

Scriptures beyond Words: “Islamic” Vocabulary in Early Christian Arabic Bible Translations*

[Escrituras más allá de las palabras: vocabulario
“islámico” en las primeras traducciones árabes de
la Biblia]

Miriam L. HJÄLM

Sankt Ignatios Theological Academy,
Stockholm School of Theology
miriam.hjalm@sanktignatios.org

Abstract: This article discusses the use of “Islamic” vocabulary in Christian Arabic Bible translations composed around the 9th century. It suggests that there is a link between such use and the translation’s *Vorlage* dependence, function, and the general translation technique attested in it. The article further proposes that a function of translations containing a notable and seemingly deliberate use of Islamic-sounding vocabulary was to show that the Christian Scriptures were able to absorb the message of Islam, just like early Christian Arabic theologians promulgated the idea that Christian dogmas permeated the Qur’ān. Thus, instead of shielding their Scriptures from a competing religion by dressing them in a more neutral linguistic register, these translators and authors presented a Christianity essentially elevated beyond words and contexts and therefore portrayable in any of them.

Keywords: Arabic Bible; Bible translations; Christian Arabic; Christian-Muslim relations; Christian theology; Sacred Scriptures.

Resumen: Este artículo discute el uso de vocabulario “islámico” en traducciones árabes de la Biblia, compuestas en torno al siglo IX. El artículo sugiere la existencia de un vínculo entre dicho uso y la dependencia y función de la traducción *Vorlage*, y de la traducción técnica general atestiguada en ella. El artículo además propone que una función de las traducciones, que contienen un uso aparentemente notable y deliberado del vocabulario de sonido islámico, fue mostrar que las Escrituras cristianas podían absorber el mensaje del Islam, al igual que los

***Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 15 (2018), pp. 49-69; ISSN-e2386-7442**

primeros teólogos cristianos árabes promulgaron la idea de que los dogmas cristianos calaron en El Corán. Por lo tanto, en lugar de proteger sus Escrituras de una religión competidora, vistiéndolas en un registro lingüístico más neutral, estos traductores y autores presentaron un cristianismo esencialmente elevado más allá de las palabras y los contextos y por lo tanto representable en cualquiera de ellos.

Palabras clave: Biblia árabe; traducciones de la Biblia; árabes cristianos; relaciones cristiano-musulmanas; Teología cristiana; Sagradas Escrituras.



In the late 1930s, Alphonse Mingana noted that one of the early Christian Arabic Psalters he was about to catalogue on behalf of the Trustees of the Woodbrooke Settlement in Birmingham, contained a great deal of Islamic terminology:¹

It is strange that the words “Saul” and “Goliath” are expressed by the Qur’ānic names *Ṭālūt* and *Jālūt*... A little less strange only is the use of the word *muṣḥaf*, to express the book of the Psalms, or Psalter. It is a word generally used for the Qur’ān. In the Qur’ān itself the Psalter is called *zabūr*.

As a Chaldean Christian from Northern Iraq, Mingana was surprised to see the Sacred Scriptures he knew so well dressed up in Qur’ānic and Islamic terminology. Clearly, this was not the practice he was accustomed to in his Syriac-Arabic Catholic milieu where Saul was

* Acknowledgements: the composition of this paper was made possible thanks to the DFG-funded project *Biblia Arabica*, initiated by Camilla Adang, Meira Polliack and Sabine Schmidtke (later Ronny Vollandt), and to the Swedish Research Council (2017-01630). An earlier version of this paper was presented at SBL in Berlin, 2017. I am most grateful to Camilla Adang for reading it in my absence.

¹ Alphonse Mingana, *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of manuscripts, now in the possession of the trustees of the Woodbrooke Settlement, Selly Oak, Birmingham: Vol. 3, Additional Christian Arabic and Syriac manuscripts* (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1939), p. 5.

referred to as *Šāf'jūl* and Goliath as *Julyāt*.² Apparently also concerned with these connotations, the 17th century Orientalist Thomas Erpenius removed the word *zabūr* for “Psalms”, present also in the Qur’ān, and replaced it with the more neutral word *kitāb* “book” in his Arabic edition of the Pauline Epistles, which he based on an ancient manuscript.³

Evidently, both Western missionaries and scholars as well as Near Eastern Christians were conscious about the Islamic turn their Sacred Scriptures may potentially take if formulated in too “Islamic” a manner. The 19th century American missionary work known as the (Smith-Bustānī-) van Dyck Bible, which was about to become the modern Arabic Bible *par excellence* among both Protestants and some Orthodox communities, consciously avoided Qur’ānic language. This decision was reached after vivid discussions, primarily concerning the risk of irritating Muslims who might fear that the usage of typically Islamic terms would subvert the message of Islam. The decision greatly disappointed the American missionaries who had hoped to attract Muslim readers by using terms that were familiar to them.⁴ As opposed to the text found by Mingana, the so-called van Dyke Bible renders the name of King David’s predecessor as *Šāf'jūl* and that of his giant foe as *Julyāt*; that is, renditions close to the biblical *Vorlagen* and different from the phrasing in the Qur’ān. In a similar manner, Psalms are here referred to as *al-mazāmīr*.⁵

In the British Bible Society, it was the missionaries themselves who wished to avoid Qur’ānic/Islamic language. The controversial

² See various versions of *Biblia Sacra Arabica* and the so-called Jesuit Bible in 1 Samuel chaps. 17 and 31, for instance.

³ See Mats Eskhult, “Translation Technique in the Epistle to the Hebrews as Edited by Edvard Stenij from Codex Tischendorf”, in Miriam L. Hjälms (ed.), *Senses of Scripture, Treasures of Tradition The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians and Muslims*, col. «Biblia Arabica» 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 425-435, espec. 433.

⁴ David D. Grafton, *The contested origins of the 1865 Arabic Bible: Contributions to the nineteenth century Nahda*, col. «History of Christian-Muslim relations» 26 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 173-174.

⁵ Probably originating from Syriac, cf. Rofail Farag, “The Usage of the Early Islamic Terminology as a Constituent Element of the Literary Form of a Tenth-Century Christian Arab Writer: Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99 (1979), pp. 49-57, espec. 51.

Lebanese writer and three-time convert, Fāris al-Shidyāq who in the 19th century was recruited by the Society, lamented the poverty of style and diction that his appointed partner Samuel Lee, professor at Cambridge, subjected his (Shidyāq’s) drafts to in the editing process. Lee consciously avoided every Qur’ānic turn of phrase as in his view such use was not suitable for a Bible translation; alterations that in Shidyāq’s opinion proved that Lee did not have a proper understanding of the language.⁶ For Shidyāq, good Arabic was synonymous with Qur’ānic Arabic; an opinion hard to dismiss, as literary Arabic had by then developed in the shadow of the Qur’ān in Muslim majority societies for over a millennium.

In the year 2000, a project to render the Arabic Bible into “simple” Arabic which could also be understood by “Muslim friends” took place in Egypt. Here we finally encounter our Islamic-sounding friend, or rather foe, *Jālūt* again, although this time accompanied with *šāl’jūl* and *al-mazāmīr*. This version of the Bible, called *al-kitāb al-šarīf*, is introduced in the online version with the Islamic-sounding phrase *lā ilāha illā Allāh*.⁷

As this short introduction has hopefully shown, translation technique is a question of target audience and of ideology.⁸ It is well documented that modern translators from the early printing era till today were aware of the impact various strategies had on an audience and that they therefore resorted to certain techniques only after careful deliberation. Unfortunately, this kind of explicit information is poorly attested to in the rich Arabic Bible material from earlier times. Those who are somewhat familiar with this corpus –consisting

⁶ Rana Issa, “Al-Shidyāq-Lee Version (1857): An Example of a Non-Synchronous Nineteenth-Century Arabic Bible”, in Miriam L. Hjälm (ed.), *Senses of Scripture, Treasures of Tradition The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians and Muslims*, col. «Biblia Arabica» 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 305-323, espec. 315.

⁷ <http://www.sharifbible.com>. Accessed online 14 July 2017.

⁸ The most comprehensive work on Arabic Bible translations is Meira Polliack, *The Karaite tradition of Arabic Bible translation: A linguistic and exegetical study of Karaite translations of the Pentateuch from the tenth and eleventh centuries C.E.*, col. «Études sur le judaïsme médiéval» 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1997). The same method is extensively used and duly developed on Christian Arabic material in Miriam L. Hjälm, *Christian Arabic Versions of Daniel: A Comparative Study of Early MSS and Translation Techniques in MSS Sinai Ar. 1 and 2*, col. «Biblia Arabica» 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

of more than a thousand Christian Arabic Bible manuscripts– have probably observed that Arabic Bible translators used various styles of translation from the earliest era up to modern times, and that many exhibit a linguistic style which has an Islamic cast to it.

It should be mentioned that in the earliest strata of the Arabic Bible production, i.e. around the 9th century, the definitions of Islamic–Qur’ānic and merely shared non-confessional Arabic language may not have been so obvious: to a certain extent, Near Eastern communities shared a religious vocabulary expressed in various Semitic languages with cognate roots and many common loan words. Hence, the direction of influence is sometimes blurred and what was soon to be known as primarily Islamic terms, due to the increasingly powerful status of Muslims, were perhaps regarded as more natural translational choices. However, despite occasional difficulties with such demarcations, the present paper suggests that many early Christian Arabic Bible translators and copyists consciously resorted to Muslim religious vocabulary with an apologetic purpose in mind. Although such evidence may not be conclusively drawn from the Bible texts themselves, a glance at the contemporary genre of apologetic texts strengthens these conclusions. It is also interesting to note that Syriac-based and Greek-based Arabic translations differ in this regard. Before we move onto the main discussions, a brief discussion will delineate the scope of the relevant corpus.

Trends in the 9th century Corpus

At around the 9th century, a substantial number of biblical books had been rendered into Arabic, as is evident from extant manuscript sources. We encounter several versions of the Gospels, Pauline Epistles, and Psalms and at least one version each of Acts, the Catholic Epistles, Job, Ben Sira, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Lamentations, the extended version of Daniel, as well as a few fragments of the Pentateuch.⁹

⁹ This account is based on manuscript catalogues, secondary literature, and an ongoing study by the present author. For lists of manuscripts, see Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur. Vol. 1, Die Übersetzungen*, col. «Studi e testi.; Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana» (Città del Vaticano: Bibl. Apost. Vaticana, 1944); Joshua Blau, *A grammar of Christian Arabic based mainly on South-Palestinian*

Judging from apparent copying errors, many of these translations were copied into surviving manuscripts and may initially have been composed around the 8th century. Seemingly by the early 10th century, we also encounter Susanna, a few folios from 2 Kings, an additional version of Daniel and two of Job, as well as several New Testament and Psalm texts. Thus, by the first half of the 10th century, at least half of the biblical corpus was available in Arabic and during the course of the 10th century, several books were added to the list. Some additional books, now lost, may be dated to the 9th century as well. For instance, the 10th century *Rūm* Orthodox bishop Agapius of Manbij mentions that Ruth was translated into Arabic due to the beauty of this book,¹⁰

texts from the first millennium: Fasc. 1, §§1-169: introduction, orthography & phonetics, morphology, col. «Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium» 267. «Subsidia» 27 (Louvain, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 23 ff.; and Michel Van Esbroeck, “Les versions orientales de la Bible: une orientation bibliographique”, in Jože Krašovec (ed.), *Interpretation of the Bible: The International Symposium in Slovenia* (Ljubljana: SAZU, 1998), pp. 403-410. For Arabic Gospel translations, see Hikmat Kashouh, *The Arabic versions of the Gospels: The manuscripts and their families*, col. «Arbeiten zur neutestamentlichen Textforschung» 42 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012); for the Pauline Epistles, I am indebted to Vevian Zaki for initially having provided me with secondary literature and manuscript references from her ongoing Phd project within the *Biblia Arabica Project*. For some early Arabic Pauline traditions, see Vevian Zaki, “The Textual History of the Arabic Pauline Epistles: One Version, Three Recensions, Six Manuscripts”, in Miriam L. Hjälml (ed.), *Senses of Scripture, Treasures of Tradition: The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians and Muslims*, col. «Biblia Arabica» 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 392-424. For Ben Sira, see Kamil W. Samaan, *Sept traductions arabes de Ben Sira*, col. «Publications Universitaires Europeennes» (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993); for Acts and the Catholic Epistles, see Margaret Dunlop Gibson (ed.), *An Arabic version of the Acts of the Apostles and the seven Catholic Epistles ... : With a treatise on the triune nature of God and translation, from the same codex*, col. «Studia sinaitica» 7 (London: [s.n.], 1899); for early Arabic renditions of the Prophets, see Miriam L. Hjälml, *Christian Arabic Versions*; Miriam L. Hjälml, “The Changing Face of the Arabic Bible: Translation techniques in early renditions of Ezekiel”, *Open Theology* 2/1 (2016), pp. 832-848; Miriam L. Hjälml, “The Major Prophets in Arabic: The authorship of Pethiōn revisited in light of New Findings,” in Miriam L. Hjälml (ed.), *Senses of Scripture, Treasures of Tradition: The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians and Muslims*, col. «Biblia Arabica» 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 448-483. As for the Pentateuch fragments included above, an edition is being prepared by Arianna D’Ottone Rambach. I am thankful to Ronny Vollandt for bringing these fragments to my attention.

¹⁰ http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/agapius_history_01_part1.htm

yet the earliest extant copy of Ruth is attested only four hundred years later.¹¹

It should be mentioned that if secondary research and catalogues are to be trusted, there are around forty to fifty manuscripts containing translations that could be dated to the 9th century. However, some of these are *membra disiecta*, others should be dated later, at least in my opinion based on a previous study on Paleography.¹² Thus, I would suggest that there are around twenty-three translations, which can with relative certainty be placed in the 9th century or at the beginning of the 10th century, whereas another ten may be disputed. The content of these twenty-three translations is dispersed as follows:¹³

¹¹ If we only take extant sources into consideration, we may safely state that by the 10th century, 75% of the Bible was rendered into Arabic. New translations of popular books, such as the Gospels, Psalms, the Epistles, the Pentateuch, Daniel, and Job, continued to be produced and different versions existed side by side up to modern times. The lion's share of the remaining books was apparently not translated until the 13th and 14th centuries, and a few books, mainly deuterocanonical works, were apparently not rendered into Arabic until the 16th century. For overviews of the production, see Miriam L. Hjälms, "Overview of the Arabic Manuscript production", and "The Arabic Canon", both in Armin Lange, Matthias Henze, et al. (eds.), *The textual History of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). See also F. C. Burkitt, "Arabic Versions", in J. Hastings (ed.), *Dictionary of the Bible* 1 (1911), p. 136; and Ronny Vollandt, *Arabic versions of the Pentateuch: A comparative study of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources*, col. «Biblia Arabica» 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

¹² The study was presented at *Translators copyists and interpreters. Jews, Christians and Muslims and the transmission of the Bible in Arabic in the Middle Ages* in Cordoba, April 2017, organized by Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala. Many thanks to Peter Tarras for reading this paper in my absence.

¹³ Following manuscripts are included (some manuscripts contain more than one translation): 1. Sin. Ar. 151 (oldest part 867 CE); 2. Sin. Ar. N. F. Parch. 14/16/Fleischer taf. II/ii =Leipzig, UL, 1059A = Tischendorf 31 (dated 859 CE or 873 CE); 3. St. Petersburg, RNL, Ar. 327/Greg. Cod. 134 (=Fleischer taf. II/i)/ + Sinai ms (892 CE); 4. Sin. Ar. 72 (897 CE); 5. Sin. Gr. 35 (by Anthony of Baghdad); 6. Sin. Ar. N. F. Parch. 7 (901 CE); 7. Sin. Ar. 73/Paris, BnF, 6725/3 (902 CE or 918 CE); 8. Sin. Ar. 154 (undated); 9. Sin. Ar. N.F. Parch. 5/6/63 (undated); 10. Sin. Ar. N.F. Parch. 8/28 (undated); 11. Sin. Ar. 75 (undated); 12. Sin. Ar. 155/London, BL, Or. 8612/Munich, BSB, Ar. 1071/Paris, BnF, syr. 378 (undated); 13. Sin. Ar. 1/London, BL, Ar. 1475/Add. 26, 116 (undated); 14. Sin. Ar. 70 (undated); 15. Sin. Ar. 74 (undated); 16. Sin. Gr. 36 (undated); 17. Sin. Ar. N.F. Parch. 4 (undated); 18.

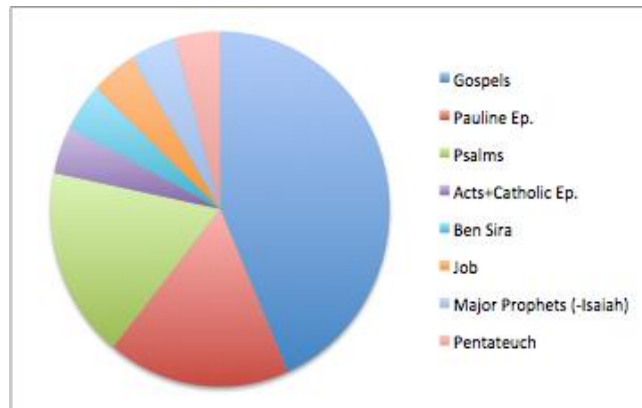


FIGURE 1: *Extant witnesses of biblical books in Arabic from the 9th and early 10th c.*

These translations are principally based on Greek or Syriac *Vorlagen*, or exhibit a mix between them. With some exceptions, there is a clear correspondence between the language of the *Vorlage* and the translation techniques employed in these texts. A preliminary survey of translation techniques in 9th and early 10th century texts yields the following results:¹⁴

Vatican, Ar. 13 (oldest hand, undated); 19. Vatican, Borg. Ar. 95 (undated); 20. Berlin, SB, Violet 26 (undated); 21. Moscow, State Library, 432 (undated).

¹⁴ In this survey, manuscripts basically containing one and the same text are treated as one translation. A couple of 10th century translations treated in secondary literature are added here to enlarge the comparative material as their date and the date of their Arabic *Vorlage* (if such existed) is anyhow debatable. Many 9th century translations especially of the Psalms are yet to be examined (= “unknown character”) and their given *Vorlage* dependence here is preliminary (many are bilingual Greek-Arabic). The terms “faithful” and “many non-literal traits” are simplified in this overview. For more on translation techniques in Christian Arabic translations, see Miriam L. Hjälms, *Christian Arabic Versions of Daniel* and further bibliography there.

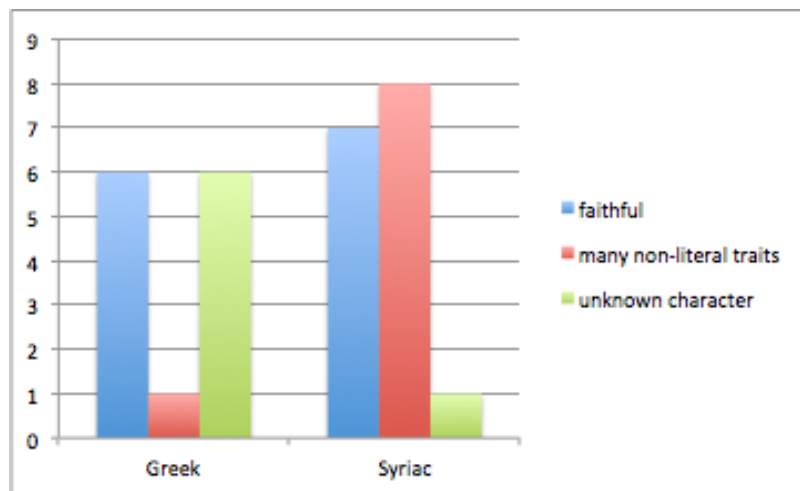


FIGURE 2. Translation techniques and Vorlage dependence in 9th- and 10th-c. Arabic Bible translations

It is evident that most Greek-based versions are highly literal whereas Syriac-based versions often contain many non-literal features. In addition, most of the Greek-based translations are from the New Testament and, apparently, from Psalms, i.e. liturgical material, whereas Old Testament translations are overrepresented in the Syriac-based material, which are often of a more non-literal character.¹⁵

¹⁵ Previously, it has been noted that translations made in Palestine are literal whereas others are not, cf. Joshua Blau, *A grammar of Christian Arabic*, p. 20; Adriana Drint, "Some notes on the Arabic versions of IV Ezra and the Apocalypse of Baruch in ms. Mount Sinai Arabic 589", in Samir Khalil Samir (ed.) *Actes du 5e Congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes (Lund, août 1996)*, col. «Parole de l'Orient» 24-25 (Kaslik: Université Saint-Esprit, 1999-2000), pp. 165-177, espec. 173. Non-literal features are often connected with the Church of the East, cf. Ronny Vollandt, *Arabic Versions of the Pentateuch*, p. 67. However, ecclesial belonging is difficult to discern in these manuscripts, since one and the same community often used different *Vorlagen*, and in Palestine, manuscripts where often copied so the original translation and the manuscript at hand should be differentiated when studied. In short, a more encompassing, comparative study would be helpful in this regard.

“Typically Islamic Language”

It is true that the field of Christian Arabic Bible translations still suffers from a lack of larger, comparative studies, as is often pointed out. Nevertheless, based on secondary research it appears that –at least in the 9th and 10th centuries material– it is primarily in the Peshitta-based translations that scholars find significant occurrences of so-called typically Islamic or Qur’ānic language, just as it is there we often find non-literal translation choices. In the two Greek-based Arabic Epistle versions edited by Gibson, no mention is made of recourse to Islamic vocabulary.¹⁶ In contrast, the earliest Peshitta-based version of Daniel and some of the other prophets in the same manuscript often exhibit common Islamic terms, as we will see below. Among 9th century Arabic Gospels, Kashouh argues that two versions are of Syriac origin, none of which contain any notable amount of Islamic vocabulary. Nevertheless, the *Vorlage* dependence of one of these is contested by Monferrer-Sala who claims that the oldest section of the Gospels is in fact translated from a Greek *Vorlage* and only revised according to a Syriac text.¹⁷ In any event, Kashouh found a Syriac-based version dated to the 10th century, containing a linguistic register that “approaches the language of the Qur’ān” and noted that many of the verses rhyme elegantly.¹⁸ Stenij, and more recently Zaki, have published on the same phenomenon in a 9th-10th century Syriac-based version of the Pauline Epistles.¹⁹ Leemhui, Kijjn

¹⁶ Margaret Dunlop Gibson (ed.), *An Arabic Version of Acts...and Catholic Epistles* (in Ms Sinai Arabic 154); Margaret Dunlop Gibson (ed.), *An Arabic version of the epistles of St. Paul to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, with part of the epistle to the Ephesians: From a ninth century ms. in the Convent of St. Catharine on Mount Sinai*, col. «Studia sinaitica» 2 (London: C.J. Clay, 1894) (in Ms Sinai Arabic 155). A few “free” renderings in Corinthians are attested, see Robert H. Boyd, *The Arabic Text of 1 Corinthians in “Studia Sinaitica No. II”: A Comparative, Linguistic, and Critical Study* (PhD dissertation submitted at Princeton University, 1942), espec. pp. 109-113.

¹⁷ Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, “Translating the Gospels into Arabic from Syriac: Vatican Arabic 13 Restored Section, Strategies and Goals”, *Arabica* 62/4, pp. 435-458, espec. 435.

¹⁸ Hikmat Kashouh, *Arabic Versions of the Gospels*, p. 113.

¹⁹ Edvard Stenij, *Die altarabische übersetzung der Briefe die Hebräer, an die Römer und an die Corinther aus einem in St. Petersburg befindlichen Codex Tischendorfs vom Jahre 892*

and van Gelder have noted that a 10th century Syriac-based version of the Apocalypse of Baruch contains a fare amount of Qur'ānic vocabulary,²⁰ which is also the case with a 10th century version of IV Ezra in the same manuscript, as Drint observes, including the Muslim *basmallāh*.²¹ Vollandt mentions that a Syriac-based translation of the Pentateuch from the first half of the 10th century contains a passage which is highly reminiscent of the Joseph *sūra*.²²

Thus, although a notable amount of Islamic phrasing and terminology is not necessarily encountered in all early Syriac-based Arabic translations,²³ many of them evidently do display such language. Just as there seems to be a notable link between rather literal vs. palpably non-literal translation character and the language of the *Vorlage* in use, there also seems to be a connection between *Vorlage*, general translation technique, and recourse to Islamic vocabulary.²⁴ Although the matter needs to be investigated further,

n. Chr. zum ersten Male herausgegeben (Helsingfors: Frenckellska Tryckeri-Aktiebolaget, 1901); Vevian Zaki, "The Bible in Qur'anic Language" (forthcoming).

²⁰ Frederik Leemhuis, Albertus F. J. Klijn & Gert J. Van Gelder, *The Arabic Text of the Apocalypse of Baruch: Edited and Translated with a Parallel Translation of the Syriac Text* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), pp. 72-77.

²¹ Adriana Drint, "Some notes", 172. In this connection, see also the usage of Islamic terminology by the 10th century Copt Ibn al-Muqaffa' in Rofail Farag, "The Usage of the Early Islamic Terminology".

²² Ronny Vollandt, *Arabic Versions of the Pentateuch*, pp. 189-190. Islamic terminology in pre-modern Christian Arabic Bible translations of various dates has been briefly mentioned also in Frank, "The Jeremias of Pethion ibn Ayyūb al-Sahhār", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 21/2 (1959), pp. 136-170, espec. 139-141; Stephen Blackburn, *The Early Arabic Versions of Job* (PhD dissertation submitted at the University of St. Andrews, 1998), pp. 391-392; and Daniel Potthast, *Christen und Muslime im Andalus: Andalusische Christen und ihre Literatur nach religionspolemischen Texten des zehnten bis zwölften Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013), pp. 63-67.

²³ Staal does not mention such for Ibn Bishr al-Sirrī's translation, for instance, see Harvey Staal, *MT. Sinai Arabic Codex 151*, 2 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, 1983-1984).

²⁴ An interesting exception to the above rule seemingly appears in a 9th century version of Ben Sira, which Frank argues is based on a Greek text but which exhibits many non-literal traces and many terms which are "thoroughly Muslim in their resonance," see Richard M. Frank, *The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach (Sinai Ar. 155, IXth/Xth cent.)*, col. «Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium» 31 (Leuven, 1974), pp. v-viii. For *Vorlage* reliance, see id., *The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach (Sinai Ar. 155, IXth/Xth cent.)*, col. «Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium»

this appears to be true only for Peshitta-based translations, not those based on the Syro-hexapla.

In addition, it appears that it was mainly the Greek-based, literal translations that were used in liturgy, as most of these represent Gospel, Epistle, and Psalm texts (other Old Testament texts used in liturgy were more likely read from liturgical books, not running translations).

Let us turn back to our 9th century corpus and look briefly at the practice of formulating incipits. Of the twenty-two translations singled out above, only fourteen have been surveyed, as others are in fragmentary form or only partially accessible. Each of these manuscripts normally contains four to thirteen books/epistles where incipits may subsequently be found. Based on these occurrences, we may conclude that in the available copies there are three ways in which a new work is introduced: 1) no introductory formula at all, apart from the name of the book or letter; 2) the Christian trinitarian formula *bism al-'ab wa-l-ibn wa-l-rūḥ al-quds (ilāh wāhid)*; and 3) the Muslim *basmallāh: bism allāh al-raḥman al-raḥīm*.

It is of great interest to note that Greek-based manuscripts are introduced either without any paratextual formula at all, or with the trinitarian formula.²⁵

In the Syriac-based manuscripts, we find either the trinitarian formula or the Muslim *basmallāh*, often used interchangeably in the same manuscripts.²⁶ If there are exceptions to this trend in the

30 (Leuven, 1974), pp. vi-xxiv. Thus, like many other early Old Testament Arabic translations it is rather free, and like many of these non-literal renditions, it includes a notable amount of common Islamic terminology, yet the *Vorlage* of this copy seems to be Greek.

²⁵ The Trinitarian formula appears especially in copies connected with Mar Chariton in the Judean Desert.

²⁶ Cf. Sin. Ar. 151; St. Petersburg, RNL, Ar. 327; and Sin. Ar. 1/London, BL, Ar. 1475. See Heinrich L. Fleischer, "Beschreibung der von Prof. Tischendorf im J. 1853 aus dem Morgenlande zurückgebrachten christlich -arabischen Handschriften", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 8 (1854), pp. 584-587; Miriam L. Hjälms, *Christian Arabic*, pp. 76-77; Miriam L. Hjälms, "Changing Face", pp. 835-836; Harvery Staal, *MT. Sinai Arabic Codex 151*, vol. 41, p. v. Staal argues that the Trinitarian formulas primarily belong to the later supplemented parts of this copy.

earliest corpus of Bible translations, they would seem to be negligible.²⁷

Several Syriac-based manuscripts from the 10th century manuscripts briefly referred to in the overview of secondary literature above also contain the Muslim *basmallāh*. We should mention that this is the practice also in some early Latin-based Arabic manuscripts or texts going back to earlier times, though in the latter case it is of course difficult to say when paratextual features were added.²⁸

There are more intricate aspects of Islamic-sounding vocabulary, in particular the choice of such as a translation technique. Due to their close linguistic relation, Syriac-based Arabic translations can potentially reach high levels of syntactical and lexical affinity. Whereas the Jewish Karaites to a vast extent took advantage of the similarly close Hebrew-Arabic relationship, as Polliack has shown,²⁹

²⁷ Other *incipits*, such as *al-allāh al-khāliq wa-l-nātiq wa-l-ḥayy*, become common later on, especially, it appears, in Bible manuscripts relating to the Copts. Although the idea of expressing the Trinitarian formula in attributes can be glimpsed already in the eighth and ninth centuries in theological tracts, I have not encountered such use in early Bible translations. Many Christian theologians active in the 8th and 9th centuries argued that Muslims should rationally accept the Triune nature of God as, according to them, it is even stated in the Qurʾān (cf. 4:171) where God is connected to the words *kalima* “word” and *rūh* “spirit.” The logic that follows is that God is speaking and living, i.e. has reason and life, so these entities cannot be attributes detached from his essence but rather persons sharing the same essence. It appears that it is this common argument that lies behind the later use of *incipits al-allāh al-khāliq wa-l-nātiq wa-l-ḥayy* “God the Creator, the talking/reasoning and the living.” Cf. Already in the 8th century, John of Damascus (ed. Shahas) and Timothy I (ed. Mingana) used these arguments, see also David Thomas, “With the Qurʾān in mind”, in *Arab Christians and the Qurʾān from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period*, col. «The History of Christian-Muslim Relations» 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2018). See also Margaret Dunlop Gibson (ed.), *An Arabic version of ... With a treatise on the triune nature of God*, p. 76; and Michel Hayek Hayek (ed.), *Apologie et controverses [=Kitāb al-Burhān wa-Kitāb al-Masāʾil wa-al-ajwibah]*, col. «Recherches» 5 (Bayrūt, 1977), p. 47.

²⁸ Cf. for instance Geoffrey K. Martin, “An Anonymous Mozarab Translator at Work”, in Miriam L. Hjälml (ed.), *Senses of Scripture, Treasures of Tradition: The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians and Muslims*, col. «Biblia Arabica» 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 125-152.

²⁹ Meira Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition*. The Rabbanite Saadiah Gaon frequently used Muslim religious terms while such practice is less common in the Karaite

Christians who were familiar with Syriac normally did not strive for such similarity to the same degree. Yet, we frequently encounter the employment of sound-similar roots in Syriac-based Arabic translations as well. The proximity between Qur'ānic/Islamic and Syriac vocabulary made recourse to such roots natural (which sometimes entail common "Islamic" concepts and terminology) and it is not always clear when it is used deliberately.³⁰ For instance, the Arabic word for *presbyteroi* in the Greek-based version in Sinai Arabic 154, is *kahana* "soothsayers, priests," a word which appears twice in the Qur'ān in the singular, *kāhin*.³¹ However, it also appears frequently in the Peshitta, in the form *kāhnā*, cf. Hebrew *kōhēn*, and should rather be regarded as a Semitic word which has entered this Greek-based Arabic text directly from a Christian environment and not necessarily as an attempt to echo the Qur'ān.

Other examples are more complex. In Dan. 3:2-3 the Arabic/Qur'ānic term *ḥajj* "pilgrimage" is employed in Sinai Arabic 1 to represent the Syriac source word *ʿēdā* "feast," referring to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar set up (Aram. *ḥānukkā*, Gr. *ἐγκαίνια* both denoting "dedication"). However, the Arabic word opted for should also be understood in relation to its Syriac cognate *ḥaggā* "feast, assembly." The word *ḥaggā* occurs elsewhere in the Peshitta normally to represent the Hebrew noun *ḥag* as in the reference to the golden calf in Ex. 32:5, that is, in a thematic parallel to the story in Daniel.³² In biblical Hebrew, the noun *ḥag* commonly refers to a feast connected to pilgrimage.³³ Thus, for a

translations, see there p. 174; and David M. Freidenreich, "The Use of Islamic Sources", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 93/3-4 (2003), pp. 353-395. For the adaption among Karaites to its Muslim environment, see Meira Polliack, "The Karaite Inversion of 'Written' and 'Oral' Torah in Relation to the Islamic Arch-Models of Qur'an and Hadith", *Jewish studies quarterly* 22/3 (2015), pp. 243-302.

³⁰ For an attempt to categorise various forms of Islamic terminology used by Christians, see for instance Rofail Farag, "The Usage of the Early Islamic Terminology."

³¹ Q 52:29 and 69:42.

³² My gratitude to Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala for pointing this out, cf. Miriam L. Hjälms, *Christian Arabic Versions*, p. 254.

³³ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs *et al.*, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English lexicon: With an appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic: Coded with the*

translator well versed in Syriac and acquainted with the biblical narratives and therefore able to easily transfer a concept from one biblical passage to another, the employment of the Arabic root *hajj* may have come naturally and not necessarily as a deliberate attempt to reflect Islamic practice. However, the latter case is still attractive since its employment could so easily be polemical, making a connection between biblical idolatry and the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. If we compare this with other, somewhat later traditions or those not based on Syriac,³⁴ they all employ more neutral words here: 10th century Sinai Arabic 2 uses *ʿīd* “feast,” the Karaite exeget Yefet ben ʿEli uses *dāšīn* “installation” and the Rabbanite scholar Saadia Gaon employs *wakārah* “inauguration.” Thus, it is only the translator of Sinai Arabic 1 who opts for this lexical choice, seemingly connected to the Muslim *hajj*.

Apart from comparing Arabic Bible translations to determine and evaluate the viable translation options available to the translator, one should also take the overall translation character into account. Sinai Arabic 1 exhibits frequent use of Islamic-sounding vocabulary in instances when the translator of Sinai Arabic 2 opted for more neutral words or sound-similar roots. For instance, the Aramaic/Syriac word *hē(y)kal/haykālā* “palace, temple” occurs a few times in the source texts. Whereas in Sinai Arabic 2, the expected translation equivalent *haykal* is used, the translator of Sinai Arabic 1 sometimes employed the word *miḥrāb* which in Arabic denotes a sitting place associated with kings and great men, with the mosque’s direction of the *qibla* and, in the Qurʾān, with a prayer chamber. For instance, Dan. 3:53 is rendered “blessed are You in the *miḥrāb* of your holiness.”³⁵ In addition, many non-cognate Islamic-sounding words and phrases appear. The Syriac phrase *dā-hūyū ālāhā [ḥayyā...]* “for he is the [living] God...” in Dan. 6:27 is subtly rephrased in Sinai Arabic 1 as *fa-innahu lā*

numbering system from Strong’s Exhaustive concordance of the Bible (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1906 [2015]), p. 290.

³⁴ The same word is selected in Mss Sinai Arabic 513, 597, Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Fraser (Or.) 257 which are all related to Sinai Arabic 1, see Miriam L. Hjälml, *Christian Arabic Versions*, pp. 56-62.

³⁵ Cf. Q 38:21.56. Many thanks to Camilla Adang for pointing this out. See further Miriam L. Hjälml, *Christian Arabic Versions*, p. 253.

ilāh illā [*al-ḥayy...*] “for there is no god except [the living]...” That is, the text unit is featured as an exceptive construction that echoes the Islamic shahāda *lā ilāha illā* [*allāh...*] rather than a plain translation of the source text, which we find in Sinai Arabic 2, and in the translations by Saadia and Yefet.³⁶ In a similar vein, the Qur’ānic/Islamic vocative *allāhumma* “O God” is sporadically added in Sinai Arabic 1, without translation equivalent in the source text.³⁷

According to Blackburn in his survey of Job in Sinai Arabic 1, the translator sometimes resorted to Islamic vocabulary such as *al-munāfiqīn* “hypocrites” and *al-kafara* “infidels”.³⁸ It appears that certain Islamizing tendencies may be found also on a theological level. In Ezekiel 1:3 in the same manuscript the clause “the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel” is rendered into “with the help of God came a word (*qawl*) of the Lord to the mouth of Ezekiel,” as if Ezekiel channelled the exact word of God, similar to how Muḥammad transmitted his message according to the Muslim tradition, or at least the re-writing reflects an attempt to embroider the text literary.³⁹

As mentioned above, in the introduction to an early translation of the Psalms, the names Saul and Goliath are rendered according to their Qur’ānic forms *Ṭālūt* and *Jālūt* and not transliterated according to the Syriac *Sha’ul* and *Gūlyadh* or Greek Σαούλ and Γολιάθ.⁴⁰ *Ṭālūt* is also found as a translation of Saul in a 10th century rendition of IV Ezra, so had Mingana lived a millennium earlier, he would not have been too surprised to find this version of the name in a Christian Bible.⁴¹ The word *muṣḥaf* “book”, especially used for a copy of the Qur’ān, to designate the book of Psalms mentioned by Mingana, is also found in other early compositions, such as Sinai Arabic 155 where it is used for the word “epistle” i.e. to Romans.⁴² The root *ṣḥf*, seemingly from a pre-Islamic and South Arabian origin, appears in the Qur’ān, and is extant also in Geez where it means “write,” but apparently not

³⁶ Miriam L. Hjälms, *Christian Arabic Versions*, pp. 251-252.

³⁷ Miriam L. Hjälms, *Christian Arabic Versions*, p. 254.

³⁸ Stephen Blackburn, *The Early Arabic Versions of Job*, 391-392.

³⁹ Miriam L. Hjälms, “Changing Face.”

⁴⁰ Alphonse Mingana, *Catalogue*, p. 5. (Ms. Chr. Arab. Add. 137). Q 2:249-51.

⁴¹ Adriana Drint, “Some Notes”, p. 171.

⁴² Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of of the Epistles of St Paul*, p. 1.

in other Semitic languages.⁴³ It must therefore have come to Christians further West with the Muslims, yet, as stated above, if a translation does not exhibit a notable amount of Islamic vocabulary, it is unlikely that a word was used in order to give the translation an Islamic cast and the word was more likely considered neutral.⁴⁴ One should therefore survey the whole translation and, if possible, compare it with other translations of the same text.

In sum, although recourse to Islamic-sounding words are unavoidable in any Arabic translation, a comparative study of different translations of the same biblical book often indicate that some translators readily adhered to such vocabulary, be they cognates or not, apparently as a conscious strategy. It is interesting to note that such strategies are often found in Peshitta-based translations, there combined with many non-literal techniques, which point to some kind of school or tradition.

What, then, was the goal of such a strategy?

A Christian Bible in Islamic Vocabulary

There is a common understanding in scholarly literature that recourse to Islamic-sounding vocabulary eventually ceased in Christian Arabic texts, as if its use is to be understood diachronically rather than being a matter of genre and target audience. This topic deserves closer study and here we will concentrate on different theories as to why this usage existed in the first place, a topic normally addressed by scholars only in passing.

It is hard to deny that due to the close connection between the Qur'ān and literary Arabic, as it soon came to develop in a Muslim society, literary Arabic often meant Islamic and Qur'ānic Arabic. The

⁴³ Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 61.

⁴⁴ Some Islamic-sounding words are even non-Semitic loanwords. As Martin has recently pointed out, the name Iblīs is often used in a 9th century Latin based version of the Psalms for the name "Satan," which naturally brings the mind to Islamic vocabulary. Geoffrey K. Martin, "An Anonymous Mozarab Translator at Work", p. 130. Yet, since Iblīs is originally a Greek loan word, *diabolos*, it is in fact not clear whether the translator adopted Islamic vocabulary or only pointed to the common heritage of the two religions.

Qur'ān became the standard measurement for grammars, lexicons and literary texts. Just as Shidyāq in the 19th century wished to dress the biblical corpus in the most refined register he knew, early translators could have used Islamic-sounding Arabic for literary reasons, to mark their rank in society. But there are other explanations as well. Leemhuis, Klijn, and van Gelder, suggest that in the early times "Koranic usage may be explained by the fact that some religious thoughts were still felt to be best expressed in an existing Arabic, i.e. Koranic idiom",⁴⁵ the key word here being "still," to indicate that Christian Arabic-speakers had not yet developed their own religious terminology (but later did so) and had to depend on Muslim vocabulary in the early stages. Drint develops the thought and states that "Islam adopted existing Arabic religious terminology that was employed by Christians and Jews already before Islam". Such terminology was then adopted by later, Arabicized Christians but was eventually discarded as it became connected with the majority religion and as tension between the groups grew, in particular with the coming of the Crusaders. Islamic vocabulary is therefore a sign of early provenance.⁴⁶

Although these scholars apparently have not noted that there were different approaches to Islamic vocabulary also in the early periods, a division which to some extent continued in later times,⁴⁷ Drint in particular makes several important points here, including drawing a line between Arab Christians and Arabicized Christians. The fact that some religious vocabulary in the Qur'ān was borrowed from surrounding cultures, including Syriac and perhaps even pre-Islamic Arab Christian ones, is hard to deny.⁴⁸ As a consequence, early Christian Arabic translators who knew Syriac well, would not have to

⁴⁵ Frederik Leemhuis, Albertus F. J. Klijn & Gert J. Van Gelder, *The Arabic text of the Apocalypse of Baruch*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Adriana Drint, "Some Notes", pp. 171-172. Cf. Staal, *MT. Sinai Arabic Codex 151*, vol. 2, p. v.

⁴⁷ Miriam L. Hjälms, *Christian Arabic Versions*. In addition, Saadia frequently used Muslim religious terms while such practice is less common in the Karaite translations, Meira Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition*, p. 174.

⁴⁸ Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic Language*, pp. 59-60; Alphonse Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Qur' ān", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 11 /1 (1927), pp. 77-98.

take the route via the Muslim religion to apply similar vocabulary, at least not for terms with sound-similar roots. Along the same lines, Griffith has recently argued that Christian Arabic-speakers used oral Arabic Bible translations in pre-Islamic times.⁴⁹ If this theory is true, extant Arabic Bible translations, at least those from the Eastern regions, may very well reflect terminology developed in these earlier translations rather than being borrowings from Islam.

Regardless of the exact relation between pre-Islamic Arab Christians and early Islam and the Qur'ān, I would like to explain the notable recourse to Islamic vocabulary in Christian Arabic Bible translations in light of another theory proposed by Griffith, Thomas and some other scholars regarding a different genre of texts, namely theological tracts. Several prominent early Christian Arabic theologians (from the 8th to 13th c.) made a point of showing that the Qur'ān was not necessarily a competing Sacred Scripture but actually one confirming the Christian message.⁵⁰ Even though these tracts normally subordinated the Qur'ān (and what they saw as its not fully developed message) to the Bible, the authors, primarily motivated by apologetic purposes, fearlessly integrated what they could from the Qur'ān in support of their own doctrines. The practice of claiming Scriptures was in fact not new since this is exactly what Christians did with the Hebrew Scriptures some centuries before, although in the latter case the integration was of course more fundamental and generic, as Christianity developed from Judaism and added the Gospels as the ultimate explanation or fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures whereas the Qur'ān, at best, could only recapitulate some of its basic elements for a different audience. Indeed, for Christians the Gospels, or rather the Logos whom they mirror, retroactively recapitulate the Hebrew Scriptures, and by a similar logic, they could

⁴⁹ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic the Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the language of Islam*, col. «Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the ancient to the modern world» (Princeton Oxford Princeton University Press 2015); Meira Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition*, pp. 3-4, and further references in these works.

⁵⁰ See especially *On the Triune Nature of God*, edited by M. D. Gibson and referred to above; Paul of Aleppo; the Bahīra legend and other pre-13th c. texts, see a number of articles in *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period*, col. «The History of Christian-Muslim Relations» 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

encompass the message of the Muslim Scriptures ahead of time. By pointing out references in the Qur'ān to collections of biblical books, *al-injīl*, *al-zabūr*, *al-tawrāh*, and by claiming that certain phrases in it were in fact proofs of the triune nature of God,⁵¹ early Arabic-speaking Christians claimed to understand the authentic meaning of the Qur'ān better than Muslims, just like they believed that Jews had missed the higher meaning of their Scriptures when failing to acknowledge Christian Messianic and trinitarian types in them.

I believe that the use of Islamic-sounding language in early Peshitta-based Arabic Bible translations may have been resorted to for similar reasons. Given the nature of these translations, there is no explicit evidence for such a claim, yet the context in which both theological tracts and Arabic Bible renditions were made is basically the same and despite their various genres, we may very well assume that they had some common aims. That is, books frequently used in Byzantine liturgy (Gospels, Epistles, Psalms) were normally based on Greek and, as we have seen, do not seem to include notable Islamic vocabulary. In contrast, many early translations (especially, but not exclusively, Peshitta-based) of Christian Old Testament books which did not play a liturgical role do display such a language to a notable degree. These translations were produced for other, possibly apologetic, purposes. Thus, extensive Islamic/Qur'ānic language in Bible translations was not a sign of capitulation or submission to Islam,⁵² nor was it governed by a lack of terminology, or primarily a wish to show off their literary capabilities. Instead, the usage represents a sophisticated polemical approach to Islam and what was about to become one of its primary vehicles, the Arabic language. At a time when Christianity in the East was self-confident, Bible translators were attempting to claim this language –in all its registers– as their own, hoping to prevent Christians from converting to Islam and perhaps even to attract Muslims, as the eventually silenced voices in the American Bible Society had attempted to. Those

⁵¹ For instance, "...Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him" (Q 4:171).

⁵² As indicated with regard to Andalusī texts by Pieter Sjoerd Van Koningsveld, *The Arabic Psalter of Ḥaḥṣ ibn Albar al-Qūṭī. Prolegomena for a Critical Edition* (Leiden: Aurora, 2016), p. 31.

early Christian theologians who did not retreat to a defensive and exclusive position vis-à-vis Islamic revelation (by avoiding or demonizing it) claimed instead to “owe” divine revelation as such by finding the Christian message even in the Qur’ān. Some early Syriac-Arabic Bible translators in particular appear to have taken a similar stance by consciously resorting to a common Islamic-Arabic register and thus “owing” the linguistic garb itself. The fact that many languages in the East were linguistically related facilitated such strategies and the fact that the Syriac religious vocabulary in some cases preceded the Islamic-Arabic one, made recourse to it natural and uncomplicated. Yet the primary reason for its adoption in these particular translations was, I believe, intentionally polemical and reflects a historical and theological context wherein the Christian Scriptures were unquestionably understood to be the highest form of written revelation and whose content was considered to be more sublime than its form, essentially transcendent and therefore readily adaptable for the defence and promotion of Christian creed in an increasingly Islamicized world.