jewish and Christian traditions. Interestingly, they differed about what would happen at the Day of Resurrection (32:25). Q al-Isrā' 17:49 and 17:98 record: “When we have become bones and fragments, shall we indeed be raised up as a new creation?” Subsequently, the passages recall the Psalms of David (17:55) and the story of Moses performing miracles before Pharaoh (17:101–104), presupposing the questioners knew these biblical accounts.⁴ Once again, there appears to be dissension among the opponents over the resurrection because “Satan provokes discord among them” (17:53). Q Saba' 34:7 asks: “Shall we direct you to a man who will inform you that when you have been completely torn to pieces, you will indeed [return] in a new creation?” In Q 32:10 and onwards, the Qur'ān replies to the questioner with allusions to legends of David and of Solomon and the people of Sheba to reinforce the coming resurrection and judgment.⁵ Likewise the audience in Q al-Ra'd

1. I would like to offer my gratitude to Nicolai Sinai, Andrew Hayes, Jonathan Loopstra, James Bockmier, and the peer reviewers for their comments and corrections of various drafts of this article. English translations of the Qur'ān are quoted from A. J. Droge (trans.), *The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013).

2. For a full list of verses pertaining to resurrection themes, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 985–986.

3. The Qur'ān often portrays Christians as a sect of the Israelites, e.g., Q al-Ṣaff 61:14. See Uri Rubin, “Children of Israel,” *EQ*, s.v. (2001).

4. See Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible*, 441, 447–448.

5. For a description of the post-biblical legends and their connections, see *ibid.*, 653–656.

13:5 asks how dust can be a new creation. Given the allusions to biblical descriptions of creation in Q 13:2–4 based upon Psalms 104 and 136,⁶ and the fact that, according to Gabriel Said Reynolds, “if the Qurʾān were concerned with pagans, presumably it would need to defend its entire eschatological teachings, including the idea that there is a heaven like a garden and a hell that is a place of torture,”⁷ this passage too seems to be aware of monotheistic debates on the resurrection.

A second prominent question in the Qurʾān is how God can re-compose the original body from nothing when “we are dust and bones” (*kunnā turāban wa-ʾiẓāman*). In many places in the scripture, God’s power over creation is adduced to support His ability to re-compose the human body. In Q Qāf 50:3, the alleged unbelievers are recounted as saying, “When we are dead, and turned to dust [shall we be raised up again]? That is a far return!” After describing God’s creative power in psalmic tones, Q 50:15 reminds the audience that God was not tired out from his first creation, and so a new creation is not only possible but is assured.⁸ As Nicolai Sinai has noted, “Qurʾanic reminders that humans are created by God serve to establish the creator’s power to refashion them at the Resurrection.”⁹ Q al-Qiyāmah 75:3 asks: “Does the human think that we shall not gather his bones?” The passage closes by reminding the listener that the one who created and fashioned humans from semen is certainly capable of giving life to the dead. One finds the same argument in Q al-Ḥajj 22:5–7. That this parallel from creation to restoration at the resurrection is found in Christian arguments is

6. Parallels with Psalm 136 include (1) God raises the heavens, (2) God sets the sun and moon to rule for a set time, (3) God spreads out the earth. Allusions to Psalm 104 here include: (1) God raising the heavens like a tent/without pillars, (2) God spreads the earth/sets it on its foundations, (3) mountains and waters are set firm, (4) the setting of the sun/covering for night, (5) vineyards/wine, (6) crops/plants for cultivation. The passage assumes knowledge of this biblical material. See also note 8 below.

7. Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible*, 388.

8. The relationship between creation psalms and qurʾanic passages evoking God’s signs has long been recognized. Already Hartwig Hirschfeld argued that the Psalms formed the conceptual framework for the Qurʾān and that their influence was ubiquitous in the text, as shown by the parallels of Q al-Raḥmān 55 with Psalm 136 and Q 16 with Psalm 104. For Hirschfeld, the author of the Qurʾān must have heard the Psalms recited liturgically and decided to include them in his preaching. See the examples in Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition of the Qurʾān* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), 73–77, 116–118. These insights were repeated and developed further by Angelika Neuwirth, “Qurʾanic Readings of the Psalms,” in Angelika Neuwirth et al. (eds.), *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾanic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 733–778, esp. 740–745.

9. Nicolai Sinai, *The Qurʾān: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 174.

also confirmed by Sinai, basing himself on Edvard Lehmann and Johannes Pedersen: “It is worth observing that the argument deducing God’s power to resurrect the dead from His creation of humans from sperm is entirely traditional: it is found already in second-century Christian writers like Justin and Athenagoras, and is rooted in pre-Christian Jewish literature (2 Maccabees 7: 22–23). The early Meccan surahs therefore confront their addressees’ doubts about the resurrection by deploying an argument that had a prehistory of at least several centuries.”¹⁰ Similarly in Q Maryam 19:66, someone asks “When I am dead, shall I indeed be brought forth alive (*la-sawfa ukhrajū hayyā*)?” The following verses (19:67–72) remind the questioner that God was able to create from nothing and that the resurrection will be followed by God’s judgment of the groups that deny it.

The Qur’ān also contains passages wherein its audience questions God’s ability to take flesh and bone and reconstitute it in its original state. Sūrat al-Mu’minūn (Q 23), which contains miscellaneous references to creation that have a psalmic tone, critiques unbelievers for their skepticism regarding the resurrection. The *sūrah* includes narratives and brief reminiscences about earlier messengers, such as Noah, Moses and Jesus. Q 23:82–92 records a faction that accepts God as a sovereign protector and yet claims (23:82–83): “When we are dead, and turned to dust and bones, shall we indeed be raised up? We have been promised this before—we and our fathers. This is nothing but old tales.” The passage concludes that God took neither a son nor other gods as partners. The accusations are directed at those who acknowledge God’s sovereignty (23:84–89) yet reject notions of a bodily resurrection and ascribe partners to God (23:91). Q al-Nāzi‘āt 79:10–12 states, “They will say, ‘Are we indeed being turned back into [our] former state? When we were rotten bones?’ They will say, ‘That would then be a losing turn!’” But the passage reminds its audience of God’s ability to re-fashion matter, using biblical precedents from creation. The *sūrah* recollects God’s call for Moses to go to Pharaoh (paralleling Exodus 3–4), followed again by a brief summary of the creation themes in Psalm 104:27–33. There are similar questions posed regarding the resurrection body in Q Yā-Sīn 36:78, Q al-Şāffāt 37:16–17.51–53, and Q al-Wāqī‘ah 56:47–48.

A third question introduced by skeptics in the Qur’ān is the claim that the bodily resurrection is an ancient tale. In Q al-Naml 27:67–68, unbelievers question how dust can be reconstituted and dismiss the resurrection, since “this is nothing but old tales” (*in hādihā illā asātīru ‘l-awwālīn*).¹¹ Similarly in Q al-

10. Ibid.

11. The “Sons of Israel” are mentioned in verse 76 afterwards, although it is not exactly clear that the question about the resurrection was posed by one from this group.

Aḥqāf 46:17 someone claims that the resurrection is simply an ancient tale. The references to “old tales” indicates that the audience was well acquainted with discussions regarding the biblical scriptures and the resurrection, as these tales appear to refer to the Bible and biblical tradition.¹²

A fourth accusation that the Qurʾān claims its audience makes is that there is nothing more than this present life. In Q al-Jāthiyah 45:24 the opponents assert: “There is nothing but our present life. We die, and we live, and nothing destroys us but time.”¹³ A similar theme is repeated in Q al-Dukhān 44:34–36, where the skeptics demand: “Surely these [people] indeed say, ‘There is nothing but our first death. We are not going to be raised. Bring [back] our fathers, if you are truthful!’” This section is immediately preceded (44:17–33) by a retelling of the escape of the “Sons of Israel” from Pharaoh. An unnamed apostle hears skeptics argue against his message by claiming in Q 23:37: “There is nothing but our present life. We die, and we live, and we are not going to be raised up.” This passage occurs in between stories of the messengers Noah (23:23–30), Moses (23:45–48), and “the son of Mary and his mother” (23:50). The speaker in Q al-Anʿām 6:29 also denies the existence of anything beyond this life. Q al-Nahl 16:38 and Q al-Taghābun 64:7 also allege that opponents deny the resurrection, although they do not claim that there is nothing beyond this life.¹⁴

Recent Historiography: The Resurrection Deniers

Traditional scholarship has claimed that many of the passages dealing with the resurrection debate date to the Meccan period and that they occurred between Muḥammad and local pagan polytheists. These exhortations were for the purpose of teaching right and wrong actions and their implications for death, judgment, and salvation. More recently, however, scholars have noted that many of the qurʾānic critiques of these opponents expect them to be familiar with biblical themes and subjects related to monotheistic polemics.

12. For further evidence, see Q 6:25, 8:31, 16:24, 23:83, 25:5, 46:17, 68:15, and 83:13. I owe these parallels to Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible*, 847–848.

13. The Sons of Israel (i.e., a Jewish or Christian group) are the subject just prior to this in Q 45:16.

14. In the examples in this paragraph and elsewhere, the critics are not only claiming that the doctrine of the resurrection is wrong, they are denying the notion of resurrection completely. However, as we will see below, the rhetorical strategies of late antique Syriac polemical literature show ample instances of caricaturing, misrepresenting, and falsely depicting the beliefs held by their opponents. In a similar fashion, scholars should be hesitant to take the Qurʾān’s claims at face value regarding their opponents’ claims without strong evidence.

But if Jews and Christians both agreed on the resurrection of the body, then why would the Qurʾān argue with pagan polytheists using biblical material?

Some scholars have proposed that the Qurʾān's familiarity with biblical and post-biblical material in Syriac was a catalyst for its choice of themes, including the resurrection. Thomas O'Shaughnessy's *Muhammad's Thoughts on Death* links Syriac literature with themes in the Qurʾān regarding death and resurrection.¹⁵ O'Shaughnessy notes that the Qurʾān's opponents are consistently accused of (1) polytheism, and (2) denial of the resurrection and judgment. According to O'Shaughnessy, this polemic in the Qurʾān is rooted in a longstanding literary trope, found in works by late antique Syriac Christian authors such as Ephrem, Aphrahat, and Babai, and is ultimately descended from Deuteronomy 32:39: "See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life," as well as its parallels in 1 Samuel 2:6 and 2 Kings 5:7. The passage from Deuteronomy links God's unity with the resurrection, which is a connection sustained in the Qurʾān.

As a hybridized thesis that includes Jewish and Syriac Christian literature within a pagan context, Patricia Crone believes that the *mushrikūn* of the Qurʾān, despite their label, were biblically literate pagan monotheists.¹⁶ In a two-part article on "Jewish-Christianity and the Qurʾān," Crone surveys various Christian doctrines mentioned in the Qurʾān and concludes that a number of concepts from late antique Syriac texts, such as the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, were preserved in the Qurʾān because Muḥammad's audience included adherents of Jewish Christianity.¹⁷ Crone's two-part article entitled "The Qurʾānic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection" explicitly connects the two in a sustained way while investigating late antique pre-Islamic sources.¹⁸ According to Crone, the Qurʾān accuses its opponents of three matters in particular: they deny the resurrection based on conjecture; they waded into sophisticated subjects of dispute, following reason over faith; and they are accused of being pagans and polytheists. These attitudes correspond to two groups of polytheists according to Crone: (1) those who lack concern with the resurrection but accept that God's judgment will occur in the distant future; and (2) those who are in doubt and/or denial regarding God as creator, revivifier, and judge. In the second part of the

15. Thomas O'Shaughnessy, *Muhammad's Thoughts on Death* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

16. Patricia Crone, "The Religion of the Qurʾānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities," *Arabica* 57 (2010): 151–200.

17. Patricia Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qurʾān (Part One)," *JNES* 74.2 (2015): 225–253; Patricia Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qurʾān (Part Two)," *JNES* 75.1 (2016): 1–21, esp. 21.

18. Patricia Crone, "The Quranic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection Body (Part I)," *BSOAS* 75 (2012): 445–472; Patricia Crone, "The Quranic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection Body (Part II)," *BSOAS* 76 (2013): 1–20.

article, Crone examines Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity for groups that represent the latter attitude. In a posthumously published article, Crone reiterates these views, asserting that the alleged pagans of the Qurʾān were believers in the biblical God.¹⁹ In contrast, Guy Stroumsa suggests that rather than focusing on prospective audiences and alleged communities in central Arabia, comparative literary analyses of late antique Syriac sources such as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Pseudo-Clementines* yield better data.²⁰

The scholarship mentioned above has contributed important insights into the audience of the Qurʾān that denied the resurrection and possible connections with earlier Jewish and Syriac literature. However, there has not yet been a sustained attempt to link qurʾānic polemics against the deniers of the resurrection with other literature from the same era. This article attempts to fill this lacuna by examining polemical tropes in Syriac texts that are nearly contemporaneous with the emergence of the Qurʾān and reflect similar topics of debate.²¹

Syriac Writings on the Bodily Resurrection

The debate about the form in which the resurrection would take place has a long history in Christian literature.²² The Odes of Solomon (second to third centuries), 2 Baruch (second century), Aphrahat (fourth century), Jacob of Sarug (sixth century) and Babai the Great (early seventh century) are all examples of Syriac authors whose works address the bodily resurrection.²³

19. Patricia Crone, “‘Nothing But Time Destroys Us’: The Deniers of the Resurrection in the Qurʾān,” *JIQSA* 1 (2016): 127–147, esp. 132.

20. Guy Stroumsa, “Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins,” in Behnam Sadeghi et al. (eds.), *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 72–96. For examples, see Holger Zellentin, *The Qurʾān’s Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); Sidney Griffith, “St. Ephraem the Syrian, the Qurʾān, and the Grapevines of Paradise: An Essay in Comparative Eschatology,” in Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson (eds.), *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 781–805.

21. I would like to thank Nicolai Sinai for this clarification.

22. For instance, Methodius of Olympus (ca. third–fourth centuries) composed an anti-Originist dialogue *On the Resurrection* in which the main character Theophilus answers a series of questions, including from skeptics in the audience, about the nature of the bodily resurrection in which he denies that the resurrected body is numerically distinct from the original one. The work enjoyed a long literary afterlife in Greek and Syriac.

23. Thomas Kollamparampil, *Jacob of Sarug’s Homily on the Resurrection* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008); James Rendel Harris, *The Doctrine of Immortality in the Odes of Solomon* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912); Eugen Pentiu, “The Nature of the Resurrected Bodies: 2 Baruch and the New Testament,” in Matthias Henze and

These works critique Origenist views that while there would be a resurrection, the resurrected bodily form would be a transformed spiritual body clothed and perfected by the soul. Origen argued that while there were qualitative differences, the resurrection could be associated with the original body. But anti-Origenist critics argued that by denying that the resurrected body was identical with the body that the resurrected had inhabited prior to their death, and instead positing a transformed spiritual body, the personality of the individual would vanish. They argued that if the resurrection involved a different body, then Origenists had denied the resurrection in word and in fact: if the soul never died and its former body remained dust, then what exactly was being resurrected?²⁴

As in the Qurʾān, some Syriac texts recall individuals asking whether the resurrected body would consist in the original physical body or instead amount to a new creation. This is found in 2 Baruch, a second-century CE work. The Syriac version of this text became a part of the West Syrian Miaphysite lectionary cycle in Late Antiquity.²⁵ In chapter 49, the prophet Baruch asks God about the nature of the resurrected body (49:1–3):

But I will ask from you again, O Mighty One, and I will ask favor from him who made all things. In what form will those living live in your day? Or how will the splendor [remain] of those who continue after that time? Will they, then, resume this present form, and put on these chained members, which are now involved in evils, and in which evils are accomplished? Or will you perhaps change these things which have been in the world, as also the world [itself]?²⁶

In response, the Lord tells Baruch to record the fact that the earth will return the dead and preserve them, with no change in form and completely restored. Interestingly, one finds the theme of a prophet asking the Lord for an explanation of the resurrection in Q al-Baqarah 2:260 as well: “[Remember] when Abraham said, ‘My Lord, show me how you make the dead to live.’ He

Gabriele Boccaccini (eds.), *Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch: Reconstruction after the Fall* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 309–334; Gie Vleugels, “Prospect of an Afterlife in the Odes of Solomon,” in Geert van Oyen and Tom Shepherd (eds.), *Resurrection of the Dead: Biblical Traditions in Dialogue* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 417–428. See also François Graffin, “Exhortation d’un supérieur de monastère sur la Résurrection; Extrait d’un homélieaire syriaque du Ve-VIe siècle,” *MUSJ* 49 (1975–1976): 607–615.

24. See Basil Lourié, “John Philoponus on the Bodily Resurrection,” *Scrinium* 9 (2013): 79–88, esp. 79–80. According to Lourié, the body was not essential to human identity in the same way for Origen as other theologians.

25. Daniel Gurtner, *Second Baruch: A Critical Edition of the Syriac Text* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 6–7.

26. *Ibid.*, 88–89.

said, ‘Have you not believed?’ He said, ‘Yes indeed! But [show me] to satisfy my heart.’”

Other Syriac texts recall the question of how the original body was to be recomposed from nothing but dust and bones.²⁷ For instance, Aphrahat (the “Persian Sage”) wrote a series of *Demonstrations* in the fourth century on important theological themes including the resurrection. Given that Aphrahat was writing for members of his religious community,²⁸ we can see that this was an internal argument among Syriac Christians. *Demonstration 8*, composed in 336–337, describes some people who challenged the re-composition of the body:

For disputes always exist about this: “How will the dead rise and with what body will they come?” [1 Cor 15:35] For the body wears out and is destroyed; as the time lengthens, the bones also are reduced to powder and are unrecognizable. When you enter into a tomb, where a hundred dead are buried in it, you will not [even] find there a handful of dust. Those who think on these things say thus, “We know that the dead will rise, but they will clothe themselves in a heavenly body and in spiritual forms ... From where does that body come, seeing that there is nothing in the tomb?” But he who thinks this, is foolish and ignorant: “When the dead were brought into [the tomb] they were something, and when they had been [there] for a long time, they became nothing at all. When it was time for the dead to rise, that nothing became something according to its former nature and a change was added to its nature.”²⁹

Aphrahat replies to these questions by asserting that God can re-compose a body just like a seed, which decays and dies to form new grain and fruit. If Adam was composed from dust in the first creation, then God can do likewise in the new creation, according to Aphrahat. Interestingly, he cites extensively from biblical and post-biblical legends about Moses to confirm its importance.³⁰

Syriac texts also recall claims that the bodily resurrection is a false promise based upon speculation. In *Demonstration 8*, Aphrahat responds by utilizing the death and life theme of Deuteronomy 32:39 to argue that God’s creative power assures the resurrection:

27. See for instance Edward Mathews (ed. and trans.), *Jacob of Sarug’s Homily on the Creation of Adam and the Resurrection of the Dead* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), esp. 52–57.

28. Sidney Griffith, “Monks, ‘Singles,’ and the ‘Sons of the Covenant’: Reflections on Syriac Ascetic Terminology,” in Ephrem Carr et al. (eds.), *Eulogema: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft, S.J.* (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1993), 141–160.

29. Kuriakose Valavanolickal, *Aphrahat: Demonstrations I* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 2005), 184.

30. *Ibid.*, 189–192.

They say [namely, with regard to John 3:13, according to which no one has ascended to heaven], “Behold our Lord has witnessed that the earthly body did not ascend to heaven.” But, my beloved, you should not have for yourself any doubt about the resurrection of the dead. For the living mouth testifies, “I put to death and I bring to life.” [Deut 32:39] Both proceed from one mouth. As it is certain to us that he makes to die and we see [it], so also it is certain and trustworthy that he makes alive.³¹

Around the turn of the seventh century, Babai the Great (d. 628), bishop of the Church of the East, accused the director of the church’s school at Nisibis, Ḥenana of Adiabene (d. 610), of pro-Chalcedonian and Origenist proclivities. Babai polemically reduces his opponent’s claims that the resurrected body was not identical with the original to an outright denial of the resurrection. Babai’s rhetorical move equates Ḥenana’s resurrection theory with unbelief and says that his supporters will be judged accordingly at the Day of Resurrection:

However, all of these followers of Ḥenana even in our day rise up for their destruction. These people deny not only the resurrection of the body of our Lord, but also the general resurrection of the bodies of all men. They believe in the redemption of all souls in the future and they believe that their redemption is when they are freed from the prison of the body in which they are confined. But in truth the bodies of these evil ones will rise in the resurrection of judgment and they will be handed over to eternal punishment with Satan their father, whose deception they have accepted.³²

These examples from Syriac sources on the resurrection illustrate some thematic connections with passages in the Qurʾān. As in Babai’s critique, the Qurʾān often uses the Day of Resurrection to articulate a threat of judgment directed at Jews and Christians for their divisiveness (e.g., Q 2:113.174, 4:159, 5:14). Other scholars have noted these links, such as Mehdi Azaiez, who explores the Qurʾān’s rhetorical techniques against those who denied the resurrection in his monograph *Le contre-discours coranique*.³³ He identifies several thematic parallels between the Qurʾān and post-biblical Jewish and Syriac Christian works. Azaiez concludes that the counter-discourse of opponents in the Qurʾān is representative of Jewish and Christian polemics from the period, especially on three themes: the resurrection of the body, the Day of Resurrection (or “Hour”), and the eschatological Day of Judgment/

31. Ibid., 200.

32. Quoted in Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible*, 388, with credit to Tommaso Tesei, from Babai the Great, *Liber de unione*, 195.

33. Mehdi Azaiez, *Le contre-discours coranique* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 165–176.

Punishment. As I shall now demonstrate, Syriac arguments against denials of the resurrection took on renewed urgency in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. This was due to the emergence of the so-called Tritheist heresy, to which we shall turn in the next section.

The Origins of Tritheism

During the mid-sixth century and into the early seventh century, a theological debate over Trinitarian language raged in the eastern Mediterranean. The short-lived Tritheist movement, a faction involved in intra-Miaphysite disputes (Syrian Orthodox and Coptic), confessed a triple Godhead and gained some notable followers in Egypt, Syria-Palestine, and Arabia. Tritheism emerged as a theological position in the wake of the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 553. While imperial Byzantine hopes for restoring communion between the different churches continued, three groups developed out of the failed attempt at a consensus. Within the Byzantine Empire, two groups vied for imperial favor in the promotion of their particular theology and in the selection of ecclesiastical positions. The first group was known as the Orthodox Chalcedonians (later known as Melkites in the Arabic-speaking lands after 681). The Miaphysite non-Chalcedonians (known as Coptic Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox “Jacobites”; sometimes called Monophysites) were the dominant ecclesiastical group in the Middle East, with the exception of Jerusalem and its coastal environs. In addition, the East Syriac Church of the East (also called the Nestorian Church) was a prominent Syriac-speaking community on the borderlands of Mesopotamia and the Gulf regions, living under the Sasanian Empire. Due to religious, ethnic, political, and economic differences, these groups participated in heated discussions in the latter half of the sixth century concerning Christology and the Trinity.³⁴

These debates regarding Jesus Christ’s hypostatic union with the Godhead led to a reevaluation of Trinitarian theology within the Coptic and Syriac-speaking Miaphysite communities during the latter half of the sixth century. Miaphysite Trinitarian theology used the vocabulary of Severus of Antioch (d. 538), who affirmed that the Trinity was three hypostases in the unity of one substance/essence (Greek and Syriac *ousia*) and nature (Greek *physis*; Syriac *kyānā*). It was generally agreed among theologians that only the three hypostases but not God’s essence or nature were capable of quantitative

34. See more in Averil Cameron, “Disputations, Polemical Literature and the Formation of Opinion in the Early Byzantine Period,” in G. J. Reinink and H. L. J. Vanstiphout (eds.), *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures* (Leuven: Peeters, 1991), 91–108.

specification, i.e., were deemed to be countable. This terminology was the standard language Miaphysites used concerning Trinitarian doctrine. But in 557, according to the *Chronicle* of Elias of Nisibis, a Syriac-speaking Miaphysite from Apamea named John Mūqā d-zēqā (“high boots”) began teaching that there were not only three hypostases but also three distinct divine substances or essences. This doctrine was labeled Tritheism by its opponents.³⁵

According to the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian (d. 1199), John studied under Samuel (also called Peter) of Rēsh ‘Aynā and became adept in Syriac literature and philosophy: “John Mūqā d-zēqā became his disciple, and after he had gained a little instruction in the doctrine of the pagans, he fell into the heresy of the Arians [here used to mean Tritheism].”³⁶ Against his Miaphysite teacher, John postulated that if Jesus Christ was truly God and human yet had one hypostasis and one nature (as Miaphysites taught), then the terms “hypostasis” and “nature” should have the same meaning for the Trinity as for Jesus Christ. Initiated into this logical idea via his familiarity with the Alexandrian and Constantinopolitan philosophical traditions, John asserted that the Trinity did not just consist of three hypostases in One God but was composed of a triple nature, substance, and essence in reality. God was not only three hypostases but three natures. John’s theology quickly gained new adherents in Constantinople and gradually spread via leading intellectuals and monks into other cities. This intra-Miaphysite controversy over the Trinity (which also had linguistic and political undertones) eventually led to the emergence of a separate Tritheist faction. Their opponents labeled them “polytheists” and “pagans,” despite the fact that the Tritheists considered themselves part of the faithful church. The theological debate over Tritheism in the Christian world only subsided in the mid-seventh century. But from the latter half of the sixth century through the early seventh century, the main Christian churches viewed Tritheism (real or imagined) as a dangerous heresy that required the propagation of anti-Tritheist literature across the eastern Mediterranean to eliminate its appeal.

Around 564, Theodosius of Alexandria, the exiled Miaphysite patriarch living in Constantinople, wrote a refutation of the Tritheist heresy, since the movement had become an issue at the highest levels of ecclesiastical

35. Elias of Nisibis, *Eliae metropolitae Nisibeni Opus chronologicum*, CSCO vols. 62 and 63, ed. E. W. Brooks and trans. J.-B. Chabot (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1910; reprint Leuven: Peeters, 1962), vol. 62, 121. In Greek accounts, John is called *Ascoutzanges*, meaning something like “bottle-shaped boots.”

36. See Albert van Roey and Pauline Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century* (Leuven: Peeters, 1994), 124; J.-B. Chabot (ed.), *Chronique de Michel le Syrien 1166–1199* (4 vols.; Paris: E. Leroux, 1899–1910), 2.251–253, 4.313–314. See also Michael the Syrian, *The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo (The Great): A Universal History from the Creation*, trans. Matti Moosa (Teaneck, NJ: Beth Antioch Press, 2014), 360.

power.³⁷ Two years later, in the hope of effecting a reconciliation, the Byzantine Emperor Justin II called for a meeting between the Chalcedonian Patriarch John Scholasticus, the leading Miaphysite bishops, and the foremost Tritheist bishops: Eugene of Seleucia in Syria and Conon of Tarsus. When this negotiation failed to result in a union, Justin II issued condemnations against the Tritheists in 567, known as the first and second Synodoticons of Constantinople. In 567 and 568, the leading Miaphysites at Mar Bassos monastery also promulgated two synodoticons, or mutual agreements, that condemned the doctrines and specifically the teachings of John Philoponus, who had emerged as a prominent champion of Tritheism (see below).³⁸ The second synodoticon even noted that translators were making John Philoponus' works available in Syriac. At the behest of Chalcedonian Orthodox and Miaphysite Church leaders, the Tritheist bishops Conon and Eugene were exiled to the New Monastery in Palestine to remain there for the next three years. In their absence from the public sphere, John Philoponus of Alexandria became the leading intellectual of the Tritheist movement.

John Philoponus and Tritheism

John Philoponus (d. after 570), or John the Grammarian, was an Aristotelian commentator and renowned teacher in Egypt.³⁹ Like many other scholars (*philoponoi*) in Egypt, John sought to transform classical Greek philosophy using a Christian framework. In 553, he wrote a rebuttal of the pro-Chalcedonian Council of Constantinople representing the Miaphysite school. His dialectical response, the *Arbiter*, was well-received and translated into Syriac.⁴⁰ In this work, Philoponus explained the doctrine of Christ's single nature (*mia physis*, hence the label "Miaphysite") as the incarnate Word of God against Chalcedonian dual-nature Christology. He argued in the *Arbiter* that a substantial hypostasis and a particular nature are indistinguishable in Christ, meaning that he was

37. For evidence of the impact of Theodosius' text and its role in the Middle East among Syriac speakers, see van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*, 146–147.

38. For summaries, see van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*, 284–285.

39. For more on his life and works, see the chapters in Richard Sorabji (ed.), *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); and Koenraad Verrycken, "John Philoponus," in Lloyd Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 733–755.

40. See a study of his thought in John Philoponus, *On Aristotle, Categories 1–5; A Treatise Concerning the Whole and the Parts*, trans. Riin Sirkel, Martin Tweedale, John Harris, and Daniel King (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 169–189.

one and identical with his single nature as God and man. For Philoponus, the word “Christ” was indicative of one nature or substance. Since “Christ” was one in word and in reality, the word “Christ” indicated one nature. He identified the concept of “nature” with “substance,” meaning something subsisting in an individual state. For Philoponus, “nature” (*physis*), “substance” (*ousia*), and “person” (*prosōpon*) were virtually identical expressions.⁴¹ Since the one hypostasis of Christ is an actual instantiation of one nature, it is the same hypostasis and nature as that of the Word of God in the Trinity.⁴²

By 567 in his work *On the Trinity*, Philoponus carried his technical terminology to its logical conclusion. First, he concluded: “When the common nature of man ... is realized in each of the individual human beings it becomes proper to that individual; then it is no longer common to any other individual.”⁴³ He explained that individuals have a proper nature in reality, while universals, such as the common nature of humanity, are mental constructs.⁴⁴ Philoponus explained that if all real existents have individual hypostases and Christ had one hypostasis, then God is three hypostases: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Divine unity is only an intellectual abstraction that we use when we conceptualize the Trinity, but the Godhead only has existence in the three realities.⁴⁵ Philoponus explained his nominalist position further in his works *Against Themistius* and *Letter to a Partisan*, where he argued that God’s hypostases, natures, and substances signify three divine realities. The affirmation of God’s unity exists only as a theoretical abstraction. While he initially denied that he was asserting three separate gods, he also denied that a universal Godhead—distinct from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—could exist in reality, or even intellectually in a real sense. If arguments purporting to prove the existence of a self-subsistent Trinity, distinct from the three individual hypostases Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, were valid, they would at

41. For the text, translation and study, see Uwe Michael Lang, *John Philoponus and the Controversies over Chalcedon in the Sixth Century: A Study and Translation of the Arbiter* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

42. For more elaboration on his Christology, see Leslie MacCoull, “John Philoponus and the Composite Nature of Christ,” in *Documenting Christianity in Egypt, Sixth to Fourteenth Centuries* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2011), no. 11.

43. Quoted in Rifaat Ebied, Albert van Roey, and Lionel Ralph Wickham (eds.), *Peter of Callinicum: Anti-Tritheist Dossier* (Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1981), 26.

44. See Albert van Roey, “Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon,” *Orientalia Lovanensia Periodica* 11 (1980): 135–163, esp. 148. For an explanation of Philoponus’ theological framework and its relation to later Christian Arabic theology, see Carl Ehrig-Eggert, “John Philoponus, Yahyā ibn ‘Adī and Tritheism,” *Parole de l’Orient* 19 (1994): 313–318.

45. See Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 51, 78 (Syriac).

most add a fourth substance to the other three (i.e., yielding a quaternity).⁴⁶ The response by the Miaphysite community was to condemn John Philoponus' theology as polytheism (*sagī ūt ʿalāhē*).⁴⁷

John's influence in Syriac Christianity

The Tritheist works of John Philoponus impacted Trinitarian thought among Christians in the Arabian provinces. John's writings attracted the attention of Syriac-speaking Miaphysites and made their way into their theological debates during the latter half of the sixth century. For instance, the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus (d. ca. 588) provides a detailed account of Philoponus' theology and the entire Tritheist controversy in Syriac.⁴⁸ Philoponus' ideas were so influential that they were still being refuted decades later by Chalcedonian sources, including Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem (d. 638) and Maximus Confessor (d. 662).⁴⁹ He even garnered an official anathema at the Third Council of Constantinople in 680–681, which forbade Christian theologians from explicit reference to his name.

The writings of John Philoponus appeared in translation among Syriac-speaking Miaphysites during his lifetime. His Aristotelian commentaries and other philosophical works were commonly studied in the East. His hypothesis that the universe had a temporal beginning also found a wide and enthusiastic audience among Jewish and Muslim intellectuals in the medieval period.⁵⁰

46. Anti-Tritheist refutations are seen in the Church of the East as well, during the assembly of their bishops in 612, which included several question-and-answer arguments against those who would argue that God was composed of a quaternity. See J.-B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale ou recueil de synods Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 572–573 (Syriac), 590 (French).

47. See Henry Chadwick, "Philoponus the Christian Theologian," in Richard Sorabji, *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 41–56.

48. Ernest Walter Brooks (ed.), *Iohannis Ephesini historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*, CSCO Syr. III.3 (Leuven: L. Durbecq, 1935–1936), 253–262. The English translation is in Robert Payne Smith, *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History of John Bishop of Ephesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1860), 52–65.

49. On Sophronius and "minor tritheism," see Pauline Allen (ed.), *Sophronius of Jerusalem and Seventh-Century Heresy: The Synodical Letter and Other Documents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 142–143. On Maximus, see Grigory Benevich, "Maximus Confessor's polemics against Tritheism and his Trinitarian teaching," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 105 (2012): 595–609. On Maximus as an author of and participant in dialogues, see Averil Cameron, *Dialoguing in Late Antiquity* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 2014), 30–34.

50. Philoponus argued that the universe had a created order and therefore must have a beginning rather than being eternal. See Michael Chase, "Philoponus'

Philoponus' works were also disseminated in Syriac because he acquired an intellectual following as a leader of the Tritheist movement, especially among the Philoponian or "Athanasian" Tritheists. They were given this moniker because they identified with a certain monk named Athanasius, who was a grandson of Empress Theodora and therefore had imperial protection allowing him to express his ideas in the Miaphysite community. It was this Athanasius who first sent the works of John Mūqā d-zēqā to John Philoponus, presumably bringing him into the movement. Further, the Miaphysite Jacobite community preserved Syriac translations of Philoponus' *Arbiter*, which remained an important defense of their Christology. The eighth-century Melkite theologian John of Damascus quoted extensively from the work as a summary of Miaphysite teaching, thus indicating its continued relevance into Umayyad times.⁵¹

We also know of several Chalcedonian and Miaphysite anti-Tritheist critiques of John Philoponus' works that are partially preserved.⁵² That John Philoponus' works instigated passionate responses in the eastern Mediterranean in the latter half of the sixth century among Syriac-speaking Christians is clear. The extensive range of Philoponus' works found in Syriac and in citations in anti-Tritheist literature suggests that his Tritheist doctrines and their anti-Tritheist counterparts were widely familiar to Syriac-speaking communities.⁵³ But what particular works may have been available to the Syriac-speaking community and to Arabic-speaking Miaphysite Christians? The following list of Tritheist works by Philoponus are all cited in fragments by anti-Tritheist authors:

Cosmology in the Arabic Tradition," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 79 (2012): 271–306.

51. Frederic Chase (ed.), *St. John of Damascus: Writings* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), 140–148.

52. Albert van Roey, "La controverse trithéite jusqu'à l'excommunication de Conon et d'Eugène (557–569)," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 16 (1985): 141–165; idem, "La controverse trithéite depuis la condamnation de Conon et Eugène jusqu'à la conversion de l'évêque Elie," in Wilhelmus C. Delsman et al. (eds.), *Von Kanaan bis Kerala: Festschrift für Prof. Mag. Dr. J. P. M. van der Ploeg O.P. zur Vollendung des siebzigsten Lebensjahres am 4. Juli 1979 überreicht von Kollegen, Freunden und Schülern* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 487–497.

53. See the bibliography of his Tritheist writings in Sorabji, *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science*, 235.

1. *Against Themistius*, written after 567⁵⁴
2. *On the Trinity*, sometimes referred to as *On Theology*⁵⁵
3. *Letter to a Partisan*
4. Fragments of uncertain origin⁵⁶
5. *On the Resurrection*⁵⁷
6. *Against the letter of Dositheus*⁵⁸

The Tritheist Movement and the Miaphysite Jafnids

In the late sixth century, bilingual Arab Miaphysites played a prominent role in the Tritheist controversy.⁵⁹ The leaders of the Ghassānid Arab tribal

54. Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 33, 51–52. The question-and-answer text is partially preserved in a Syriac anti-Tritheist letter composed by Peter of Callinicum, the Miaphysite Patriarch of Antioch, to Damian, the Patriarch of Alexandria, written in 581. Damian as well as Peter were of Syrian origin and were native Syriac speakers. This fact suggests that Syriac translations of Tritheist texts were widely available by the 580s. In Peter's critique of Tritheism, he quotes a passage from the third part of John Philoponus' work *Against Themistius*, revealing its question-and-answer style of critiquing orthodox notions of the Trinity. John Philoponus writes: "Now tell me, do you [orthodox] not confess each of the hypostases to be God in a different way? Do not scheme against the number when you say 'three Godheads,' but if Godhead is not in each of them a different way, have the temerity to say so openly. For if this is untrue, and each of the three hypostases is not God and there is no divine substance, then the hypostases are not substantial and are, so to say, not divine. And again, the argument has resulted for you in atheism. Were anyone, therefore, to speak of Godheads different in nature, the concept would be that of pagans and Arians. But if Godhead is one in number and hypostasis, it will be triple only in name and Sabellius will get in." See *ibid.*, 51, 78–79 (Syriac).

55. See Syriac fragments preserved in van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon"; Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien 1166–1199*, 2.331–332 (French), 4.361–362 (Syriac). See also Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 29–30.

56. Fragments from 3 and 4 listed above are in van Roey, "Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon."

57. Albert van Roey, "Un traité cononite contre la doctrine de Jean Philopon sur la resurrection," in *ANTIΛΟΠΟΝ: Hommage à Maurits Geerard pour célébrer l'achèvement de la Clavis Patrum Graecorum* (Wetteren: Cultura, 1984), 123–139.

58. *Ibid.*

59. See Alois Grillmeier, "Die tritheitische Kontroverse im 6. Jahrhundert und ihre Bedeutung für die Syrische Christologie," in Alois Grillmeier and Theresia Hainthaler (eds.), *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, vol. 2.3: *Die Kirchen von Jerusalem und Antiochien nach 451 bis 600* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2002), 279–291; English translation in Alois Grillmeier, "The Tritheist Controversy in the Sixth Century and

confederation were known as the Jafnids, a Syriac-speaking Miaphysite community prevailing in the provinces of Arabia, Phoenicia II (Libanensis), and Palestine III (Salutaris), which included Sinai, Nabatea, and the northern Arabian Peninsula.⁶⁰ They also had strong connections with South Arabian Christians (e.g., Najran).⁶¹ The exchange of people, goods, languages, and ideas was a long-established pattern in the region.⁶²

The Tritheist works of John Philoponus, including his dialectical presentations and the content of his ideas, impacted Trinitarian thought among Christians in the Arabian provinces. There are several data points that suggest that Syriac-speaking Arab Christians had knowledge of the Tritheist controversy. One late sixth-century Syriac manuscript clarified the activities

Its Importance in Syriac Christology,” in Alois Grillmeier et al. (eds.), *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 2.3: *The Churches of Jerusalem and Antioch from 451 to 600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 268–280. On situating the Arabs in the late antique Roman context, see Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Theresia Hainthaler, “On Pre-Islamic Christianity Among the Arabs in the Sphere of Influence of the Patriarchate of Antioch,” in *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 2.3: *The Churches of Jerusalem and Antioch from 451 to 600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–217.

60. On the Ghassānids/Jafnids and other Arabs in the period, see the comprehensive studies of Irfan Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 1.1: *Political and Military History* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 1.2: *Ecclesiastical History* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 2.1: *Toponymy, Monuments, Historical Geography, and Frontier Studies* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 2.2: *Economic, Social, and Cultural History* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2009).

61. See for instance Robert Hoyland, “Late Roman Provincia Arabia, Monophysite Monks and Arab Tribes: A Problem of Centre and Periphery,” *Semitica et Classica* 2 (2009): 117–139; and C. J. Robin, “The Peoples beyond the Arabian Frontier in Late Antiquity: Recent Epigraphic Discoveries and Latest Advances,” in J. H. F. Dijkstra and Greg Fisher (eds.), *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 33–79.

62. See for instance Elizabeth Key Fowden, “Rural Converters among the Arabs,” in Arietta Papaconstantinou (ed.), *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 175–196. On the appearance of the Arabic language with other languages and/or scripts in Arabia, see Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 128–153; and M. MacDonald, “Romans Go Home? Rome and Other ‘Outsiders’ as Viewed from the Syro-Arabian Desert,” in J. H. F. Dijkstra and Greg Fisher (eds.), *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 145–163. See epigraphic evidence presented in C. J. Robin, “The Peoples beyond the Arabian Frontier in Late Antiquity,” especially 48–79.

of the Miaphysites in a collection of forty-five documents. These primary sources devote significant attention to the Tritheist controversies in Arab-controlled territories and other Miaphysite lands.⁶³ The intra-Miaphysite debate included Arabic-speaking (and Syriac-writing) Miaphysites, who were the dominant Christian community in the Arabian provinces.⁶⁴ One of the most important rulers was the Arab leader al-Ḥārith ibn Jabalah (Arethas, ruled 528–569), who was named “Patrician and King of the Saracens” by the Byzantine emperor Justinian. As ruler of the Ghassānid tribal confederation, al-Ḥārith played an important role in settling disputes. Several letters exchanged between the Jafnid ruler and other church leaders indicate that al-Ḥārith promoted Miaphysite doctrines as well as debate against other groups.⁶⁵ In 567, he dispatched a letter from his Miaphysite bishops, Jacob Baradeus and Theodore of Arabia (the bishop for the Arab tribes), to his Syriac- and Arabic-speaking communities, noting that some monks had adopted Tritheism and were spreading its teachings and that some people were translating their works.⁶⁶ In fact, some people had falsely accused Jacob and Theodore of adopting Tritheism, which furthered the movement. John of Ephesus also noted in his *Ecclesiastical History* that the Tritheists were successful in gathering adherents and that their evangelization was a matter of concern to Arab Christians.

In 570, al-Ḥārith arranged a meeting between the Tritheist bishops Conon and Eugene and the Miaphysite bishops Jacob Baradeus and Theodore of Arabia.⁶⁷ The Miaphysite bishops prepared an encyclical and al-Ḥārith presented the Tritheist leaders with the document to sign. When they refused, the Miaphysite bishops excommunicated Conon and Eugene. Their sentence was dispatched by al-Ḥārith throughout Arabia, along with

63. J.-B. Chabot (ed.), *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas* (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1907; reprint Leuven: Peeters, 1962–1965); see the study by van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*.

64. See for instance Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); John Bowman “The Debt of Islam to Monophysite Syrian Christianity,” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 19 (1964/1965): 177–201; reprint E. C. B. MacLaurin (ed.), *Essays in Honour of Griffiths Wheeler Thatcher (1863–1950)* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1967), 191–216.

65. See the summary in van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*, 288–290; texts in Chabot, *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas*, 196–209 (Syriac), 136–145 (Latin).

66. See van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*, 284; texts in Chabot, *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas*, 165–166 (Syriac), 115–116 (Latin).

67. On the Ghassānids/Jafnids and Tritheism, see Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 1.2, 805–824. Shahīd addresses the controversy in detail but does not connect it to the Qurʾān.

an encyclical forbidding the faithful from having communion with Tritheists. The assumption underlying this encyclical is that the Tritheist community had adherents in the region. A further piece of evidence that we have is the response from the archimandrites of Arabia that affirmed the letter, condemned the Tritheists, and made a confession of faith. One hundred thirty-seven bishops, priests, and abbots of churches and monasteries within the Jafnid realm in Syria-Palestine and Arabia signed the document.⁶⁸

The Tritheist debate did not cease upon the death of the main actors in Syria and Alexandria. A series of letters in the 580s between the Miaphysite Patriarch of Antioch, Peter of Raqqa/Callinicum (d. 591), and Damian (d. 605), the Patriarch of Alexandria, reveal persistent anxiety about Tritheism in the Syrian Jacobite and Alexandrian parties of Miaphysitism. The Syrian and Alexandrian parties of the Miaphysite movement even accused one another of heresy during this period. Around 587, Tritheist advocates—presumably Philoponian Tritheists, given their location in Egypt—were brought to the attention of Damian in Alexandria, who was asked to counter their arguments. But after sending his refutation of Tritheism to his Miaphysite colleague Peter, the Patriarch believed that Damian had fallen into the opposite heresy of Sabellianism, which is considered a form of modalism, or the belief that there are three modes or aspects to the one God. Peter had already debated Tritheist leaders on several occasions between 582 and 585 and so he was attuned to language that he did not consider completely orthodox. To resolve matters, the Arab leader Jafnah (ruled ca. 587–591) arranged for a meeting of the patriarchs Peter and Damian at the Jafnid capital of Jābiyah in the province of Arabia in 587. When they were unable to reach a resolution, Peter wrote a refutation of Damian which resulted in schism (both Peter and Damian were of Syrian origin and communicated in Syriac). The two parties failed to settle their disagreement and they reconciled only in 616.⁶⁹

This information shows how Arabic-speaking Miaphysite Christians were involved not only in the dispute but also in seeking a resolution regarding perceived Tritheism within their midst. The Miaphysites of the Middle East created anti-Tritheist literature because some figures in the area were

68. See the study and English translation in Fergus Millar, “Christian Monasticism in Roman Arabia at the Birth of Mahomet,” *Semítica et Classica* 2 (2009): 97–115. Millar points out the Hellenized features of most of the names, but their locale in the Middle East and confession as Miaphysites suggests that many of them were Syriac and Syro-Arabic speakers. The Syriac letters are in Chabot, *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas*, 204–209, 209–224. For comments on the documents, see van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*, 288–290.

69. On these events, see Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 1.2, 925–935.

repeating the arguments of John Philoponus. During the Sasanian-Byzantine war (611–629), which led to the Persian occupation of Jerusalem in 614, the Sasanians placed prominent Jewish leaders in charge of the region. This caused Miaphysite clergymen to flee Syria-Palestine for Egypt, and possibly for Arabia as well, which may have led to a continuation of the debate there.⁷⁰ Tritheist discussion subsided only after the Byzantine emperor Heraclius promoted his *Ekthesis* of 638 advancing the doctrine of Monothelitism (the claim that Jesus Christ had a single divine will), which became a more pressing Christological matter.

Sixth-Century Tritheist Controversies in Syriac: God's Unity and the Resurrection

Sometime before 575, John Philoponus composed *On the Resurrection*, wherein he argued that the physical body is mortal and corruptible, like all creation. Since the resurrected body must be immortal as well as eternal, John rejected traditional beliefs about the resurrection and he argued that the new body would have a different nature and substance than the old body. According to John, God created a new body for the resurrection while the dead body would be destroyed in both matter and form/appearance (*schema*).⁷¹ Thus the resurrected body would be numerically different than the original body.

John Philoponus' cosmology was based upon reasoned faith rather than uncritical acceptance of biblical revelation. For Philoponus, anything that had deteriorated could not be reconstituted into an earlier state. Therefore, he taught that the resurrected body could not be related to the ruined former body but must be an entirely new one. At the resurrection, this new body would be united to the rational soul, while the original material body would not be resurrected. For John, the resurrection constituted a spiritual rather than a physical phenomenon insofar as the link between the old body and the new one resided in the fact that they shared the same soul and form (*eidōs*).⁷²

John Philoponus' works were translated into Syriac and spread throughout the region. His explanation of the bodily resurrection in these writings caused a rift among the Tritheist community. The leading Tritheist bishops Conon and Eugene rejected Philoponus' claims as heretical. However, the monk Athanasius (the grandson of the Empress Theodora) supported John Philoponus' doctrine that the former physical body of the resurrected was

70. Chabot (ed.), *Chronique de Michel le Syrien 1166–1199*, 2.381, 4.391; Michael the Syrian, *The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo*, 433.

71. Lourié, "John Philoponus on the Bodily Resurrection," 83–84.

72. For a detailed assessment of his views, see Lourié, "John Philoponus on the Bodily Resurrection."

not itself an object of resurrection.⁷³ The sometime Philoponian Tritheist Stephen Gobar also assembled a collection of sayings on the position of the Church Fathers that tended to spiritualize the resurrection (questions 4–7).⁷⁴ The Tritheists became separated into two camps: the Cononites and the Philoponians (also called Athanasians). The Philoponian Tritheist rejection of a physical resurrection remained a lively part of discussions that continued well into the seventh century in the region.

Out of these controversies emerged a robust corpus of anti-Tritheist and anti-Philoponian literature designed to refute his alleged polytheism and alleged denial of the resurrection. While John Philoponus' apparent rejection of the bodily resurrection was not directly a consequence of his Tritheist doctrinal explanations, they were bound together in the polemics of anti-Tritheist literature by the end of the sixth century. To be fair, John Philoponus did not deny the resurrection as such or that the resurrected would have bodies; rather, he denied that post-resurrection bodies would be numerically identical to pre-resurrection bodies. Polemicists viewed the numeric change as tantamount to a complete denial of a physical resurrection. This rhetorical move had polemical value in late sixth-century political and religious debates. The anti-Tritheist records belonging to the Jafnid Christian rulers of the late sixth century mentioned above confirm that Syriac-speaking Arabs during this period caricatured and polemicized against his ideas regarding Tritheism and the resurrection.⁷⁵ Literary responses to Tritheism, such as the renewed promotion of the Legend of the Sleepers of Ephesus (see below), were disseminated by orthodox Christians to counter such doctrines.

A. "They are godless"

The anti-Tritheist camps, including both Miaphysites (Coptic and Syrian Orthodox) and the Byzantine Orthodox, responded with four accusations against John Philoponus and his followers: they were unbelievers, divided God's unity, professed pagan polytheism, and denied the bodily resurrection.

73. Van Roey, "Un traité cononite contre la doctrine de Jean Philopon sur la resurrection."

74. Theresia Hainthaler, "A Christological Controversy among the Severans at the end of the Sixth Century—The Conversion of Probus and John Barbur Chalcedonism," in *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 2.3: *The Churches of Jerusalem and Antioch from 451 to 600*, 386–418, esp. 416–417. Stephen Gobar's text may very well be the one referred to by John of Ephesus in Brooks, *Iohannis Ephesimi historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*, 261 (Syriac); Payne Smith, *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History of John Bishop of Ephesus*, 63.

75. The commentary is in van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*; texts in Chabot, *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas*.

These accusations were rhetorical moves. They were not meant to accurately depict Tritheist doctrines, but rather to reduce their ideas to absurd positions via polemical tropes. Theodosius, the Miaphysite patriarch of Alexandria who was living in exile in Constantinople in the 560s, sent instructions to the bishop John of Cellia to address Miaphysite needs in Egypt. But Theodosius died in 566 and a theological treatise he composed meant to bring Tritheists back into the fold was rejected by Alexandrian Tritheists.⁷⁶ So in 567, John of Cellia pronounced an anathema at Alexandria against John Philoponus, accusing him of being an unbeliever:

We find that which is written by John the Grammarian, who is called Philoponus, but rather should be called a heretic, to be full of atheism, and to be contrary to the *Treatise on the Holy Trinity* composed by our holy father Theodosius [Patriarch of Alexandria, d. 566], and the teaching of the Fathers who correctly taught the word of truth. Moreover, we anathematize whatever is written on this subject by John the Grammarian, who is surnamed Philoponus, although more truly speaking godless, and whoever receives them. We also anathematize John the Grammarian, and any clergy who would give him the Eucharist, before he would do penance on account of this matter.⁷⁷

B. “They divide God’s unity”

Another accusation against the Philoponian Tritheists is that they had divided God’s unity into three divine realities. According to John Philoponus:

The Godhead and substance of the adorable Trinity does not exist in reality but only in the mind and reason. In this way God is viewed as one, whereas there are three substances of God; and these substances and natures are distributed according to the hypostases and thus the Father is another God, the Son another God, and the Holy Ghost another God.⁷⁸

Other Miaphysites, including the Patriarch of Antioch, Paul of Beit Ukkame, condemned Philoponus for allegedly subverting divine unity. Paul mentions in an official letter dated to 580 to Theodore, the Miaphysite Patriarch of Alexandria, that he and several others were acting in debates against the

76. For a study of Theodosius’ treatise, see van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*, 129–140.

77. Chabot, *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas*, 160–161; summary in van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*, 284.

78. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien 1166–1199*, 2.330–331, 4.361; Michael the Syrian, *The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo*, 403. Translation quoted from Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 31.

Tritheists. For Paul, Philoponus' position could be reduced to a rejection of God's unity:

Consequently on account of this, we reject those who dare to say: "The oneness of the divine substance and nature is subsequent to the constitution of its being, so that this [unity] is merely a mental image and comprehended only in the imagination." These ones are indeed outside of our sheepfold and we reject the error of the pagans (*hanpē*).⁷⁹

Another condemnation, quoting Philoponus' *On the Trinity* in Syriac, demonstrated the rejection of his claims in the Miaphysite milieu: "Let any opponent be anathema (*aḥrem*) who says: 'Three gods.' For [John Philoponus] says in the former treatise [*On the Trinity*] to his opponent thus: 'If we do not say "three gods" who are different in nature ...'"⁸⁰ In an anonymous Miaphysite question-and-answer text, there are eleven questions asked by a Tritheist along with solutions given by the author. The exchange, which took place in Syriac, was entitled:

A refutation of the questions slanderously written by one of those who have fallen into heresy, confessing that the holy and consubstantial Trinity is composed of a plurality of substances and natures, which produces pagan polytheism (*sagī'ūt 'alāhūtā d-ḥanpē*).⁸¹

One relevant feature of anti-Tritheist literature is its utilization of polemical critiques to claim its opponents lack knowledge of God and his creation. In this text, the author introduces his logical arguments with rhetorical polemics, such as in his response to question five on the consubstantiality of the Trinity: "While you want to be renowned in many things, you do not know even one. Your ignorance and lack of education is seen in all of your questions."⁸² Or in the opening response to the eighth question: "Even in your own question, you walk on the same path of ignorance and you have reduced yourself to the evil of not knowing what is clear even to schoolchildren."⁸³

An anonymous Miaphysite Syriac author composed a series of twelve questions (with a later addition) against Tritheist conceptions of God's unity. For instance, the second question challenges the Tritheist denial of God's unity and simultaneously insists that God is three only according to a certain

79. Chabot, *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas*, 318.

80. Van Roey, "Les fragments tritheites de Jean Philopon," 150.

81. Giuseppe Furlani, *Sei scritti antitriteistici in lingua siriana* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1920), 679.

82. *Ibid.*, 706.

83. *Ibid.*, 714.

manner of speaking. The text's Miaphysite author argues that "if it is not correct to confess the oneness of God in every case, nor again in any case [to confess] a plurality of gods, then will it not necessarily confirm the wicked 'who says in his heart that there is no God?'"⁸⁴ Questions three and four dismiss the Tritheist attempts to attribute any number to God whatsoever, adapting Jeremiah 2:28 to accuse them of faithlessness: "the number of your villages is the number of your gods, Judah."⁸⁵ The fifth question suggests that "if it is right for us to confess the oneness of God by the same name, then why [is it not correct for us to confess the oneness of] Moses and all of the saints, who were called gods?"⁸⁶ In this text, the use of the Christian Old Testament and its critiques of polytheism are harnessed to contemporary polemical concerns.

The Miaphysite monk Thomas of Mar Bassos, when he was in Alexandria, also composed twenty-three questions in Syriac concerning John Philoponus' work *On the Trinity*.⁸⁷ Regarding the claim of three gods, Thomas asks in his tenth question whether the number three can become the word for one, or whether the number one can expand into the number three, so that one can become many and many can become one.⁸⁸

Incidentally, critiques such as these ones may have relevance for the meaning of the word *thalāthah* in Q al-Nisā' 4:171 ("do not say 'three'") and likewise for the translation of Q al-Mā'idah 5:73 ("Surely God is the third of three," *inna 'llāha thālithu thalāthatin*). Sidney Griffith has suggested that the phrase in Q al-Mā'idah 5:73 is an Arabic calque, or loan translation, on the Syriac word *tlitāyā*, which means the "threefold" or "treble one," which is an orthodox epithet for the Trinity in Syriac.⁸⁹ While the term carries that resonance, the same usage appears in the Syriac version of John Philoponus' *On Theology*.⁹⁰

84. *Ibid.*, 749, quoting Ps 14:1.

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

87. *Ibid.*, 753–759.

88. *Ibid.*, 756.

89. Sidney Griffith, "Syriacisms in the 'Arabic Qur'ān': Who Were 'Those Who Said 'Allāh Is Third of Three' according to al-Mā'ida 73?'" in Meir M. Bar-Asher et al. (eds.), *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān Presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 2007), 83–110, esp. 103–106.

90. Corrie Jonn Block was the first scholar, to my knowledge, to suggest that the Qur'ān's audience in early seventh-century Arabia was familiar with Philoponian Tritheism. Block made a convincing argument that the Qur'ān does not use an exact Arabic calque on the Syriac word for Trinity, *tlitāyūtā*. He suggested the Arabic form in the Qur'ān would have conformed more closely to the Christian Arabic title *al-thālūth* with the long vowel *ū* indicated in the text, since this would preserve a more common Syriacism. See C. Jonn Block, "Philoponian Monophysitism in South Arabia at the

He writes: “The divine substance subsists in threefold (*tlitā ʔit*)⁹¹ fashion in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This substance is divided not only by number but by the properties themselves. Therefore they are entirely of different species.”⁹² This Philoponian Tritheist terminology was repeated in the debates that Syriac Miaphysite Christians conducted against one another. Accusing advocates of the Christian Trinity of adhering to alleged Tritheism was a deliberate and polemical strategy meant to caricature opponents, which was well-known by the time of the emergence of the Qurʾān.

C. “They are pagans and polytheists” (*hanpē* and *sagīʾay ʾalāhē*)

Anti-Tritheist literature accuses its biblically literate opponents, who considered themselves to be Christian, of having embraced a doctrinal innovation that was tantamount to a relapse into paganism and polytheism. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, John of Ephesus noted that their bishops were evangelistic polytheists: “The further history of the Tritheists is given in few words; for these teachers of polytheism under Conon and Eugenius as their heads flourished for a time greatly, and multiplied their bishops, and sent them in all directions to increase and establish their heresy.”⁹³

The Arab Jafnid leader al-Hārith also had his two main bishops, Jacob Baradeus and Theodore of Arabia, send a letter to the Miaphysite monks of Arabia in 567 denouncing anyone who would try to convert their flock to polytheism:

As we were informed about your correct faith and the dignity of your brotherhood’s rule, beloved by God, we inform you that we have learned that some monks have gone astray, fallen into heresy, arising on account of sin. Those ones are called Tritheists, or polytheists, and [confess] three deities and go about seeking some chaste monks and lay faithful to induce to embrace their heresy.⁹⁴

The anonymous Syriac author of the question-and-answer refutation also noted that Miaphysites had characterized the Philoponian position as pagan and polytheistic: “But [Patriarch Theodosius] excommunicated this

Advent of Islam with Implications for the English translation of ‘*Thalātha*’ in Qurʾān 4.171 and 5.73,” *JIS* 23 (2012): 50–75.

91. This is the Syriac adverbial form.

92. Syriac text in van Roey, “Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon,” 153. English translation quoted in Ebied, van Roey, and Wickham, *Peter of Callinicum*, 29.

93. Payne Smith, *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History of John Bishop of Ephesus*, 64; Brooks, *Iohannis Ephesini historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*, 261.

94. Chabot, *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas*, 165.

heresy of substances, which one might say in short are ‘plural substances,’ for it produces pagan polytheism (*sagīʾūt ʾalāhūtā d-ḥanpē*). First, he rejected the three substances of pagan Tritheism, because this leads to polytheism (*sagīʾūt ʾalāhē*).⁹⁵ Later in the refutation the author notes that Theodosius “excommunicated whoever he heard speaking of it publicly, for it produces pagan polytheism (*sagīʾūt ʾalāhē d-ḥanpē*).”⁹⁶ These accusations appear in other places as well.⁹⁷

There is at least one linguistic insight that can explain some important similarities and differences between anti-Tritheist language and the Qurʾān. The Syriac term for “pagan” (*ḥanpā*) is used both negatively and positively in the Syriac tradition, while its qurʾānic equivalent (*ḥanīf*) has an exclusively positive connotation.⁹⁸ Michael Pregill has argued that the Qurʾān appropriates and subverts the negative connotation in order to show that “pagan/idolater” does not have the same moral valence attributed to it by Jews and Christians; on the contrary, it is the pagan/*ḥanīf* outsiders such as Abraham and the Messenger that comprehend monotheism best. Pregill explains that “its claim to outside status, reasserting the ‘pagan’ (or better, gentile) nature of original monotheism, implies that the corrupt monotheism of Jews and Christians is tantamount to idolatry.”⁹⁹ In a similar fashion, some Syriac Christians in pre-Islamic times invoked Abraham as a pagan/*ḥanpā* believer, and thus his title positively prefigured Jesus Christ’s call for a universal mission to evangelize all nations (Matt 28:19).

As noted earlier by Arthur Jeffery, the Qurʾān usually employs the word *ḥanīf* in combination with an explanation that “he was not an associator” (*wa-*

95. Furlani, *Sei scritti antitriteistici in lingua siriaca*, 710.

96. *Ibid.*, 723.

97. *Ibid.*, 725, 731.

98. See the argument for its positive use in François de Blois, “*Nasrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *Ḥanīf* (Ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” *BSOAS* 65 (2002): 1–30, esp. 26 on its positive use: “that Abraham had been elected ‘in uncircumcision’ and that he is consequently the paradigm of salvation for the gentiles.” I find the speculation on Jewish Christianity less convincing; see instead Sidney Griffith, “The Qurʾān’s ‘Nazarenes’ and Other Late Antique Christians: Arabic-Speaking ‘Gospel People’ in Qurʾānic Perspective,” in Sven Grebenstein and Sidney Griffith (eds.), *Christsein in der islamischen Welt: Festschrift für Martin Tamecke zum 60. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz), 81–106. See the general arguments against Jewish-Christianity in the qurʾānic environment in the chapters in Francisco del Río Sánchez (ed.), *Jewish-Christianity and the Origins of Islam: Papers Presented at the Colloquium Held in Washington DC, October 29–31, 2015* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).

99. Michael Pregill, “QS 10: 6:74–83,” in Mehdi Azaiez, Gabriel Said Reynolds, Hamza Zafer, and Tommaso Tesei (eds.), *The Qurʾān Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qurʾānic Passages* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 120–121. See also Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 77–87.

mā kāna mina 'l-mushrikīn).¹⁰⁰ This gloss seems to consciously differentiate its use of the word “pagan” from what one might read in anti-Tritheist polemics, which convey a negative religious sense to the word, instead qualifying its meaning to convey a positive sense for a different audience.¹⁰¹ The qurʾānic use of the term *ḥanīf* therefore appears to reflect knowledge of the theological freight behind its Syriac cognate and to elaborate on it.

D. “They deny the bodily resurrection” (specifically, the revivification of the original body)

Most important for our discussion is the anti-Tritheist polemical claim that Philoponian adherents denied the bodily resurrection (although as noted, this was a polemical point and a rhetorical move, since John Philoponus affirmed humans would have resurrected bodies that were numerically distinct from their original ones). This was a significant concern for Miaphysite Christian leaders in the Middle East according to numerous primary sources. Our best knowledge of Tritheist attitudes concerning the resurrection comes from the third part of the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus, written in 588. As a Miaphysite Syrian Orthodox bishop and personal witness to this controversy, John of Ephesus provides a clear explanation of how John Philoponus instigated a division among the Tritheists over the resurrection. Here he simplifies Philoponus’ teaching in order to characterize the position as heretical:

When however the second treatise written by this John the Grammarian reached them, in which he teaches that it is not these same bodies which arise from the dead, but that they are changed into other bodies, which come in their stead to the resurrection, it led them into still greater error, and rent [the Tritheists] into two heresies, each of which was, if possible, more abominable than the other ... and still do the two heresies stand arrayed over against one another.¹⁰²

In 580, Paul of Beit Ukkame, the Miaphysite Patriarch of Antioch, composed a letter to Theodore, the Miaphysite Patriarch of Alexandria. In his composition, he polemically reduces his Tritheist opponents’ views from a

100. Examples include Q 2:135; 3:95; 6:161; 16:123; 6:79; 10:105; 16:120. These passages are cited in Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 86.

101. It may be noted that anti-Tritheist polemics also do not accuse their opponents of ascribing non-divine partners to God (*shirk, ashraḳa*), which is fundamental to qurʾānic polemics. The reason is presumably that both Christian groups at hand agreed that the Son and the Holy Spirit were divine.

102. Payne Smith, *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History of John Bishop of Ephesus*, 57; Brooks, *Iohannis Ephesini historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*, 256–257.

denial of revivification of the same body to a total denial of the resurrection and rejects their identity as Christians:

Therefore, let those [Tritheists] who deny the resurrection of the body be put to shame, daring to destroy the great hope that belongs to us. These [Tritheists], I declare, also should not be justly counted in the number of Christians. There are two divisions of this impiety among them [Philoponians and Cononites], who are now creeping their way in to lead [people] astray with the hideousness of paganism. Among them are those who say: "Everything disappears and this body is destroyed. However, different souls are given in the resurrection, which is something entirely made from nothing, which is therefore fitting for our life at that time." The chief among these ones is John the Grammarian who is head of the order of Tritheists.¹⁰³

John of Ephesus also recounts how Philoponus' writings provoked a division among the Tritheists into Philoponians and Cononites. Damian, the Miaphysite Patriarch of Alexandria, required the Cononite Tritheists in a letter to deny a polytheistic God and excommunicate John Philoponus and reject three of his Tritheist works, the latter of which allegedly denied the bodily resurrection. While the Cononites were willing to anathematize the third work, they would not reject a diversity in Gods and so Damian excommunicated them.¹⁰⁴

To confirm this attitude among the Cononites against Philoponus, we have a manuscript containing a response from them criticizing Philoponus' doctrine rejecting the revivification of the mortal body. In the title of the late sixth-century Syriac text, there is a general anathema against any group who denies the resurrection "including the Samaritans, the Sadducees, Simon the Magician, Valentine, Marcion, those who are called Gnostics, Origenists, and Mani," and anyone who agrees with these doctrines.¹⁰⁵

According to John of Ephesus, the Tritheist movement spread its allegedly pro-polytheistic texts that denied the resurrection in the Middle East among Syriac-speaking groups. Here he assumes (not unlike some passages in the Qur'an: Q 50:3–15; 75:3, 36–40; 19:66–72¹⁰⁶) that if his opponents claim

103. Chabot, *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas*, 330.

104. Payne Smith, *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History of John Bishop of Ephesus*, 62–63; Brooks, *Iohannis Ephesini historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*, 260–261.

105. Van Roey, "Un traité cononite contre la doctrine de Jean Philopon sur la resurrection," 126; William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, Part II* (London: British Museum, 1871), 966.

106. Note that just as John of Ephesus mischaracterizes the Tritheists as denying the resurrection altogether here, it is also possible—following G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)—that when the Qur'an depicts skeptics as completely denying

that God creates a new body for the soul in the resurrection, then it seems to impugn God's creative sovereignty and His ability to recompose the old one by virtue of his creative power. Here, John of Ephesus polemically reduces Philoponian Tritheism to outright paganism:

Next, after a short interval, [Eutychius] heard of the heresy of Athanasius, who after having been head and founder of the heresy of those who number the substances, that is, the essences and natures in the Holy Trinity, having been led astray by the error of John the Grammarian, of Alexandria, further said that these bodies of ours do not rise again at the resurrection of the dead, but that others are made, which come to the resurrection in their stead. And from this madness, worthy of paganism or the Manicheans, there arose a schism among them, and they anathematized one another in their writings. When then Eutychius heard of these people, he immediately joined himself unto them, and was imbued with their sentiments, and became one of them, and began composing a work in their defense, and drew up and published books ...

After these things, the haughty Eutychius, who belonged originally in the main to the heresy of Paul of Samosata, was not long in precipitating himself into a fresh snare, by adopting the views of those who denied the resurrection of the body: nor did he merely assent to their opinions, but set himself industriously and zealously to confess and publicly teach their doctrine, saying, "These bodies of men do not attain to the resurrection, but others are created anew, which arise in their stead." And this view he not merely taught by word of mouth, but even drew up written treatises in its defense, and distributed them publicly, and constantly spoke of nothing else.¹⁰⁷

Qur'ānic Discourse and Anti-Tritheist Polemics

Many passages in the Qur'ān make it appear as a peripheral interloper who suddenly enters an ongoing and longstanding conversation about the nature of God and the bodily resurrection. For instance, Q al-Mā'idah 5:14 implies that Christian groups were by no means guaranteed salvation due to their disputations: "And with those who say, 'Surely we are Christians,' We made a covenant, but they have forgotten part of what they were reminded of. So We stirred up enmity and hatred among them, until the Day of Resurrection, and (then) God will inform them about what they have done." A typical Qur'ānic strategy in these conversations is to eschew the technical language used by

the resurrection this may not be an accurate characterization of their views but a reduction of their arguments to absurdity for the purpose of certain polemical arguments and rhetorical strategies of critique.

107. Payne Smith, *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History of John Bishop of Ephesus*, 147–148, 149; Brooks, *Johannis Ephesini historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*, 101–102, 117.

Christians in these centuries-old theological debates, since the Qurʾān does not have to make itself consistent with earlier non-Arabic terminology, while orthodox and Tritheist positions were constrained by an extensive history and theological vocabulary.¹⁰⁸ In contrast, passages in the Qurʾān flatten out that history and its context, in order to reduce their opponents' views to illogical positions, thereby questioning the premises of the opponents. For instance, Christological debate is reduced to unbelief and association (*shirk*) in Q 5:72: "Certainly they have disbelieved who say (*la-qad kafara ʾlādhiḥna qālū*), 'Surely God—He is the Messiah, son of Mary,' when the Messiah said, 'Sons of Israel! Serve God, my Lord and your Lord. Surely he who associates [anything] with God (*man yushrik biʾllāh*), God has forbidden him [from] the Garden, and his refuge is the Fire. The evildoers have no helpers.'" Recall that the following verse in Q 5:73 ("Surely God is the third of three," *inna ʾllāha thālithu thalāthatin*) also accuses a group of Christians of disbelief. Another example of flattening the long pre-history of a Christian view, here to do with religious leadership, occurs in Q al-Tawbah 9:31, which also reduces its opponents to associators: "They have taken their teachers and their monks as lords instead of God, and [also] the Messiah, son of Mary, when they were only commanded to serve one God. There is no god but Him. Glory to Him above what they associate (*subḥānahu ʾammā yushrikūn*)!" This polemical exaggeration suggests that the Christians at hand are *mushrikūn*.

These kinds of passages suggest that literary tropes commonly used in Syriac and spoken Arabic at the turn of the seventh century in anti-Tritheist polemics, especially accusations of association, polytheism, paganism, unbelief, and denying the resurrection, could have been well known to the Qurʾānic community. Qurʾānic passages directed at polytheists and resurrection deniers rarely detail the names of opponents or distinguish clearly between various groups of Jews and/or Christians. The greater concern in many passages seems to be with more general polemical tropes against association (*shirk*) and unbelief (*kufr*). Such tropes may reflect an awareness of debates among Syriac-speaking Miaphysite Christians (e.g., Q 5:14 above) and the fact that certain Christians were accused of Tritheism (e.g., Q 4:171 and 5:72–73 above).¹⁰⁹ G. R. Hawting has previously shown that when the Qurʾān accuses its opponents of polytheism, idolatry, or association, it is not necessarily a literally accurate representation of its opponents. Like other intra-monotheist debates such as the Tritheist controversy, the language of calling others idolaters and/or pagans was not self-referential but formed polemical phrases.¹¹⁰ By flattening distinctions between complex theological

108. I would like to thank Andrew Hayes for his insights on this important point.

109. I would like to thank one of the peer reviewers for this connection.

110. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 67: "Just as idolatry is frequently a charge made

systems and their expressions, the Qurʾān might be making a similar polemical move well known in anti-Tritheist literature that equated certain Christian doctrines with idolatry and paganism.

In addition to the distribution of anti-Tritheist literature claiming that God's unity and the bodily resurrection were under attack, other texts were composed or revived to combat these notions, such as the legend known as the Sleepers of Ephesus. Q al-Kahf 18:9–31 contains an extensive narrative about these Companions of the Cave who were a group of young Christians who supposedly hid in a cave outside Ephesus during the persecution of Decius from 249–251. God put them into a deep sleep and awoke them about three hundred years later. Once the sleepers awakened and returned to Ephesus, the Christians of the city declared their resurrection a miracle and built a shrine over their cave.¹¹¹ The Qurʾān probably included a discussion of the Sleepers to support the doctrine of a physical resurrection and to confirm the existence of a tangible heaven and hell.¹¹² Here the Qurʾān recounts a Syriac Christian legend which anti-Tritheist advocates were utilizing to critique those who denied the resurrection of the original body. If the Sleepers of Ephesus were adopted for polemical arguments, it would not be surprising if the Qurʾān were also adopting an anti-Tritheist rhetorical style in accusing its opponents of polytheism and of denying the resurrection for its own purposes.¹¹³ The debate recorded in the Qurʾānic verses, the Christian symbolism of the narrative, and the audience's denial of strict monotheism

against individuals or groups who, by their own lights, are committed monotheists, so too in Islam the accusation of *shirk* is a term often used in polemic directed against people who would describe themselves a fully monotheistic and, frequently, as Muslims." Hawting suggests that the claim that the Qurʾān's opponents were *mushrikūn* ("associators") may have been a rhetorical device that the later Islamic tradition took literally. The term connotes a sense of idolatry that is also conveyed by the Syriac word *hanpē*. See also Mun'im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qurʾān and Other Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 36, 47–48.

111. For more on this topic, see Sidney Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qurʾān: The 'Companions of the Cave' in Sūrat al-Kahf and in Syriac Christian Tradition" in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 109–137; and Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 167–185.

112. See for instance Carl Ernst, *How to Read the Qurʾān: A New Guide, with Select Translations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 122–127.

113. The common assumption has been that the opponents here might be polytheists who denied the resurrection. Patricia Crone argued that several of the opponents were biblically literate God-fearers, or henotheists who had grown accustomed to biblical material but denied the resurrection; see Patricia Crone, "The Religion of the Qurʾānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities," *Arabica* 57 (2010): 151–200.

and a physical resurrection fit quite nicely with our historical knowledge of intra-Miaphysite disputations between the Syrian Jacobites, the Cononite Tritheists, and the Philoponians. The parallels between the Tritheist doctrines on God and the resurrection, and the way those themes are addressed in the Qurʾān, indicate that anti-Tritheist debate may have provided some material from the prestige culture of the region to be reappropriated in the Qurʾān for its own discourse.

It appears that the Qurʾān exhibits a shared polemical milieu with Syriac Christian Miaphysite debate over Tritheism and the resurrection.¹¹⁴ Several Qurʾānic passages reflect similar content and polemical themes compared to intra-Christian debates from the same time period and geographic region.¹¹⁵ In particular, they have parallels in anti-Tritheist discussions and their Trinitarian and eschatological themes. They argue against doctrinal concepts using biblical premises that were also common in Syriac-speaking Arab Christian debates. Syriac legends, questions and answers, and theological homilies on these topics were well known in the later sixth century.¹¹⁶ Anti-Tritheist critiques were not esoteric but part of the local mainstream culture. Tritheism was debated in urban and rural communities, from monastic cells to major cities and trade routes. We know that the Miaphysite Jafnid Arab Christians were facilitating and engaging in debates in places such as Gaza, Syria, and the province of Arabia. Debates over alleged polytheism and denial of the resurrection were central to political and theological discourse

114. For a discussion on the polemical milieu of the Qurʾān as closer to paganism, see Sinai, *The Qurʾān*, 62–65.

115. Michael the Syrian, drawing upon sixth-century sources, called practitioners of Tritheism “new Arians” because they denied the consubstantiality of the Trinity. At another point he remarked that the monk Theodosius of Cappodocia wrote “a treatise against the neo-Arians who confessed three divinities” (Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien 1166–1199*, 2.254, 4.315; Michael the Syrian, *The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo*, 361). Arianism acknowledged three natures in the Godhead and claimed that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit were created in time and therefore distinct from the Father. This link between historic Arianism and Tritheism is remarkable because one of the longstanding Christian polemical claims was that an Arian monk collaborated with Muḥammad. This evidence does not prove any real historical encounter between Muḥammad and a Tritheist took place, but it does indicate that that later Christians associated Tritheism (labeled as Arianism) with the emergence of the Qurʾān.

116. See for example Sidney Griffith, “What does Mecca Have to Do with Urhōy? Syriac Christianity, Islamic Origins, and the Qurʾān,” in Maria Doerfler, Emanuel Fiano, and Kyle Smith (eds.), *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium, Duke University, 26–29 June 2011* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 369–399, esp. 379; and Joseph Witztum, “The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2011).

during this period. Anti-Tritheist works on these topics were widely known and available to interested parties.

Do quotations in the Qurʾān allegedly spoken by resurrection deniers accurately reflect the views that audience held? In both Syriac anti-Tritheist literature and the Qurʾān, the rhetorical strategy is to caricature, distort, misrepresent, and/or falsely portray the opponents' assertions, making it challenging to untangle the polemical claims from what opponents actually professed. Nevertheless, it appears that anti-Tritheist polemics and the Qurʾān shared rhetorical strategies of critique, topical subjects such as God's unity and the resurrection, and themes such as God's creative power. However, the two bodies of literature differ in key areas including linguistic difference, their choice of vocabulary (e.g., there are no clear Syriac-Arabic cognates for association and polytheism), and in some cases at least, they direct their polemics at different audiences.

Conclusion

The doctrines of Philoponian Tritheism on the resurrection are significant for the emergence of the Qurʾān insofar as they may be supplying some of the basic tropes from which Qurʾānic polemics were generated. Anti-Tritheist polemics do not always describe Tritheist teachings accurately, but employ rhetorical strategies to reduce their Tritheist opponents' views to polytheism and paganism, unbelief, and an outright denial of the resurrection. Syriac-speaking Arab Miaphysite Christians disseminated a wide variety of anti-Tritheist polemical literature at the turn of the seventh century. This article suggests that certain passages in the Qurʾān adapted and repurposed anti-Tritheist material because they demonstrate the same rhetorical move of reducing opponents' positions to simplicity or exaggerating them to seem absurd. This is a general strategy in the Qurʾān; even the Qurʾānic insistence on proving the truth of the resurrection is often reduced simply to divine creative sovereignty.

Neither anti-Tritheist literature nor the Qurʾān seem especially interested in precise renderings of their opponents' views; rather, the passages simplify, caricature, or sometimes provide misleading information about the opponents' ideas in order to refute them and accuse them of association, polytheism, unbelief, and denying the resurrection. Based on these parallels in content and method, some Qurʾānic verses may or may not reflect actual debates with Tritheists because its polemical strategy of reduction means that scholars cannot simply take the Qurʾān's descriptions of its opponents at face

value.¹¹⁷ Rather, it seems more convincing to acknowledge that the Qur'ān is familiar with the content and polemical strategies of anti-Tritheist literature and that it engages in the same type of polemical reduction of its opponents' positions.¹¹⁸

In sum, several qur'ānic passages demonstrate knowledge of contemporaneous debates concerning the denial of a bodily resurrection within the Syriac-speaking community. These literary arguments, and the concomitant oral arguments, circulated throughout Arabic-speaking lands. The Qur'ān's polemical tropes reflect in-depth knowledge of the content of anti-Tritheist material on God's unity and the bodily resurrection as well as its method of reducing opponents' arguments. These documents suggest that the Qur'ān belonged to a shared polemical culture in the Mediterranean world at the turn of the seventh century.

117. See for instance Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible*, 13: "The Qur'ān is shaped throughout by the concern of its author(s) with crafting polemical and apologetical messages, even when that involves putting words in its opponents' mouths. This is seen perhaps most clearly in the way it exaggerates the religious doctrines of its opponents, for example, by declaring that the Jews say 'Ezra is the son of God' (Q 9:30) or that the Jews and Christians worship their clergy (Q 9:31)."

118. This argument allows for the possibility that the Qur'ān might utilize anti-Tritheist rhetoric not against Tritheists, but against biblically literate pagans or polytheists who outright denied the resurrection. But due to the Qur'ān's polemical strategies, the audience's characteristics can be difficult to ascertain.