



“You Still Believe Like a Jew!”: Polemical Comparisons and Other Eastern Christian Rhetoric Associating Muslims with Jews from the Seventh to Ninth Centuries

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ABSTRACT Patriarch Timothy I and Theodore bar Koni, late-eighth-century members of the Church of the East, brand Muslims as “new Jews,” in Timothy’s words, on account of their refusal to accept Christian doctrines about Christ. Like many other Eastern Christians, these authors employ the discourse of anti-Judaism against Muslim targets to reinforce the faith of their Christian audiences. Timothy and Theodore, however, are the only known authors of the initial Islamic centuries who employ the rhetorical device of polemical comparison when associating Muslims with Jews. Analysis of the elements with which Timothy and Theodore construct their comparisons reveals the goals that they hoped to achieve through their innovative use of traditional anti-Jewish discourse as well as the distinctive contributions of this rhetorical device to their arguments on behalf of Christian truth claims. This essay demonstrates a broadly applicable method for rhetorical analysis of polemical comparisons.

KEYWORDS Anti-Judaism, Christian-Muslim relations, Comparison, Eastern Christianity, Polemics, Theodore bar Koni, Timothy I

Introduction

The Muslim Conquests reshaped the political landscape of the region now known as the Middle East. In important respects, however, the challenges that Eastern Christian theologians confronted did not change: they still needed to instill their own particular doctrines within a diverse marketplace of ideas. This diversity included not only non-Christian traditions such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and now Islam, but also three distinct forms of Christianity that differed in their understanding of the relationship between Christ’s divine and human natures. The Church of the East, dominant within the Persian Empire including present-day Iraq, taught that Christ possessed two distinct natures. Miaphysite churches, which became

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dominant within the region of Syria, insisted that Christ possessed a single nature simultaneously human and divine. Chalcedonian churches accepted the Byzantine Empire's hybrid doctrine, according to which Christ is a single person with two natures.

To promote their own conceptions of proper Christianity, Eastern Christian authors of the seventh through ninth centuries often employed the longstanding discourse of anti-Judaism, in which polemicists brand as "Jewish" specific beliefs and practices they deem to be un-Christian. Unlike antisemitic rhetoric, which specifically targets Jews, anti-Jewish rhetoric condemns not only Jews but also and especially non-Jews who allegedly bear these negative characteristics as well.¹ Some Chalcedonians, Miaphysites, and members of the Church of the East began to direct anti-Jewish rhetoric not only against Jews and members of rival Christian churches but also against Muslim targets. By associating powerful and esteemed Muslims with the Jews, whom Christians widely regarded as despicable, these authors sought to bolster the commitment of fellow Christians to their own particular faith. The various means by which polemicists constructed these associations contribute significantly to the persuasiveness of their rhetoric. [2]

This essay analyzes two works from the late eighth century that brand Muslims as Jews in the course of making broader arguments in defense of core Christian truth claims: a letter by Timothy I, patriarch of the Church of the East, and an instructional manual by Theodore bar Koni, a teacher within that church. Sidney Griffith (1988, 65) quotes the key passages from these works in the opening paragraph of his foundational study of Eastern Christian rhetoric about Jews and Muslims, correctly intuiting that modern readers would find their polemics especially striking.² In many respects, these Syriac-language texts are indeed representative of other Eastern Christian works that employ the discourse of anti-Judaism to associate Muslims with Jews. Timothy and Theodore, however, are the only known Eastern Christian authors of the initial Islamic centuries who employ the rhetorical device that Christina Brauner (2020) labels "polemical comparison." [3]

Analysis of the elements with which Timothy and Theodore construct their polemical comparisons reveals not only the logic that underpins these associations of Muslims with Jews but also the goals that they hoped to achieve through their innovative use of traditional anti-Jewish discourse. We will also consider the reasons why these authors chose to employ a rhetoric of comparison while fellow Eastern Christians associated Muslims with Jews by means of other rhetorical devices.³ Throughout, this essay demonstrates a broadly applicable method for the rhetorical analysis of polemical comparisons. [4]

Before launching into this analysis, however, let me offer some brief contextual remarks. Rhetoric, by its very nature, presupposes the existence of an audience. Contemporary scholars, however, have no access to the audiences of Syriac works beyond those texts themselves. Timothy I is exemplary in this regard. 'Abdisho' bar Brika, writing around the year 1300, reports that hundreds of Timothy's letters still circulated in his day, but the only surviving [5]

1 On anti-Judaism in general, see Nirenberg (2013). On the application of anti-Jewish rhetoric to Muslims, see Freidenreich (forthcoming), which also elaborates on the distinction between antisemitism and anti-Judaism.

2 Throughout this essay, I employ the term *polemic* with reference to disparaging discourse rather than to a literary genre of argumentative disputation. Polemical discourse in the former sense can appear in texts that are not works of polemic in the latter sense. On the history and various meanings of this term, see Steckel (2018, 7–10).

3 All of the primary sources discussed in this essay were written for exclusively Christian audiences, most in Syriac or other languages that only Christians read. For summaries and bibliographies of these works, see Thomas and Roggema (2009). For more detailed discussions, see Freidenreich (forthcoming) and, for Syriac sources, Penn (2015).

collection is a set assembled by a single addressee, an abbot named Sergius (Berti 2009, 41–66).⁴ We cannot know whether anyone in Timothy’s lifetime other than Sergius read or heard the letters that we now possess, let alone assess how these audiences actually reacted to their content. It seems reasonable to suspect that the patriarch employed rhetoric similar to what we find in his surviving correspondence in letters and other works that are now lost, but we lack information regarding its reception. We are left, then, with the task of inferring Timothy’s perception of his intended audience from the rhetoric itself. The same is true with regard to Theodore bar Koni, even though his work circulated in many more surviving manuscripts than Timothy’s letters (Griffith 1982, 55). We can infer from the manuscript history that many students over hundreds of years read Theodore’s book, but we do not know how they reacted to it. The purpose of the analysis that follows, however, is not to assess the reception of Eastern Christian rhetoric about Muslims but rather to unpack the logic of the rhetoric itself: to explain why Timothy and Theodore found value in constructing polemical comparisons that associate Muslims with Jews. Through this case study, I hope to shed light not only on how these theologians thought about Muslims and Judaism but also on polemical comparison as a rhetorical device.

Timothy I and the “New Jews”

Timothy I, patriarch of the Church of the East from 780–823, participated actively in the intellectual culture of Baghdad’s Abbasid court, where successive caliphs fostered the study and translation of Greek philosophy. Timothy is best known for his *Disputation with Caliph al-Mahdi*, a work composed between 782–85 that circulated widely in a number of Syriac and Arabic versions. Shortly before writing that work, Timothy described another disputation instigated by an unnamed Muslim philosopher in the caliph’s court in a letter to Sergius, known today as Letter 40. These accounts of Timothy’s philosophical debates, which address subjects such as the nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as well as the respective significance of Christ and Muhammad, contain no invective. The patriarch’s introduction to Letter 40, however, features a sharply polemical comparison between contemporary Muslims and the Jews of Christ’s day.⁵

This introduction contains no direct reference either to the disputation itself or to the Muslim philosopher. The patriarch opens with the declaration that “There is nothing stronger than truth, and nothing weaker than falsehood,” and he reminds his Christian audience that victory and defeat are not always as they seem. Timothy supports this claim by reference to the crucifixion: “When the prince of the world [i.e., Satan] and his generals, the Jews, seemingly conquered [our Lord], in that moment they were conquered by him. When they seemed

4 Note that, although ‘Abdisho’ had access to far more letters than we do, he displays no familiarity with the letters we possess. I am grateful to Michael Penn for sharing his insights on the reception of Timothy’s works, including a draft book chapter on the subject.

5 Heimgartner (2019a, 2019b) provides a critical edition and German translation of Letter 40; I also consulted the unpublished English translation of Hurst (1981) when preparing my own. For the *Disputation with al-Mahdi*, commonly known as Timothy’s *Apology*, see the critical edition and German translation of Heimgartner (2011b, 2011a); for an inferior edition with English translation, see Mingana (1928; translation reprinted Newman 1993, 167–267). The *Apology* appears in the sole surviving collection of Timothy’s letters as Letter 59, but unlike the other letters in that collection it also circulated as an independent work whose influence is evident in the works of numerous other authors. On the dates of these texts, see Berti (2009, 56–57). For summaries and brief analyses, see Griffith (2007); Hunter (2007); Penn (2015, 79–83, 108–10).

to put on the crown of victory, in that moment they were put to shame and disgraced with shame that can never be forgotten” (Heimgartner 2019a, 3, 2019b, 3).

Timothy’s pointed reference to the Jews as the eternally disgraced enemies of Christ illustrates an important facet of Christian anti-Judaism: Such rhetoric sharply distinguishes the Christian self from the Jewish other by depicting Jews not merely as non-Christians but rather as “anti-Christians” (Freidenreich 2011, 110–28). Jews allegedly seek to conquer Christ because they serve Satan rather than God (see John 8:42–47). What makes the discourse of anti-Judaism polemical is that it disparages Jews in an aggressive fashion so as to reinforce the self-identity of the speaker’s own community through contrast with a despised outgroup (Steckel 2018, 11). [8]

Notice that even though this rhetoric attacks Jews, Timothy’s goal is to influence fellow Christians. The patriarch’s anti-Jewish discourse does not address, involve, or directly impact actual Jews, although one can readily imagine how this sort of rhetoric could inspire violence against Jews. Distinguishing the rhetorical target from the polemicist’s imagined audience is critical for understanding any instance of polemic. Polemicists, after all, seek to persuade their audience, which frequently does not include those whom the polemicist overtly disparages. As noted above, our only source of information regarding the Christians for whom Timothy wrote Letter 40 is the letter itself. We can, however, infer from Timothy’s rhetoric what he thought members of his intended audience would find persuasive. [9]

Thus far—less than ten lines of Syriac text in Heimgartner’s edition—Timothy has not said anything that would surprise Christians for whom anti-Jewish rhetoric is banal. The patriarch, however, has not merely cleared his throat; he has set up his bombshell. [10]

Indeed, not only back in the days of Herod, Pilate, and the old Jews was there this sort of defeat and victory of truth and falsehood, but also now in our own times, in the days of the current rulers and the new Jews among us, the very same struggle and the very same contest persists between falsehood and truth. The stumbling block of the cross has not yet ceased. There is, however, nothing to fear from such strife and struggle because, as explained above, when it seems that truth is defeated the Shoot of Righteousness will demonstrate truth’s victory in its full force. (Heimgartner 2019a, 4, 2019b, 3–4) [11]

Timothy declares (in the safety of a language that Muslims could not read) that Caliph al-Mahdi and his ministers are the contemporary equivalents of those who condemned Jesus while Muslims more broadly are “new Jews” who deny Christ’s true significance. Through this anti-Jewish rhetoric, the patriarch frames his philosophical disputation with a Muslim as part of the timeless struggle between truth and falsehood, exemplified respectively by Christians and by Jews old and new. Muslims may appear triumphant, but Christ, the “Shoot of Righteousness,” will ultimately vindicate the Christians once more. Timothy is not the first Syriac author to employ the term “new Jews,” but he is, to my knowledge, the first to apply it to Muslims rather than to so-called heretics.⁶ [12]

Polemical comparisons, according to Christina Brauner’s definition, “obtain their polemical edge by explicitly violating usual categories and standards of comparability. They point out [13]

⁶ Narsai (fl. fifth century), a fellow member of the Church of the East, calls his Miaphysite Christian opponents “new Jews” (McLeod 1979, 130–33). Miaphysites such as Severus of Antioch (Allen and Hayward 2004, 12), Philoxenus of Mabbüg (Vööbus 1960, 54), Jacob of Sarug (Bedjan 2006, 6: 334), and John of Ephesus (Brooks 1924, 575) likewise employed that term against Chalcedonians and the Church of the East. I am grateful to Sergey Minov for many of these references.

similarities in items conventionally understood to be different or compare things commonly deemed incomparable” (2020, 2). The allegation that Muslims are “new Jews” meets that definition well. Both the patriarch and members of his Eastern Christian audience knew that Muslims are not Jews and, indeed, that Muslims venerate Christ. This awareness makes Timothy’s association of Muslims with Jews shockingly scandalous and thus especially powerful. Timothy was sufficiently fond of this comparison that he also uses it in subsequent works, where he disparages “the old and the new Jews” for their rejection of the Trinity and their practice of male circumcision (Heimgartner 2012b, 110, 2012a, 91, 2021a, 139, 2021b, 106; Sachau 1908, 2: 70–71). Christians should not mimic the behavior of the dominant Muslims because that behavior is ‘Jewish’ and thus inherently un-Christian.

The rhetorical target of the introduction to Letter 40, we now understand, is not Jews but rather Muslims, whom Timothy subjects to the form of comparison that Oliver Freiberger calls “an insulting equalization” (2010, 65). Jews function as the point of reference within this comparison, the group which the polemicist believes his audience already despises. Timothy’s initial statement about Satan’s gloating Jewish generals activates strong emotions of disgust that the patriarch then redirects toward Muslims, whom his audience might not otherwise disdain. Recall, however, that the only participants in Timothy’s polemical discourse are the patriarch himself and the Christian audience he hopes to influence. Earlier polemicists who branded rival Christians as Jews on account of their alleged heresies also addressed members of their own communities of faith. Our task when analyzing Timothy’s comparison is to figure out how Timothy hopes to influence his Christian audience and why he believes that associating Muslims (the rhetorical target) with Jews (the reference) in this manner will further his objective. [14]

The objective of polemical comparisons is often to prod the audience to act differently from the rhetorical target: Muslims act like Jews, so you should not act like Muslims. To determine exactly what this means to Timothy, we need to look at the criterion of comparison (known in technical parlance as the *tertium comparationis*) by which he asserts that Muslims are similar to Jews. What makes Muslims ‘Jewish,’ Timothy explains, is “the stumbling block of the cross,” to which the patriarch refers not only in the introduction to this disputation but also in its conclusion (Heimgartner 2019a, 64, 2019b, 50). Timothy alludes to the words of Paul, who describes the proclamation of Christ crucified as “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23, NRSV). Paul himself contrasts the so-called foolishness of faith in Christ with Greek (i.e., gentile) wisdom, and he disparages the latter. Timothy, however, demonstrates in this disputation that there is no conflict between Aristotelian principles and Christian theology: Christian doctrines, he insists, are not in fact foolish on Greek terms. Muslims fail to accept the truth about Christ not because of their admirable inclination toward philosophical wisdom but rather despite it. Timothy therefore makes a point of defining Muslims not as foolish gentiles but rather as stumbling Jews who stubbornly reject reasoned arguments in support of Christian faith. Muslims are like Jews because they lack faith in Christ; Christians should differentiate themselves through their faithfulness. [15]

There is no inherent reason to maintain that Timothy recounted—or, quite possibly, invented—this disputation in order to dissuade Christians from converting to Islam, as the rate of conversion during the late eighth century was not especially high.⁷ Rather, Timothy [16]

7 Even Bulliet (1979), which many scholars believe overestimates the speed of conversion to Islam, suggests that widespread conversion in Iraq did not begin until the ninth century. On the challenges of addressing this demographic question, see Carlson (2018); Tannous (2019, 342–46).

seems to fear that Christians acculturating within Abbasid society might question core doctrines of their faith due to their increasing familiarity with Greek philosophy or their exposure to Islamic critiques of Christian theology. This would account for why the patriarch focuses his attention not on Islam but rather on demonstrating that Christian doctrines withstand philosophical and Islamic scrutiny.

While Timothy obviously rejects Islamic critiques of Christian theology, he engages respectfully with his Muslim counterpart and, likewise, with the Quran both in Letter 40 and in his *Disputation with Caliph al-Mahdi*. In the latter, the patriarch even praises Muhammad as one who “walked on the path of the prophets” by preaching not only monotheism but also, obliquely, Trinitarianism as well (Penn 2015, 108–10). This respectfulness may reflect not only diplomatic tact but also and more importantly Timothy’s awareness that his Christian audience already regarded the dominant elite and their beliefs favorably. Rather than challenge that perception, Timothy co-opts it by demonstrating that he can defeat his esteemed disputation partners on Islamic and philosophical terms alike, thus reinforcing the opening words of Letter 40: “There is nothing stronger than truth, and nothing weaker than falsehood” (see 1 Cor. 1:25). Respectfulness notwithstanding, however, Timothy firmly declares in his introduction that those who reject core doctrines about Christ are no better than the Jews whom his audience already regards as despicable. [17]

The patriarch’s account of his disputation with the Muslim philosopher—he emerges victorious, of course—reflects the themes foreshadowed by his introductory reference to “the stumbling block of the cross,” namely the nature of Christ and the significance of the crucifixion. This debate, whose format follows the norms of early Islamic disputations (Griffith 2007, 107–9), begins with a philosophical discussion regarding how humans can obtain knowledge of God and then proceeds to an extensive conversation about God’s attributes. The Muslim affirms that, among these attributes, God is by nature one who knows. Timothy demonstrates that if this attribute characterizes God eternally (as it must if God is unchanging), then God must have been a knower possessing knowledge of a known prior to the creation of anything knowable. This is only possible, Timothy asserts, if God’s nature is Trinitarian: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each know one another, are known by one another, and constitute the knowledge of one another. Timothy proceeds to provide arguments from nature that one indivisible being can have three distinct modalities—an apple, for example, simultaneously possesses taste, color, and smell—and then offers proof from the Old Testament and the Quran, such as references to God speaking in the first person plural. The debate subsequently turns to the Incarnation, the crucifixion, and reverence of the cross as the patriarch demonstrates that these distinctly Christian beliefs and practices are also consistent with philosophical principles (Griffith 2007, 109–15). [18]

Timothy makes disdainful references to Jews during this debate, but he never calls the Muslim disputant a Jew: an *ad hominem* slur of that nature would contrast jarringly with the respectful and rational demeanor that the patriarch displays throughout the disputation. The opening reference to Muslims as “the new Jews” thus does not function as a summary but rather as a framing device, a lens through which the patriarch encourages his audience to perceive the Muslim disputant. Through this polemical comparison, Timothy draws on the rich rhetorical tradition of anti-Judaism to reinforce his case that Christians should maintain their faith in Christ lest they too become ‘Jewish.’ Earlier polemicists promoted what they regarded as orthodox beliefs about Christ by branding Christians with allegedly heretical beliefs as ‘Jews’ (Becker 2020; Boyarin 2019, 105–29; Nirenberg 2013, 87–134; Shepardson 2008, [19]

118–56). Timothy’s comparison does the same, but now Muslims demonstrate how easy it is to fall into the falsehood known as Judaism. Anti-Jewish discourse serves to assimilate the non-Jewish targets of this polemical rhetoric (heretics, Muslims, or others) into the paradigmatically anti-Christian reference community.

Polemical comparisons are designed to shock, but at the same time their rhetoric is familiar, even cliché. Timothy’s audience may not have regarded Muslims as Jews until now, but they had long heard that disdain for all things Jewish contributes to their own Christian identity and were accustomed to anti-Jewish teachings designed to reinforce core Christian truth claims (Cameron 2002; O’Sullivan 2007). Letter 40 features a Muslim disputant and a new style of philosophical argumentation, but through his polemical comparison the patriarch frames it as being part of the timeless contest between truth and falsehood that always pits Christians against ‘Jews.’ By placing his disputation within the longstanding discourse of anti-Judaism, Timothy downplays its novelty and in so doing, he hopes, increases its persuasiveness. [20]

Most importantly, Timothy’s appeal to this discursive tradition enables him to ground his assertions about Muslims in the authority of the Bible. In this respect, the patriarch follows in the footsteps of earlier Eastern Christian authors who also interpret biblical verses about Jews with reference to contemporary Muslims. The mid-seventh-century Armenian author of the *History of Sebeos*, for example, introduces his account of the Muslim conquests with Paul’s allegory of Sarah and Hagar, traditionally understood to refer to Christians and Jews. Paul contrasts Hagar’s status as a slave with Sarah’s status as Abraham’s free wife (Gal. 4.21–5.1), but Hagar is also the mother of Ishmael, ancestor of the Arabs (Gen. 25.12–18). The Armenian chronicler capitalizes on the identification of both Jews and Arabs as Hagar’s heirs (Thomson 1999, 94–98). The Jews, *Sebeos* reports, encouraged their “Ishmaelite” brethren to seize the land that God promised to Abraham, and Jews allegedly participated in that conquest as well. The Ishmaelites, meanwhile, mimicked the behavior of biblical Israelites by dividing themselves into twelve tribes and retracing the Israelites’ circuitous route to the Promised Land; east of the Jordan River, the Ishmaelites purportedly defeated Byzantine forces exactly as the Israelites wreaked vengeance on the Midianites (Num. 31.1–12). [21]

Through his association of Muslims with Jews, the Armenian historian represents the conquest of Palestine as the latest iteration of the timeless conflict between the heirs of Sarah and Hagar—a conflict, Paul insists, in which Sarah’s heirs inevitably triumph. The *Disputation between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē*, likely composed by a member of the Church of the East during Timothy’s patriarchate, also alludes to Paul’s allegory of Sarah and Hagar to bolster its claim that Christians alone will enjoy the heavenly kingdom of God even as Muslims exercise earthly dominion (Taylor 2015, 240). Timothy likewise employs Pauline language about Christ and the crucifixion to persuade his audience that Christian truths are stronger than Muslim might. The logic of this scriptural rhetoric, however, depends upon the association of Muslims with Jews. [22]

Neither the *History of Sebeos* nor the *Bēt Ḥālē Disputation* expresses this association in the form of a polemical comparison; instead, these works contain scriptural allusions that only highly educated audiences could recognize and decode. Their authors, employing an astute pedagogy, enable such readers to discover for themselves not only the close relationship between Muslims and Jews but also the contemporary relevance of Paul’s lessons. Timothy, however, sought to make his point succinctly and explicitly so as to clearly frame the stakes of the disputation he proceeds to recount. Polemical comparison serves that goal well because [23]

this rhetorical device lends itself to sharp verbal barbs. It comes as no surprise, after all, that Sidney Griffith speaks of “the ‘new Jews’ theme” in Eastern Christian literature even as he acknowledges that Timothy is the only author to employ this term (1988, 84), or that scholars who draw on Griffith’s essay often take from it nothing more than the term “new Jews.” Although no evidence survives regarding the reception history of Letter 40, it seems likely that Timothy’s intended audience also found this rhetoric to be especially memorable. Timothy, at least, thought so: in correspondence to Sergius written at least 15 years later, he apparently refers to Letter 40 as his treatise “against the new religion of the new Jews.”⁸

Timothy presents his disputation as nothing less than a contest over truth, and he counts on his audience, primed to perceive Muslims as quasi-Jewish, to assess his challenger accordingly. The Muslim philosopher ultimately earns the disparaging title “new Jew” by refusing to accept the patriarch’s conclusions even though he cannot refute them. The fact that Muslims are unpersuaded by reasoned defenses of Christianity does not mean that Christian theology is unreasonable; rather, it reflects the Jewishness of the Muslims themselves. Christian audiences, therefore, should redouble their own faith knowing that it conforms not only to scripture but also to Aristotelian logic—and even, Timothy claims in the *Disputation with al-Mahdi*, to the teachings of Muhammad, who allegedly professed the Trinity by means of symbols and allusions (Penn 2015, 110). The patriarch’s polemical comparison of Jews old and new gives fellow Christians further incentive to accept his teachings, lest they too come to resemble Jews.

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Theodore bar Koni and the Student Who Believes “like a Jew”

Theodore bar Koni, a teacher within Timothy I’s Church of the East, also employs a polemical comparison featuring a Muslim rhetorical target and a Jewish reference within a work whose stated objective is to demonstrate the truth of Christian beliefs to a Christian audience. Theodore, however, draws on a different aspect of the rhetorical tradition of anti-Judaism, namely its use as a pedagogical tool to demonstrate that the Old Testament supports Christian truth claims. For that reason, Theodore writes a different kind of disputation than those recounted by his patriarch: an explicitly fictional dialogue in which a student represents the Muslims and a teacher represents the Christians (Griffith 1981; Penn 2015, 83–86).

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Muslims do not actually accept the authority of the Old Testament, but Theodore is one of several Eastern Christians who portray Muslims as if they do. *John and the Emir*, a disputation account composed at the turn of the eighth century but set shortly after the Muslim conquests, exemplifies this rhetorical strategy. John, the Miaphysite patriarch of Antioch, employs evidence derived from the Old Testament to parry a series of questions posed by a powerful governor. This Muslim tacitly accepts not only these proofs but also the patriarch’s repeated assertions that Muslims regard the Old Testament as authoritative (Penn 2008, 2015, 125–28). John’s biblical proof texts and the accompanying interpretations are not original: they derive from a work by the sixth-century patriarch Severus of Antioch (Nau 1915, 259–60). By portraying Muslims as adherents of the Old Testament, however, the author of *John and the Emir* creates a compelling contemporary narrative through which to convey traditional theological arguments.

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The eighth-century testimony collection known as *On the Triune Nature of God* likewise consists largely of classic proofs drawn from the Old Testament (Gibson 1899; Swanson 2007).

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8 See Letter 24 in Heimgartner (2021a, 123, 2021b, 94). Berti (2009, 62) dates this letter to 800–805.

This work's anonymous Chalcedonian author also cites a handful of quranic verses to support his theological claims, but James Rendel Harris (1901, 76) aptly observes that the author imagines his Muslim addressee to be "a new kind of Jew" who respects the authority of biblical evidence. The same may be said regarding the *Bēt Hālē Disputation* discussed above, whose Muslim figure debates the meaning of biblical texts as a Jewish disputant might and explicitly declares that he will accept Old Testament proofs (Taylor 2015, 225).

Christian authors of disputations and testimony collections had long used Jewish foils to make the case that the Old Testament supports Christian doctrines. By projecting skepticism about these claims onto the Jews, whom polemicists routinely condemn for their inability to properly understand biblical teachings, these authors encourage their audiences to accept Christian interpretations lest they too read the Bible 'Jewishly.' Eighth-century Eastern Christians, however, regarded Muslims as far more relevant than Jews. Rather than abandon a fundamental method of teaching Christian doctrine, educators chose to address fictitious Bible-believing Muslims in the hopes that actual Christians would continue to find these classic anti-Jewish arguments compelling. Like Timothy, the authors of *John and the Emir* and the *Bēt Hālē Disputation* portray Muslims respectfully: the Muslim participants in these dialogues ultimately accept Christian interpretations of the Old Testament, which gives Christians all the more reason to do the same. These authors did not worry about whether their arguments would persuade actual Muslims because Muslims are merely rhetorical targets; the objective of these works is to bolster the faith of Christian audiences. [28]

Theodore bar Koni also uses a Bible-believing Muslim as a foil with which to teach Christian doctrine to his students. Writing in the heart of the Muslim world—Theodore taught in Kashkar, located in Iraq between the great Islamic intellectual centers of Kufa and Basra—he sought to defend beliefs and practices that distinguish Christians from Muslims while reiterating elements of the theological curriculum customarily articulated through dialogues with Jews. Theodore, however, gives this pedagogical trope a new twist. In *John and the Emir* and the *Bēt Hālē Disputation*, as well as in Timothy's works, Christian heroes prove themselves against imposing Muslim officials whose power Christian audiences fear or envy but whom Christians can never truly emulate. Theodore, in contrast, constructs a dialogue between a fictional teacher and his fictional student—in a work written by an actual teacher for actual students. As a result, members of Theodore's Christian audience would have identified with the Muslim rhetorical target even as they presumably wished to differentiate themselves from him. This tension, which animates the entire dialogue, reaches its climax when the teacher polemically associates the Muslim student with Jews, the anti-Christians. [29]

Theodore's dialogue constitutes Chapter Ten of the *Scholion*, an instructional manual on the scriptural foundations of Christian theology that survives in a dozen manuscripts representing two text families. This work seeks to demonstrate that one can only understand challenging biblical texts and difficult theological principles by reading Old Testament passages in light of their New Testament counterparts. The *Scholion*'s first nine chapters, most likely written in 792, consist of questions and answers prompted by various biblical passages organized in their scriptural sequence; they contain no reference to Islamic critiques of Christian theology. Evidently dissatisfied with the work in its original form, Theodore later added Chapter Ten to reinforce his message about the significance of the New Testament and its congruence with the Old. Still later, Theodore appended an eleventh chapter on the tangentially related subject of Christian heresies (Griffith 1981, and @griffith_theodore_1982). [30]

Theodore declares at the outset of Chapter Ten that he wrote this dialogue to demonstrate [31]

the truth of Christian beliefs to those who accept the Old Testament and acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ but reject the authority of the New Testament.⁹ He calls these people *ḥanpē*, a Syriac term that originally meant ‘pagans’ but that also refers to generic non-Christians and, frequently, to Muslims (Griffith 1983, 118–22; Penn 2015, 67–69, 165–66). The dialogue’s student, who represents these *ḥanpē*, is clearly a Muslim: he a circumcised non-Jew who, thanks to the teachings of a man born six centuries after Jesus, recognizes the importance of Christ but insists—paraphrasing the Quran—that God has neither a father nor a son. The student also voices ideas regarding Christianity commonly ascribed to Muslims, claiming for example that Christians falsified the text of the New Testament and that Jesus was not in fact crucified (Penn 2015, 84). At the same time, this fictional student serves as a pedagogical foil for the actual Christian students who studied Theodore’s manual. To the extent that this literary character accepts the teachings of the Church of the East, readers of the *Scholion* should do the same. These readers, however, should also accept the doctrines that the student resists.

For much of the dialogue, the fictional student models appropriate behavior for actual students. He unswervingly accepts the authority of the Old Testament and shares his teacher’s disdain not only for the Jews but also for Chalcedonian and Miaphysite theologies. Consistently attentive, this student readily acknowledges the truth of his teacher’s scriptural interpretations and accepts the teacher’s arguments. In the first section of the dialogue, the teacher demonstrates that the Old Testament frequently refers to Jesus Christ and that the Old Testament exists for the purpose of preparing the Jews to recognize Christ upon his arrival. The student readily agrees with the teacher’s interpretations of scripture but questions the scriptural foundations of core Christian practices that find no parallel within Islam: baptism, the Eucharist, and veneration of the cross. The teacher proceeds to marshal Old Testament evidence in support of these practices, which the student once again accepts. This student, however, repeatedly expresses doubts regarding two interrelated doctrines that contradict Islamic conceptions of monotheism: that Christ is the Son of God and that God comprises Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Theodore reserves the discussion of these doctrines—and his polemical comparison—until the dialogue’s conclusion (Griffith 1981, 171–74, 185–86).

The teacher sets up his response to his student’s doubts by asking the student to identify the difference between the teachings of Christ and those of Moses. The student struggles: after all, he has come to accept that there are no contradictions between the Old Testament and the New, which has been Theodore’s point throughout the *Scholion*. The student lamely suggests, on the basis of Romans 14, that Christ abolished certain Old Testament practices related to dietary laws and holidays. “You still believe like a Jew!” the teacher retorts. The Jews, he explains, insist that the Messiah will not teach anything new, and by this point in the dialogue the student should realize that Moses himself foresaw the abolition of these practices. Yet Christ must have taught something new, for why else would God have sent him and the Old Testament foretold his arrival? The student, stumped, asks the teacher to identify Christ’s distinctive lesson. “He taught about the Father, particularly that the Father has a Son who resembles him! But they [i.e., the Jews], like you, could not bring themselves to believe him and for that reason despised him” (Scher 1912, 276; Hespel and Draguet 1982, 2:205–6). True to type, Theodore’s Muslim student reiterates his inability to believe in the divine Father and Son even after the teacher demonstrates that the Church of the East’s doctrines regarding the

9 Text: Scher (1912, 231–32); French trans.: Hespel and Draguet (1982, 2:172). Penn (2015, 84), translates the key passages of this introduction into English.

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Trinity and Incarnation align with Christ's own teachings, conform to logical reasoning, and find support within the Old Testament.

The sharpness of Theodore's polemical comparison derives in part from its climactic placement within the dialogue. For much of the *Scholion's* Chapter Ten, readers could imagine the student as a fellow Christian—after all, he assented to his teacher's every statement. Now, however, we discover to our surprise that this Muslim student is actually 'Jewish' because he fails the crucial test. Real Muslims, of course, fail this test as well. In the end, it makes no difference whether or not Muslims accept the authority of the Old Testament: they do not accept Christ as God, and for that reason they are no better than Jews. [34]

Christian readers of the *Scholion* face the same challenge as its Muslim character because they too must decide whether or not to accept Christian doctrines regarding Christ and the Trinity. Theodore, like Timothy, does not seem especially worried that his students might convert to Islam. Rather, the doubts they might harbor regarding Christian truth claims place these students at risk of believing "like a Jew." Theodore's polemical comparison, like Timothy's, depicts the significance of belief in terms that are both stark and cliché, drawn as they are from the longstanding discourse of anti-Judaism: Muslims are like Jews because they too stumble over the nature of Christ and cannot accept irrefutable arguments in support of Christian theology. Actual Christian students should instead accept the teacher's arguments and cultivate proper faith in Christ. Theodore reinforces precisely this point: "Belief is foremost among the traits that one needs to acquire," his literary teacher declares in the final paragraph of Chapter Ten, apparently addressing the *Scholion's* readers directly. This lesson sums up the message of the entire chapter, which Theodore describes as "an apology for our belief" in its programmatic opening sentence (Scher 1912, 283 and 231; Hespel and Draguet 1982, 2:211, 172).¹⁰ [35]

Timothy and Theodore both seem to presume that Christians cannot bear the thought of becoming "new Jews" themselves. These authors mobilize their imagined audiences' strong anti-Jewish sentiments so as to undercut Islamic critiques of Christian theology and inspire a reaffirmation of faith in Christ. Polemical comparisons of Muslims with Jews appear precisely where Timothy and Theodore wish to emphasize the refusal of Muslims to accept Christian teachings about Christ and the Trinity. The criterion of comparison that both employ—Muslims are like Jews with regard to their lack of faith in Christ—reinforces their message that proper belief in Christ is the key to being a good Christian. This polemical comparison also serves as a stern warning: just as Muslims can be Jewish, so too can Christians whose faith is deficient. [36]

Jews customarily serve as references within Christian polemical literature, but that alone is not the reason why Timothy and Theodore employ Jews as the reference within their polemical comparisons. More importantly, Jews traditionally exemplify those who reject scriptural and rational arguments that support doctrines about Christ. Pre-Islamic Christians often sought to reinforce the faith of fellow Christians through anti-Jewish rhetoric that targets other outgroups. Timothy and Theodore did the same while targeting Muslims. While innovative with regard to the ways in which they associate Muslims with Jews, in every other respect their polemical comparisons are actually quite conservative. [37]

"Every comparison has an inbuilt function of rectifying categories," Oliver Freiberger observes in his analysis of comparisons within the academic study of religion (2019, 107). The [38]

10 The Syriac verb form I consistently render as "belief" or "believe" (*h.y.m.n.*) also means "faith" and "think," among other synonyms used by Griffith and Penn in their discussions of the *Scholion*.

comparisons of Muslims and Jews that Timothy and Theodore construct refine the category of disbelief into which both groups fall: these comparisons clarify that one need not be part of the community that allegedly crucified Christ in order to stand in an antithetical relationship to Christianity. Anyone who doubts Christian doctrines notwithstanding their scriptural and rational foundations is, in effect, Jewish. By creating a stark binary between truth and falsehood, proper faith and disbelief, the polemical comparisons that Timothy and Theodore construct prod Christian audiences to accept the authors' philosophical and exegetical arguments, lest they too "believe like a Jew."

Polemical Comparisons and Genealogical Associations of Muslims with Jews

Timothy I and Theodore bar Koni employ polemical comparison as their preferred means of associating Muslims with Jews. This rhetorical device enables them not only to craft shocking and memorable attack lines (Muslims are the new Jews!) but also to steer their audiences toward proper choices (lest Christians also become Jewish through their disbelief in core doctrines). These writers simultaneously employ anti-Jewish rhetorical techniques also used against Muslims by other seventh- and eighth-century Eastern Christians: Timothy applies to Muslims scriptural verses commonly understood as referring to Jews while Theodore portrays Muslims, like Jews, as adherents of the Old Testament. These techniques render biblical prophecies and arguments more relevant to Christians who live under Muslim domination. Neither Timothy nor Theodore, however, employ an especially common Eastern Christian allegation with which they were presumably familiar: the charge that Jews played key roles in the formation of Islam. Consideration of this road not taken enriches our understanding of their objectives and, more broadly, of how polemical comparisons work. [39]

The *History of Sebeos*, discussed above, reports that Jews not only urged their Ishmaelite brethren to conquer the Holy Land but also sought to instill enmity between Muslims and Christians (Thomson 1999, 102–3). Eighth-century sources blame Jews for inciting Muslims to destroy Christian icons during the reigns of the caliphs 'Umar (Hoyland 2011, 126–27; Penn 2015, 43) and Yazid II (Vasiliev 1956; Gero 1973, 59–84). The *Chronicle of Theophanes*, which draws on traditions that circulated among Christians subject to Muslim rule, asserts that Jews taught Muhammad to be hostile toward Christians or, depending on how one reads an ambiguous phrase, to promote practices that contradict Christian teachings (de Boor 1963, 1: 333; Mango and Scott 1997, 464, and, on Theophanes' sources, xliii–lv). [40]

The most elaborate allegations regarding Jewish involvement in the formation of Islam appear in a popular set of traditions known today as the Legend of Sergius Bahīrā, which first took written form in the middle of the ninth century (Roggema 2009). Eastern Christian versions of this legend recount that a pious monk taught Muhammad everything he needed to know to establish his divinely ordained kingdom. This monk even wrote a version of the Quran whose teachings constituted a simplified form of Christianity. After the monk's death, however, a Jew corrupted his teachings by introducing Old Testament rituals and false claims about Muhammad. This Jew, in short, is responsible for the non-Christian elements of Islam. According to the version of this legend that appears in the late-ninth-century *Apology of al-* [41]

Kindī and later circulated in Europe, Jews undermined the monk's teachings precisely because of their longstanding enmity toward Christians and Christianity.¹¹

Tales like these enable Eastern Christians to account for specific Islamic beliefs and practices that contradict Christian teachings, especially those that seem to resemble Old Testament norms. Chroniclers also used allegations of this nature to explain the hostile interference of Muslim rulers in Christian affairs and to blame Jews for the persecution that Christians experience under Muslim domination. These authors employ genealogical arguments to define objectionable aspects of Islam as Jewish and, simultaneously, to explain how these Jewish elements entered Islam. [42]

Genealogical rhetoric explains in compelling fashion how Islam came to be as it is, but perhaps for this very reason Timothy and Theodore saw no reason to employ it. Neither, after all, is especially interested in Islam; rather, their common objective is to reinforce Christian truth claims. Timothy's "new Jews" follow in the footsteps of the "old Jews" not because actual Jews guided them toward this path but rather because Muslims themselves stumbled over the same obstacles to true faith that purportedly tripped the Jews of Christ's day. Theodore's student "still" believes like a Jew not because he was raised or educated by Jews but rather because he refuses to accept Christian doctrines about Christ and the Trinity even after his teacher demonstrates that they derive from the Old Testament. The premise motivating Timothy and Theodore is that Christian audiences are just as susceptible as Muslims to these 'Jewish' errors, and for that reason the genealogy of Islam is irrelevant. [43]

Another factor may also help to explain why neither Timothy nor Theodore makes reference to allegations that Jews shaped Islam as we know it. Jonathan Z. Smith observes that "*all comparisons are properly analogical* and fall under J.S. Mill's dictum, 'If we have the slightest reason to suppose any real connection between ... A and B, the argument is no longer one of analogy'" (1990, 51, emphasis original). According to the logic outlined by Mill and emphasized by Smith, genealogical rhetoric is incompatible with the rhetorical device of polemical comparison because genealogies offer "real" connections rather than analogies. Genealogical arguments naturalize the relationship between apparently discrete communities by alleging a historical connection between them: it is unsurprising that Muslims believe and act like Jews if Jews helped to create Islam itself. The rhetorical force of polemical comparisons, in contrast, rests on the element of surprise inherent in the juxtaposition of comparands that initially appear to be entirely unrelated. While one could in principle offer a genealogical argument to explain why the target of a polemical comparison resembles the reference, that would be the equivalent of explaining a joke's punch line: an admission that the comparison failed to land its punch in the first place. [44]

J.Z. Smith proceeds to observe that "comparison, in its strongest form, brings differences together within the space of the scholar's mind for the scholar's own intellectual reasons" (1990, 51). For Timothy and Theodore, the reason to compare Muslims with Jews notwithstanding the obvious differences is to draw upon the powerful rhetorical tradition of anti-Judaism in an era of Muslim dominance. These polemicists seek to persuade their Christian audiences to affirm Christian doctrines by associating Muslim targets with Jewish references with respect to the criterion of faith in Christ. They need not address Islam's origins or, for that matter, discard pre-Islamic rhetorical traditions in order to accomplish this objective. [45]

11 For an adequate English translation of the Arabic version of this passage (for which there is no critical edition), see Tien's 1880 translation as reprinted in Newman (1993, 355–545, at 453–54). For a critical edition of the twelfth-century Latin version with English translation, see Yolles (2018, 346–51).

The unprecedented religious dynamics of the seventh through ninth centuries did not prompt any radical changes in Eastern Christian polemic. Writers like Timothy and Theodore directed their polemics against Muslim rhetorical targets rather than against Jews or heretics but, like their predecessors, they continued to employ the discourse of anti-Judaism in their efforts to promote orthodox beliefs to their Christian audiences. Their anti-Jewish rhetoric regarding Muslims, like all forms of polemical comparison, is effective not only because it is shocking but also because it is cliché. [46]

Acknowledgments

This article presents material drawn from several chapters of a book manuscript in progress. It bears little resemblance to the paper I delivered at the conference on polemical comparisons organized by Christina Brauner and Sita Steckel in 2018. Instead, this article builds upon frameworks and insights that I gained through my participation in that conference. I am grateful to the organizers as well as to Oliver Freiberger, Michael Penn, and anonymous readers for their feedback on earlier drafts of this work. [47]

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