

Abraham's Family

A Network of Meaning in Judaism,
Christianity, and Islam

Edited by
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Mohr Siebeck

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ISBN 978-3-16-156302-7 / eISBN 978-3-16-156686-8

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-156686-8

ISSN 0512-1604 / eISSN 2568-7476

(Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was typeset by satz&sonders in Dülmen, printed on non-aging paper by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen, and bound by Großbuchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

Preface

This volume presents a scholarly journey through the centuries on what many religious and ethnic groups have understood as “Abraham’s Family.” To make this happen many institutions and individuals contributed time, money, thoughts, and also trust.

The research presented in this volume was part of a project at Åbo Akademi University in Finland and Marburg University in Germany funded by the Academy of Finland (Suomen Akatemia) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in 2015 and 2016. The project concluded with a conference at the Theology Faculty in Marburg in September 2016. At this conference several outstanding scholars as well as post-doc researchers and PhD students from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States presented and discussed their ideas on Abraham’s Family in their particular field of research.

I am pleased to acknowledge publicly the contribution to this conference of the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, the Evangelische Kirche in Hessen and Nassau, the Evangelische Kirche of Kurhessen Waldeck, and the Ursula Kuhlmann Fund at Marburg University.

I am most grateful to the publisher Mohr Siebeck, Dr. Henning Ziebritzki, the editor Prof. Jörg Frey and the editorial board of *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* for accepting the proceedings of the Marburg Conference on Abraham’s Family for publication in this esteemed series. The authors of the essays collected in the volume and I myself also thank Dr. J. Andrew Doole who proofread all contributions and made many valuable suggestions to clarify meaning and improve style. Hannah Kreß prepared the indexes for the volume. It was a great pleasure to cooperate with all the institutions and individuals mentioned in this preface.

Marburg, Easter 2018

Lukas Bormann

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Syrians and the Appeal to Abraham in the Early Islamic Times

Catalin-Stefan Popa

This paper is focused on Abraham's figure in the Christian discourse of the early Islamic period. Firstly, I will discuss a short register of Abrahamic names that Christians used to address the first Muslims. After this, starting from the premise that Abraham provides a biblical-typological support for the Christology of the Syriac Christians challenged by early Islam, I will present two Syriac texts in order to emphasize the following questions: Do any changes appear in the Christian profile of Abraham? Does the appeal to Abraham, in this new context, represent an issue related to the doctrine of Christ?

1. The Names Christians attributed to the early Muslims

As Patricia Crone and Michael Cook highlighted, “the idea of a religion of Abraham is of course prominent in the Qur‘an.”¹ Abraham is regarded in the Qur‘an as one of the most prominent figures of a series of prophets that begins with Adam and ends with Muḥammad.² But it is already well known that Abraham (arab. Ibrāhīm) represents much more than just a prophetic figure in Islam. His name is related to the notion of com-

¹PATRICIA CRONE and MICHAEL ALLAN COOK, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 12.

²See TILMAN NAGEL, “Der erste Muslim. Abraham in Mekka,” in “Abraham, unser Vater”: *Die gemeinsamen Wurzeln von Judentum, Christentum und Islam* (ed. REINHARD GREGOR KRATZ and TILMAN NAGEL; Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2003), 112–132, esp. 133. For a complete profile of Abraham in Islam see also: ROBERT G. HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (SJLA 13; Princeton, N. J.: Darwin Press, 1997), 470; EDMUND BECK, “Die Gestalt des Abraham am Wendepunkt der Entwicklung Muḥammeds. Analyse von Sure 2,118 (124)–135 (141),” *Le Museon* 65 (1952): 73–94; ANDREAS GRÜNSCHLOSS, *Der eigene und der fremde Glaube: Studien zur interreligiösen Fremdwahrnehmung in Islam, Hinduismus, Buddhismus und Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 100f.

mandments, which are very relevant for Muslim practices. This makes sense of why Islam identifies itself with the background of an Abrahamic religion. On the other hand, constructing an earlier Abrahamic account as a starting point for their religion, the Muslims – based on Surah 3:65 – try to place Islam chronologically in a time before Judaism and Christianity: “People of the Book! Why do you dispute with us about Abraham even though the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after the time of Abraham?” Abraham appears in 25 of the 114 Surahs of the Qurʿan, in around 208 verses. His name is mentioned explicitly 69 times. For this reason, Abraham is the second most frequently mentioned prophet in the Qurʿan (Moses is mentioned 136 times in around 500 verses).³

Theodor Nöldeke noted in his *Geschichte des Qurʿans* two indicators that could explain why Muḥammad felt closely related to Abraham: firstly, because of Abraham’s positive profile in the thinking of Christians and Jews (as the perfect pattern of righteousness, obedience and faith, as the father of all pious and as friend of God), and secondly, because Abraham was seen as the founder of the sanctuary of Mecca.⁴ This view about the worship of the Arabs at a place called the “Dome (qūbtā) of Abraham” or “qābā” is mentioned also in an anonymous East Syrian chronicle written in 670, which characterizes this place as “a holy place for Arabs.”⁵

³See MARTIN BAUSCHKE, *Der Freund Gottes: Abraham im Koran* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2014), 1.

⁴THEODOR NÖLDEKE, *Geschichte des Qurʿans. Teil I: Über den Ursprung des Qurʿans* (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1909), 147: “Dass sich Muhammed später gerade Abraham am meisten verwandt fühlte, darf nicht Wunder nehmen, galt doch dieser Patriarch den Christen wie den Juden als vollendetstes Muster der Gerechtigkeit und des Glaubensgehorsams, als der ‘Vater’ alle Frommen und der ‘Freund Gottes’. Die Bevorzugung Abrahams durch Muhammed hängt weiter aufs engste zusammen mit der Ansicht von Sur. 2, 119.121, dass jener der Gründer des mekkanischen Heiligtums sei.”

⁵GERRIT J. REININK, “The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam,” *OrChr* 77 (1993): 165–187, esp. 166. The chronicle presents Abraham as the founder of the sanctuary as follows: “Darüber, was die Kuppel [qābā] Abrahams eigentlich sei, haben wir nur folgendes gefunden: weil der selige Abraham reich an Vieh war und sich auch von dem Neide der Kanaaniter fern halten wollte, beschloss er, sich in entlegenen und ausgedehnten Wüstengegenden aufzuhalten, und da er in Zelten wohnte, so erbaute er sich zur Verehrung Gottes und zur Darbringung der Opfer jenen Ort, und von diesem früheren Bau hat auch der heutige seine Benennung empfangen, da die Erinnerung an die Stelle durch Überlieferung von Geschlecht zu Geschlecht bewahrt worden ist. Und für die Araber ist es nichts neues, dort anzubeten, sondern diese Sitte herrscht schon längst seit alten Tagen, indem sie dem Stammvater ihres Volkes die gebührende Ehre darbringen.” IGNACIO GUIDI, ed., *Chronica minora*, I, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Syr. 1 and 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 1955 reprint), 35–36 (syr.); THEODOR NÖLDEKE, “Die von Guidi herausgegebene syrische Chronik übersetzt und commentiert,” *Sitzungsberichte der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Philosophisch-historische Klasse* 128.9

The attempt of the Muslims to identify themselves as descendants of Abraham and of his family is also revealed in the names the Christians adopted to address them in the early Islamic period. Christians made use of various names which described the new religion of Islam in association with the Old Testament Patriarch Abraham and his family. It is well known that “in order to distinguish these monotheistic Arabs from pagan and Christian Arabs, they were called ‘sons of Ishmael’ or ‘sons of Hagar’, the name ‘Muslims’ not being attested in Syriac sources before Abbasid times.”⁶ Such names connected Muslims with Abraham’s house. “Hagarenes (mhaggrāyē)” is initially found in the mid-seventh century sources.⁷ The term gains attention in the following century. According to Michael Penn, “if one examines eighth-century texts, however, ‘Hagarenes’ becomes much more common.”⁸ The concept “mhagrē/mhaggrāyē” indicates, according to Sidney Griffith, a relationship with the name of Hagar, the concubine of Abraham.⁹ In our texts the concepts “Hagarenes” or “mhagrē/mhaggrāyē” are widely used to designate Mus-

(1893): 1–48, esp. 46; see also FRANÇOISE BRIQUEL CHATONNET, “Some reflexions about the figure of Abraham in the syriac literature at the beginning of Islam,” *The Harp* 22 (2007): 157–175, esp. 166, 172. THEODOR NÖLDEKE, “Die von Guidi herausgegebene syrische Chronik,” 46, n. 4, goes a step further: “Der Verfasser nimmt die muslimische Legende ohne Bedenken an. Darin hat er allerdings Recht, dass die Ka’ba nicht etwa erst durch Muhammed zum Heiligthum geworden ist.”

⁶GERRIT J. REININK, “The Lamb on the Tree: Syriac Exegesis and anti-Islamic Apologetics,” in *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations* (Themes in Biblical Narrative: Jewish and Christian Traditions 4; ed. ED NOORT and EIBERT TIGCHELAAR; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 109–124, esp. 123–124. See also HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam*, 156 and 414 n. 88; REININK, “The Lamb on the Tree,” 123–124 n. 78.

⁷MICHAEL PHILIP PENN, “John and the Emir: A New Introduction, Edition and Translation,” *Le Museon* 121 (1–2): 65–91, esp. 72.

⁸PENN, “John and the Emir,” 72–73. See also REININK, “The Beginnings,” 172 n. 42, 175, 177; KARL-HEINZ OHLIG, “Hinweise auf eine neue Religion in der christlichen Literatur ‘unter islamischer Herrschaft?’” in *Der frühe Islam: Eine historisch-kritische Rekonstruktion anhand zeitgenössischer Quellen* (ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig; Berlin: Hans Schiler Verlag, 2007), 223–327, esp. 232–235.

⁹SIDNEY H. GRIFFITH, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam* (Mōrān ʾEthʾō Series No. 7, Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, Baker Hill, 1995) 9. See for example the use of the term in Jacob of Edessa (in the late seventh century). In this regard MICHAEL PHILIP PENN, *Envisioning Islam. Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 1, claims: “The word ‘Hagarenes’ was the most common term Jacob used to speak of people whom we would call Muslims.”

lims. The notion “Sons of Ishmael” (“bnay Hagar”)¹⁰ also occurs only in the second text (the *Bêt ʿHālē Disputation*).

Only one name does not lead directly to Abraham and his family, and this is the concept “ṭayyāye” or “ḥānpe.”¹¹ This brings us to the basic discussion about the term “ḥanīf.” The origin of the concept “ḥanīf” has long been a very controversial issue among Syriac and Arabic scholars.¹² Milka Levy-Rubin discussed the literature and summarized the two most important semnifications of the concept: on the one hand “ḥanīf” could come from the Arabic verb “ḥanafa, to incline, or decline from,” with the intention to characterize the “ḥanīf” as “one who ‘inclined’ from a false religion towards the true religion.”¹³ On the other hand, most scholars are of the opinion that “ḥanīf” is “a loanword from the Syriac *ḥanpo*, meaning ‘pagan,’ ‘heathen,’ which was sometimes used to imply a specifically Hellenistic type of paganism.”¹⁴ Numerous sources of the seventh-century denominate the Muslims with these terms. In comparison with the Abrahamic appellatives mentioned above, the terms “ṭayyāye” or “ḥānpe” show on the contrary an important evolution of Muslims from their pagan customs and traditions to peculiar religious norms. In this sense, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook offer an interesting point of view: “This is surely the context which gave Islam the curious term *ḥanīf*, so closely associated with Abraham and his faith: by borrowing a word which meant ‘pagan’

¹⁰For “bnay Hagar” see SEBASTIAN P. BROCK, “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam,” in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (Papers on Islamic History 5; ed. GAUTIER H. A. JUNNBOLL; Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 9–21, esp. 15; MICHAEL PHILIP PENN, “A Temporarily Resurrected Dog and Other Wonders: Thomas of Margā and Early Christian/Muslim Encounters,” *Medieval Encounters* 16, 2–4 (2010): 209–242, esp. 218 n. 29; cf. OHLIG, “Hinweise auf eine neue Religion,” 232–235, 317–318; HARALD SUERMANN, “Das arabische Reich in der Weltgeschichte des Jōhannān bar Penkājē,” in *Nubia et Oriens Christianus. Festschrift für C. Detlef G. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag* (Bibliotheca Nubica 1; ed. PIOTR O. SCHOLZ and REINHARD STEMPEL; Köln: Jürgen Dinter, 1987) 59–71, esp. 61.

¹¹See CATALIN-STEFAN POPA, *Gīwargīs I. (660–680): Ostsyriscche Christologie in frühislamischer Zeit* (Göttinger Orientforschungen, I. Reihe: Syriaca, Band 50; ed. MARTIN TAMCKE; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016) 48–49 n. 188.

¹²For more on the topic see: MILKA LEVY-RUBIN, “Praise or Defamation? – On the Polemic Usage of the Term Ḥanīf among Christians and Muslims in the Middle Ages,” *JSAI* 28 (2003): 202–225; D. S. MARGOLIOUTH, “On the Origin and Import of the names Muslim and Hanīf,” *JRAS* 35 (1903): 467–493; CHARLES J. LYALL, “The words ‘Ḥanīf’ and ‘Muslim,’” *JRAS* 35 (1903): 771–784.

¹³LEVY-RUBIN, “Praise or Defamation?” 203. SIDNEY H. GRIFFITH, “The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis,” *ARAM* 3.1–2 (1991 [1993]): 115–138, esp. 127, similarly refers to a relationship of the Syrian word ḥanpō (pl. ḥanpē) with the Arab concept ḥanīf (pl. ḥunafā).

¹⁴LEVY-RUBIN, “Praise or Defamation?” 203; MARGOLIOUTH, “On the Origin and Import,” 478–479; LYALL, “The words ‘Ḥanīf’ and ‘Muslim,’” 774–775, 781.

in the vocabulary of the Fertile Crescent, and using it to designate an adherent of an unsophisticated Abrahamic monotheism, the Hagarenes contrived to make a religious virtue of the stigma of their pagan past. At the same time we can discern in this trend the beginnings of the far-reaching reorientation whereby the origins of Islam came to be seen in an elaborate and organic relationship to a real or imagined pagan heritage.”¹⁵ It is certainly understandable why the Muslims were depicted as pagans: on one hand because of their Arabic background and on the other because of their antipathy to Christianity. Both concepts (“tayyāye” and “hānpe”) evidently indicate a defined boundary between Christianity and Islam, which was created by the very early encounters.

2. Abraham in the Disputation between Patriarch John Sedra and the Emir

Before starting the analysis of the Syriac materials, it makes sense to emphasize the idea that both texts have a christological framework. Most scholars consider it quite possible that the dialogues are fictions, but as Penn mentions – focusing on the second text – “the perspective they presented were not.”¹⁶ It is feasible that such dialogues were created within Christian circles in response to everyday reality. One of the most important critical opinions is given by Penn, who produced the new edition and an English translation of our first text presented here.

The dialogue discussed purports to be a letter recounting a debate that allegedly took place between John Sedra, Patriarch of Antioch and a local Governor, an emir of the Mhaggrāyē.¹⁷ Unfortunately there are only a few

¹⁵CRONE and COOK, *Hagarism*, 13–14. For a comprehensive view of the notions used by Christians in order to characterize the new challenging of their neighbors, the Muslims, see also: PENN, *Envisioning Islam*, 60–68; POPA, *Gīwargīs I.*, 49; PENN, “John and the Emir,” 72; GRIFFITH, *Syriac Writers on Muslims*, 8; THERESIA HAINTHALER, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam: Verbreitung und konfessionelle Zugehörigkeit: eine Hinführung* (Eastern Christian Studies 7; Leuven: Peeters, 2007) 22; SPENCER J. TRIMMINGHAM, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times: Arab Background* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1990), 312.

¹⁶PENN, *Envisioning Islam*, 37.

¹⁷The text goes back to MS BL Add. 17193 from 874 c.e. For a description of the manuscript see BARBARA ROGGEMA, “The Debate between Patriarch John and an Emir of the Mhaggrāyē: a reconsideration of the earliest Christian-Muslim debate,” in *Christians and Muslims in dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages / Christlich-muslimische Gespräche im Mittelalter* (Beiruter Texte und Studien 117; ed. MARTIN TAMCKE; Beirut: Orient-Institut/Würzburg: Ergon Verlag in Kommission, 2007) 21–40, esp. 21, n. 2.

short papers that deal with the theological content of the debate.¹⁸ The Disputation is dated to late 7th century or the beginning of the 8th century, and located in the region of Ḥomṣ (Emesa), in Syria.¹⁹ Before describing the content, it is important to mention Penn's opinion regarding a possible historiographical framework of this Syriac Disputation: "(1) it is almost certain that *John and the Emir* is not an entirely accurate representation of an encounter between a Christian and a Muslim ruler, rather it is a carefully crafted piece of apologetics; (2) it is quite probable that the text was not originally composed in the 640s but rather was written in the late seventh or in the eighth century²⁰; and (3) it is quite possible that a meeting between John Sedra and ʿUmayr ibn Saʿd never actually took place but is rather a later literary construct."²¹ The uncertain historical background which Penn emphasizes here does not diminish its importance for elucidating the first interactions of Syriac Christians with

¹⁸ROGGEMA, "The Debate," 21–40; Harald Suermann, "Orientalische Christen und der Islam. Christliche Texte aus der Zeit von 632–750," *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 67 (1983): 120–136, esp. 122–128.

¹⁹REININK, "The Beginnings," 171.

²⁰ROGGEMA ("The Debate," 39) also discusses an early origin of the text. She concludes: "In this respect the *Debate* is distinct from the many literary Muslim-Christian debates that have come down to us from the eighth century onwards, which do bring up all these burning issues and teach its readers how to respond to critical questions. If larger part of the *Debate* were composed in the 640s, or at some later point in the seventh century, then that fact could explain the difference between our text and the famous Christian-Muslim debates that do treat all these topics. Be this as it may, the question on inheritance makes it highly unlikely that the text as a whole was written in the aftermath of the Islamic conquest of Syria." For an early eighth century dating, see REININK, "The Beginnings," 165–187; 171–185; SYDNEY H. GRIFFITH, "The Prophet Muhammad, his Scripture and his Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the first Abbasid Century," in *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* (Collected Studies Series, CS 380; ed. IDEM; Aldershot: Variorum, 1992) 99–146, esp. 99; HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam*, 464. Other discussions in PETER BRUNS, "Le colloque du Patriarche Jean avec l'Emir des Agaréens sur la foi (fin VIIe siècle?)," in *Ethique et religion au défi de l'histoire* (ed. MARIE-THÉRÈSE URVOY; Versailles: Editions de Paris, 2011), 119–129; CRONE and COOK, *Hagarism*, 14; REININK, "The Lamb on the Tree," 170–182; SAMIR KHALIL, "Qui est l'interlocuteur musulman du patriarche syrien Jean III (631–648)?" in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 229; ed. HAN J. DRIJVERS ET AL.; Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1987), 387–400; SYDNEY H. GRIFFITH, "Answering the Call of the Minaret: The Topics and Strategies of Christian Apologetics in the World of Islam," in *Die Suryoye und ihre Umwelt: 4. deutsches Syrologien-Symposium in Trier 2004. Festgabe Wolfgang Hage zum 70. Geburtstag* (Studien zur orientalischen Kirchengeschichte 36; ed. MARTIN TAMCKE and ANDREAS HEINZ; Münster: Lit, 2005) 11–42; esp. 18 n. 24; SUERMANN, "Orientalische Christen," 127; N. A. NEWMAN, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue. A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632–900 A. D.): Translations with Commentary* (University of Michigan: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993).

²¹PENN, "John and the Emir," 80

Muslims. Penn argues as follows: “As with most other disputation texts, *John and the Emir* does not reflect an attempt of objective historiography as much as an act of apologetics, polemics, and meaning-making. This conclusion does not lessen the importance of *John and the Emir* for the study of early Christian/Muslim interactions, but it does highlight the need for particular reading strategies to effectively analyze this document, strategies that focus more on questions of ideology and representation than on historical reconstruction.”²²

The text deals with different questions: variety of faiths, practical issues concerning the Law and questions about the prophets and their christological statements. The debate handles five questions that can be situated in the field of dialogue and interreligious discourse. The Emir asks firstly whether the Gospel is one and the same for all Christians. After that the Emir adds: “Why if the gospel is only one, is the faith diverse?”²³ In a context of such discursive challenges the “standard Muslim critique of Christianity” arises,²⁴ namely the issue about the divinity of Christ (whether Christ is God). The Emir brings a fourth theological thesis into discussion concerning the “form and the opinion of Abraham’s and Moses’s faith.” In his answer, the Patriarch refers to a line of Prophets (“Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron”) and argues that these “and the rest of the prophets and all the just and the righteous ones” “had and held this belief and this faith of the Christians.”²⁵ It is not coincidental that the Emir places Abraham at the top of the list.²⁶ The question about the Prophets belongs to a christological framework, and this is obvious from the statements of both discourse participants. The answer of the Patriarch reveals his intention not to give a general explanation to the general question of the Emir. He nominates as prophets of the christological testimony first of all Abraham and Isaac, because both are also relevant in Islam. After this he extends the testimony to other prophets who are also important in a larger interreligious context: Jacob, Moses, Aaron (and their relevance in Judaism).

²²Ibid., 80–81.

²³Ibid., 86.

²⁴ROGGEMA, “The Debate,” 26.

²⁵PENN, “John and the Emir,” 87; compare PENN, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*, 70–71.

²⁶SUERMAN, “Orientalische Christen,” 127: “Nach islamischer Auffassung hat Abraham den Glauben an einen Gott verkündet, ebenso Moses. Dabei ist die Offenbarung im Wesentlichen die gleiche. Die spätere Offenbarung bestätigt jeweils die Vorausgehende. Auch das Evangelium bestätigt nur die Tora.”

From the perspective of intertextuality, the question about Abraham's and Moses's faith is placed between two christological interrogations. The latter deals with the real proof of the divine nature of Christ. To this question of the Emir "and why then did they not write openly and make (it) known concerning Christ?" the Patriarch offers a decisive statement certifying that the Prophets "truly knew that God is one and (that there is) one divinity (Christ),"²⁷ "but the Jews are too immature to appreciate the proofs of Christ's divinity in the Old Testament."²⁸ It seems that the appeal of John Sedra to Abraham and to the prophets makes them advocates of christological statements. The Patriarch intends to demonstrate, in a subtle way, that Christology is not missing in the thinking of the prophets: Abraham and the prophets were the starting point of a christological idea.

The discourse of Patriarch John offers no other clues concerning expanding or omitting Abraham's biblical framework. The Patriarch promotes the prophets as a valid Christian argument highlighting their knowledge of the revelation of the Holy Trinity and of the Incarnation. Abraham and the prophets presented the mystery of the divinity in a veiled manner, so that the Trinity would not be seen in a false way, as multiple Gods. By using this short hermeneutic of the prophets, Patriarch John defends in his answer the Christian doctrine and implicitly the Christian Abraham.

3. Abraham in the *Disputation* from *Bêt' Ḥālē*

Another Syriac *Disputation*, which deals with the topic of Abraham in a more complex way²⁹ than the first text, goes back to the early 8th century³⁰

²⁷PENN, "John and the Emir," 87.

²⁸ROGGEMA, "The Debate," 29. See also HARALD SUERMANN, "The Old Testament and the Jews in the dialogue between the Jacobite Patriarch John I and Umayr ibn Sad al-Ansari," in *Eastern Crossroads: Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy* (Gorgias Eastern Christianity Studies 1; ed. JUAN PEDRO MONFERRER-SALA; Piscataway, N. J.: Gorgias Press, 2007), 131–141.

²⁹See FRANÇOISE BRIQUEL-CHATONNET, "Some reflexions about the figure of Abraham in the Syriac literature at the beginning of Islam," 170; see also PENN, *Envisioning Islam*, 72: "In the *Bêt' Ḥālē Disputation*, the *ṭayyāyā*'s questions were both broader in range and greater in depth than those found in *John and the Emir*. In *John and the Emir*, the emir simply presented quick cue lines for Christian refutation. But in the *Bêt' Ḥālē Disputation*, the interlocutor often continued with probing follow-up questions."

(more precisely to 720)³¹. This *Disputation* is “structurally similar to John and the Emir” and contained a “question-and-answer format.”³² The purpose of the dialogue is “instructive” according to Sidney Griffith: “He says that the Muslim notable was in the monastery for ten days because of sickness. He was a man interested in religion, the author says, ‘learned in our scriptures as well as in their Qur‘ān.’”³³ As he has already done in the case of the dialogue between John Sedra and the Emir, Michael Philip Penn also discusses this second text in terms of its historicity: “As this neat, trite, triumphal ending suggests, similar to *John and the Emir*, the *Bêt^c Ḥālē Disputation* was not an accurate transcription of an actual exchange between a *ṭayyāyā* and a Christian. Nevertheless, it yields important clues about how Syriac Christians in the first half of the eight century were categorizing their conquerors.”³⁴

One of the debated topics was the biblical narrative of Genesis 22: the story of Isaac’s sacrifice.³⁵ Sidney Griffith characterizes the *Disputation* as “Christian apologetics pure and simple.”³⁶ The Muslim (denoted with the concept *ṭayyāyā*) addressed questions and the monk (*ihīdayā*) offered answers; the text looks like a “conversion narrative,” as the Emir switches from attack to approval of the Christian’s faith.³⁷ The Muslim tried to provide a legitimate picture of Islam, claiming:

“We are careful with the commandments of Muḥammad, and with the sacrifices of Abraham. [...] We do not ascribe a son to God, who is visible and passible like us. And there are other things: we do not worship the cross, nor the bones of martyrs, nor images like you [do].”³⁸

³⁰The text appears in Diyarbekir Syriac MS 95, from the early 18th century. See the description in ADDAI SCHER, “Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés à l’archevêché chaldéen de Diarbekir”, *Journal Asiatique*, ser. 10, vol. 10 (1907): 395–398; SIDNEY H. GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bêt Hâlê and a Muslim Emir,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3.1 (2000): 29–54, esp. 41–42; IDEM, “The Monk in the Emir’s Majlis: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period,” in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* (Studies in Arabic Language and Literature 4; ed. HAVA LAZARUS-YAFEH ET AL.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 13–65.

³¹KARL PINGGÉRA, “Konfessionelle Rivalitäten in der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Islam. Beispiele aus der ostsyrischen Literatur,” *Der Islam* 88 (2012): 51–72, esp. 52.

³²PENN, *Envisioning Islam*, 128.

³³GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam,” 43.

³⁴PENN, *Envisioning Islam*, 72.

³⁵See REININK, “The Lamb on the Tree,” 109; GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam,” 110.

³⁶GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam,” 43.

³⁷Cf. PENN, *Envisioning Islam*, 72.

³⁸Text in GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam,” 44; PENN, *Envisioning Islam*, 72.

Related to our main topic, the issue of Isaac's sacrifice³⁹ demands closer attention. By making use of this biblical story, the monk evokes Abraham's (and Isaac's) affiliation to the sacrifice of Christ. Everything that happened in Isaac's story represents a type of Christ's sacrifice, asserts the monk.⁴⁰ The exegesis on Abraham and Isaac given here by the monastic figure has his roots in the East Syriac Tradition.⁴¹ Irrespective of the Islamic context in which he lives, the monk does not hesitate to use the traditional exegesis in an ingenious way in order to highlight that Abraham and his Son Isaac are related to Christ. For this reason, the monk provides a christological answer, giving – as Sidney Griffith mentions – “a recitation of the scheme of salvation history in which he explains that Abraham's life and exploits are the type for Christ's life and accomplishments; in particular the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is the type for the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ.”⁴² On this solid exegetical groundwork, the monk demonstrates that the particularity of the Christian Abraham is to be contemplated in his quintessential relationship to the passion of Christ.

The Qur'anic tradition is also familiar with the biblical motif of Genesis 22, but it contains some variations.⁴³ In this biblical example provided by the monk, it was thought simplest to give evidence of Abraham in Christian theology. The two “boys” taken by Abraham on his journey (Gen 22:3–5) are typologically interpreted by the monk as the two robbers crucified with Christ. Gerrit Reinink offers supporting arguments that this is a valid interpretation from the late Syriac commentaries.⁴⁴ Reinink comes to the following conclusion: “But – and this makes this witness so interesting – the disputation offers an amalgam of an older Syriac motif and the Greek-Antiochene Christological exegesis.”⁴⁵

³⁹See REININK, “The Lamb on the Tree,” 114–117; CRONE and COOK, *Hagarism*, 12–13.

⁴⁰REININK, “The Lamb on the Tree,” 114; see also GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam,” 44.

⁴¹REININK, “The Lamb on the Tree,” 109; see also GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam,” 115. For Genesis 22, see also SEBASTIAN P. BROCK, “An Anonymous Syriac Homily on Abraham (Gen. 22),” *OLP* 12 (1981): 225–260; IDEM, “Genesis 22 in Syriac Tradition,” in *Mélanges Dominique Barthélemy: Études Bibliques offertes à l'occasion de son 60e anniversaire* (OBO 38; ed. PIERRE CASETTI, OTHMAN KEEL, and ADRIAN SCHENKER; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 1–30; RICHARD McCARRON, “An Epiphany of Mystical Symbols: Jacob of Sarug's Mēmrā 109 on Abraham and his Types,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1:1 (1998): 57–78, esp. 76–77. A list of the Syriac exegetical compilations on Genesis 22 is offered by REININK, “The Lamb on the Tree,” 109; GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam,” 116.

⁴²GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam,” 44.

⁴³See Surah 37:102/100–110; see also BAUSCHKE, *Der Freund Gottes*, 73–75.

⁴⁴REININK, “The Lamb on the Tree,” 109; GRIFFITH, “Disputing with Islam,” 118.

⁴⁵REININK, “The Lamb on the Tree,” 121.

The *Disputation* deals further on with christological questions about the veneration of martyrs, the cross, the Christian practice of baptism, the question about Muhammad, and finally the query whether Hagar's sons are going to enter the kingdom.⁴⁶ As seen in the discourse of the monk, Abraham and his family as christological instruments of God's economy are in this period of encounters more deeply rooted in Christian self-consciousness. The appeal to Abraham is an argument in the Syriac tradition for defending the Christian typology Abraham-Christ, as the monk affirms: "As the shadow is for the body, and the word to the act, so also is the manner of life of our father Abraham to the new things that Christ did for the redemption of our lives."⁴⁷

4. Conclusion

It seems that Abraham was part of the vocabulary shared by Christians and Muslims in early Islamic times. In the dialogue of John the Patriarch of Antioch with an Emir, Abraham appears in a succession of names with his son Isaac. In the second text Abraham is discussed in a much larger framework. It is evident that the dialogue from Bêt^c Ḥālê has a very particular christological profile, which seems much more developed than in the earlier text. The monk of Bêt^c Ḥālê is interested in putting the profile of Abraham in direct connection to Christ in order to offer the Christians an assured basis for theological discussion in a multi-religious society challenged more and more by Islam.

In summary, each text has its own peculiarity. Whether these disputations took place or not, they reveal a foundation for the theological discourse of the time. The appeal to Abraham was permanently present among the Syrians, firstly against the opposing group of Jews and now for the encounter with Islam.

⁴⁶GRIFFITH, "Disputing with Islam," 49.

⁴⁷Text in REININK, "The Lamb on the Tree," 124.