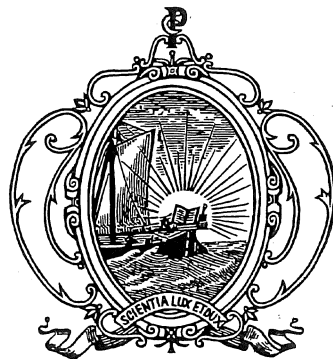


EASTERN CHRISTIAN STUDIES 5

STUDIES
ON THE
CHRISTIAN ARABIC HERITAGE

in Honour of Father Prof. Dr.
Samir Khalil Samir S.I.
at the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday

Edited by
Rifaat Ebied & Herman Teule



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HIKAYAT AMTHAL WA ASMAR...
KING PARABLES IN MELKITE APOLOGETIC LITERATURE

B. ROGGEMA

قال المسلم نراك على سائر الحالات تشرف دينك وتحققه وتورد عليه شهادات
وبراهين وحكايات وامثال واسمار وانت على كل حال تفتخر بأن الحق لديك ...

The Muslim said: we see that you always exalt your faith, maintain its veracity and adduce in support of it testimonies and demonstrations and *stories and parables and tales*, and you always boast that your religion is right...

From the time when Christians first began to write in Arabic, they have devoted themselves to the explanation and justification of their faith. When reading through the apologetic literature of Arabic-speaking Christians, one quickly realizes that the defence of Christian doctrine in the face of Islam amounted to much more than the defence of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, as Christian apologists made efforts to justify virtually every single aspect of their faith. From the broad range of critical questions that are answered in their treatises, one observes that Christians were in fact challenged on many more fronts than their conception of the Divine being. They were faced with questions such as 'why do you pray facing the East?', 'why do you kneel to something that is made by the hands of man?', 'why do you not accept our Prophet?'. Some of these questions, such as 'what would have happened to the world if Christ had died in the womb?', are of a childlike simplicity, but they are not necessarily simple to answer. The answers to such questions were sought in both Christian and Muslim Scripture and through philosophical discussions, and they were formulated in treatises of *Kalam* which provided models of debate, taught people how to silence one's opponent and, at the same time, how to justify one's faith to oneself. One of the ways in which Arab Christian apologists made aspects of their faith understandable in their treatises was by presenting parables in which they compared facets of their faith with simple examples taken from daily life and human experience.¹

¹ I use the term 'parable' as the equivalent of *mathal*, the Arabic term that covers a range of explanatory comparisons.

The exclamation quoted above comes from one of the Muslim participants in a well-known literary Christian-Muslim debate from Christian perspective, the *Disputation of George the Monk with three Muslims in the year 1207*.² In this debate an old monk withstands all the critical questions of three learned Muslims, and manages to explain the rationale behind the many aspects of his faith under criticism from his interlocutors. In the majority of the cases the old monk replies to the Muslims by telling a story that serves as an analogy with a certain aspect of the Christian religion. For example, when he is asked why he worships the cross the monk presents a parable of a rebellious slave and his master. This slave, under the influence of friends with evil intentions, ends up in prison and is condemned to death by them. His master then feels pity for him and decides to be executed in his place. At the execution the slave asks what retribution he can make for this, and the master asks him to carry a symbol of his mercy with him for the rest of his life. This is how the monk defends his wearing of a little cross.³ For a Christian audience it would be easily recognizable as the story of Christ, whereas to others it served as a way of showing that the custom was not unreasonable.

Such explanations occur quite frequently in Christian Arabic apologetic literature, ranging from brief metaphors to elaborate parables, in which the behaviour or actions of an ordinary human being are used to explain a particular aspect of the Divine. The ninth-century Nestorian apologist 'Ammār al-Basrī, when trying to show that the crucifixion does not represent a sign of weakness on the part of Christ, compares Christ with a physician who first takes a deadly potion himself in order to acquire the confidence of his patient that his cure will work, and then, too, with a fighter who lets his enemy use his weapons to subsequently vanquish him.⁴ The Jacobite apologist Abū Rā'ita explains in his *Risāla*

² Henceforth: *Disputation of George the Monk*. This text was edited by Paul Carali (Qar' alī) and published under the title: *Le Christianisme et l'Islam. Controverse attribuée au moine Georges du Couvent de St. Siméon (Séleucie) soutenue devant le Prince El-Mouhammad fils de Saladin en 1207* (Beit Chebab, 1933); transl: Alex Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation between a Christian monk and three learned Mohammedans on the subject of religion', *Edinburgh Annual Register ad annum 1816*, vol. 9 (1820), pp. 405-442. Other editions and translations are mentioned in Samir, 'Bibliographie du Dialogue Islamo-Christien (septième partie). Auteurs arabes chrétiens du XIIIe siècle', *Islamochristiana* 7 (1981), pp. 299-307. Samir also lists 89 manuscripts, with which he demonstrates the popularity of this text. For the passage quoted above: Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, p. 104.

³ Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, pp. 98-102; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', pp. 428-430.

⁴ These analogies occur in the 32th question of his *Kitāb al-nasā'il wa 'l-dawā'ib*; Michel Hayek, *'Ammār al-Basrī, Apologie et controverses* (Beirut, 1977), pp. 226-227.

fi al-tajassud that one can understand that Christ did not die in his Divine nature even though Christians say he died by comparing him with a man receiving a head wound: 'Someone who is wounded in his head is both wounded and not wounded: wounded in his head, not wounded in his hand. It is absurd to describe him as wounded in his hand, because that is not the place of the wound. But still the wounded person is one'.⁵ The author of the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*, a ninth century Melkite handbook of Christian doctrine and apologetics, says God's creation of mankind, that laid a foundation for His Incarnation, can be compared with a man who prepares his house before his bride moves in.⁶

In fact, it is Melkite apologues in particular that teem with such parables. The phenomenon is found in a number of works by Theodore Abū Qurra⁷, in Peter of Bayt al-Ra's' *Kitāb al-burhān*⁸ and, as noted, in the

⁵ Georg Graf, *Die Schriften des Jacobiten Habib ibn Hithna Abū Rā'ita*, CSCO 130-131, 2 vols. (Louvain, 1951), vol. 1, p. 40 (text); vol. 2, p. 52 (transl.).

⁶ There is no printed edition of this text, except of the chapters 5-8 in Louis Ma'ūf, 'Aqdam al-makhtūfāt al-nasāniyya al-'arabīyya', *al-Mašriq* 6 (1903), pp. 1011-1023, of which this example is taken (p. 1014). The same piece was reprinted in two different volumes by Louis Cheikho: *Seize traités théologiques d'auteurs arabes chrétiens (ix-xiii^e siècles)* (Beirut, 1906), pp. 87-99 and *Vingt traités théologiques d'auteurs arabes chrétiens* (Beirut, 1920), pp. 108-120. The text of these chapters is to be found on ff. 29a-39b of the oldest manuscript, which is MS BL Or. 4950. An edition of the near 200 folio manuscript is being prepared by Sidney Griffith, on the basis of the unfinished work by Graf. A number of articles have appeared that discuss its exact date of composition and authorship. The main points of concern are how the date of 877 in the MS BL Or. 4950 should be interpreted and whether the work should be attributed to Theodore Abū Qurra, whose treatise on the veneration of icons is found in the same manuscript. Samir proposes a date of 816-817 and finds arguments for the attribution to Theodore Abū Qurra, but refrains from making a final judgment. See, amongst others, his article 'La «Somme des aspects de la foi» oeuvre d'Abū Qurrah?', in: Kh. Samir (ed), *Actes du deuxième congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes (Oosterhasselien, septembre 1984)*, OCA 226 (Rome, 1986), pp. 93-121. This article includes a *status questions* of the debate (pp. 97-107), as does the following article in the same volume: Griffith, 'A ninth-century Summa Theologiae Arabica', pp. 123-141; pp. 128-136. In this article Griffith argues that there is very little solid ground for the attribution to Theodore Abū Qurra.

⁷ The frequency of the use of parables by Theodore Abū Qurra is particularly striking in his *Treatise on the Veneration of Holy Icons*, but there are many instances of this in other works of his, as will be shown below.

⁸ Pierre Caehia and W. Montgomery Watt, *Eutychius of Alexandria, The Book of Demonstration (Kitāb al-burhān)*, CSCO 192, 193, 209, 210, 4 vols. (Louvain, 1960-1961). The work attributed to Eutychius of Alexandria and published under his name is nowadays believed to be the work of Peter of Bayt al-Ra's. Samir has convincingly refuted the attribution to Eutychius of Alexandria by calling attention several colophons in which Peter of Bayt al-Ra's is mentioned as the author, and he believes it to be composed in the second half of the ninth century. See his: 'La littérature Melkite sous les premiers abbassides', *OCP* 56 (1990), pp. 469-486, pp. 482-484. There are more apologetic texts with this title, but throughout this article *Kitāb al-burhān* will refer to Peter of Bayt al-Ra's' work.

Disputation of George the Monk. Many of these parables use an earthly king to represent God, or, in some cases, another type of ruler, such as a lord, *mawli*, a nobleman, *sharif*, or a sultan, whereas mankind is often represented by a slave of the king. The persuasive power of these analogies obviously originates in the conception of God as King, which is common to Judaism and Christianity and which underlies some of the metaphors for God that are found in the Qur'an. Such king parables evoke a range of different ideas and emotions that are tied up with man's being subject to a power that they venerate and fear, a being that is invisible but nevertheless presides over their lives. And yet, the analogies present the kings as ordinary as can be in order to elucidate a certain point in a down-to-earth manner, divested of any metaphysical notions that would make the audience feel *a priori* that the issue was 'beyond them'.

This explanatory method long predates Christian Arabic literature. Ultimately it goes back to the *maš'al*, the type of parable that is used in Rabbinic Judaism to explain difficult passages and concepts in the Bible. In the *Midraš* there are literally thousands of these. In the majority of these *meš'alim* a king is the main figure. These are designated specifically as *maš'al-le-melekh*.⁹ After the quotation of a Biblical verse, a rabbi gives a parallel meaning in the form of a king parable, as for example in the *Midraš Berešit Rabba* on Gen. 1:31:

'And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good'

R. Yonathan said: It is like a king who married off his daughter, and made a bridal-chamber and house for her, and plastered, cemented and decorated it. When he saw it, it pleased him. He said: My daughter, My daughter, if only this bridal-chamber would always please me just like it pleases me now. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to His world: My world, if only you would always please Me just as you please Me now'.¹⁰

⁹ A collection of almost a thousand king parables from the *Midraš* was compiled by Ziegler, who in his study of this genre aimed to show that many of these king parables are modelled on historical events and customs of Roman Emperors; Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midraš* beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit (Breslau, 1903). A useful study of their compositional, rhetorical and exegetical aspects can be found in: David Stern, *Parables in Midraš. Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge (Massachusetts)/London, 1991). See also: Clemens Thoma & Simon Laner, *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen. Erster Teil. Pesiqta deRav Kahana (PesK). Einleitung, Übersetzung, Parallelen, Kommentar. Texte* (Bern/Frankfurt am Main/New York, 1986).

¹⁰ Translation from Stern, *Parables in Midraš*, pp. 26-27 (but quoted without its numbers and transliterations).

These *meš'alim* were written down from the fifth century onwards, but the practice of inventing such parables is undoubtedly older, since the method was already used in the Gospels. Apart from the presence of the more cryptic and homiletic parables in the Gospels (such as in Luke 15), which have given the term 'parabolic' the connotation of 'allusive', there are a number of Gospel parables that are first and foremost explanatory in nature, feature a king, and concentrate on one specific issue, as for example in Matt. 18:21-35.¹¹ In patristic literature one notices the same phenomenon. For example, the many quotations in John of Damascus' treatises in defence of the worship of icons show that the method was used by Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great and Anastasius I of Antioch.¹²

In the following discussion my first aim is to draw attention to the diversity of religious issues that Melkite apologists elucidated and justified by means of king parables, and to make some observations as to their stylistic features and their rhetorical mechanisms. Subsequently I will take a closer look at a specific parable, that of the 'incognito king' and discuss its apologetic aspects.

Themes and styles

Earthly king parables in Melkite apologetics survive in a variety of forms of differing lengths and degrees of intricacy. Some of them do not form a narrative and are mere similes. They often involve royal paraphernalia, such as the king's robe or seal. Peter of Bayt Ra's writes for example that when God created man in His image, He sealed the body with it in the same way that kings seal their letters with the engraving of their image.¹³ The seal also symbolizes proof of authenticity, and when one reads about how a messenger comes without a sealed message from the caliph one recognizes this as a reference to Muḥammad, of whom the Christian apologists said that he had not worked miracles to support his claim that his message came from God.¹⁴ Theodore Abū Qurra refers

¹¹ See the survey in S. E. Johnson, 'King parables in the Synoptic Gospels', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955), pp. 37-39.

¹² David Anderson, *Sr. John of Damascus, On the Divine Images. Three Apologies against those who attack the Divine Images* (Crestwood, 1980), p. 40, p. 68, p. 69, p. 92, pp. 102-103, *passim*.

¹³ Cachia and Watt, *The Book of Demonstration*, vol. 1, p. 31 (text); vol. 2, p. 25 (transl.).

¹⁴ Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, p. 42; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', p. 409. See also a similar comparison in one of Theodore Abū Qurra's writings: Ignace Dick, 'Deux écrits inédits de Théodore Abuqura', *Le Muséon* 72 (1959), pp. 53-67, p. 64 (text); p. 66 (transl.).

to the royal seal when he tries to make clear that things can represent more than their actual value as material; that they can refer to a reality beyond their proper self. The material that is used to print the seal is worth little whereas its value is beyond calculation when it seals a letter of pardon to people condemned to death.¹⁵ Abū Qurra presents this argument in his treatise in defence of the veneration of icons, which is replete with such analogies. In a similar line of thought he gives the example of a king who sees a scandalous icon of his mother. The mother is depicted as having intercourse with a tramp. When the king becomes aware of this, the painter cannot excuse himself by saying that he only 'played around with paint'.¹⁶

Numerous other aspects of the Christian faith are 'covered' by means of parables in these apologetic works. The *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*, for example, uses a hypothetical case of a king with the aim of explaining that man's actions are not predetermined by God:

'And when they say that mankind does good and evil by the power of God and his guidance and his instructing them, and that God is therefore the agent of their actions, we say to them: "If a king were to ride with one of his officers on a horse and he entrusts the sword to him and tells him to kill his enemy with it, and that man were to ride his horse and strikes the enemy with his sword and his friend, then the killing of the friend with the sword of the king should be forgiven by the king. The king himself would be the one who has struck his friend with the sword if God were the agent of man's actions by means of the power he has created in them."¹⁷

In the discussion about the direction of prayer in the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān* the author wants to defend the worship toward the East, by showing that it predates the Jewish worship towards Jerusalem and that it is the direction of paradise. His comparison is as follows:

'the heavenly paradise is the equal of a meeting of the elite who are gathered outside the royal box [*maqṣūrā*] of the king. They want to praise the king and thank him and ask for his help, so they turn their faces towards the royal box. But someone from among the common people who is out-

¹⁵ I. Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Kurra De cultu imaginum libellus a codice Arabico nunc primum editus Latine versus illustratus* (Bonn, 1897), p. 45; transl. S. H. Griffith, *A treatise on the veneration of the holy icons written in Arabic by Theodore Abū Qurrah, Bishop of Harrān (c. 755-C. 830 A.D.)*, Eastern Christian Texts in Translation (Louvain, 1997), p. 90. In the *Disputation of George the Monk* a similar parable is told about a man receiving his letter of pardon from the Sultan while in prison. Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, pp. 76-78; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', pp. 420-421.

¹⁶ Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Kurra*, pp. 46-47; Griffith, *A treatise on the veneration*, p. 92.

¹⁷ MS BL Or. 4950, ff. 128a-128b.

side the meeting does not turn his face towards the meeting when he desires or seeks the king.¹⁸

Peter of Bayt Ra'i tells a king parable in his discussion of the role in the Divine plan of Old Testament types (*yusūm*) and prophecies (*nubuwwāt*) concerning Christ. Both have foreshadowed Christ's coming and are equally important, he asserts, but they differ in nature. He explains the difference by means of the tale of a king who wanted to inform his people about his plans to build a city of sublime construction. In order to acquaint his people with the plans he sent out two trustworthy messengers. The first was unlettered and sketched the city on cloth and used just a few words to describe it. The second received written documents and was able to convey the plans by word of mouth. Their achievements, however, were the same.¹⁹

Theodore Abū Qurra is often looking for the simplest of terms to explain his views. When he wants to explain why the Old Testament reproof of idolatry does not concern the veneration of icons, he compares this with a king who does not want his son to play with a knife or a sword because he does not know yet how to handle them. When the king says that instead he should play with a ball it is a kind of distraction that has no intrinsic value: 'this tactic of the father toward the son is not a right definition of reality. The son will put it aside when his mind reaches maturity'.²⁰ Abū Qurra clearly had such a penchant for this style of argumentation that he presents many analogies in which he uses imaginary kings without their kingship playing a role in the explanation of the theological idea in question at all. In a treatise in defence of Christian monotheism, he explains why one cannot say that the world has been created by three by means of the following analogy:

'You visit a king and he speaks to his son, who then hits you. Then you say: 'the king has hit me', and you are correct. But you say also: 'the son

¹⁸ MS BL Or. 4950, f. 123a. An audience with the king is also the setting for a parable that illustrates the importance of staying in church until the end of the service: f. 171b.

¹⁹ Cachia and Watt, *Eurychius of Alexandria, The Book of Demonstration (Kitāb al-Burhān)*, vol. 1, p. 150 (text); vol. 2, p. 122 (transl.). The reference to a messenger who is unlettered (*ummi*) catches the reader's attention because it seems to be a veiled reference to the prophet Muhammad. Does the author want to suggest that Muhammad showed types of Christ as it were in reverse? The way in which he uses the Qur'an to express his Christian views makes one think that this may be the case.

²⁰ Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Kurra*, pp. 35-36; Griffith, *A treatise on the veneration*, p. 82. A similar analogy is to be found in the preceding chapter: Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Kurra*, pp. 35-36; Griffith, *A treatise on the veneration*, pp. 77-78.

of the king has hit me' and you are right. But it is not right to say: 'both the king and his son have hit me'.²¹

The diversity of styles amongst Abū Qurra's king parables becomes clear when we contrast this example with a much longer parable of his in the treatise *On the Creator and the True Religion*.²² He tries to show in this treatise how one can discern the True Religion from amongst the multiplicity of faiths in the world. The parable of the king and his sick son, vaguely reminiscent of the *Hymn of the Pearl*, is an integral part of his exposé, for it creates the foundation of the rest of his argumentation in which he puts forth the idea that human reason is capable of discerning the Truth. In short the story runs as follows: a prince lives far away from his father, the King, whom he hardly knows. When the son gets ill and the king learns about his disease and its cause he sends a messenger with a letter to the son's physician, in which he describes himself, the cause of the disease and its cure and prevention. Simultaneously, some evil subjects of the king also dispatch letters containing purported cures. It is the physician who then knows how to select the only true letter with its effective cure by means of showing that all the other letters contain advice that is contrary to the son's health, as well as descriptions of the king himself that are false.

Abū Qurra explains that the king represents God, whereas the son stands for mankind and the physician for reason. The disease is the fall of man, and the messenger stands for the Divine revelation that teaches mankind the worship of God and morality in this world and its reward in the next. The parable is open-ended. For it to serve Abū Qurra's purpose of showing that Christianity is the only religion in agreement with reason he still needs to show *how* the physician selected the one valid cure, which he tries to do in the rest of his treatise by 'proving' that only Christianity's commandments are in agreement with human nature. One is struck by this peculiar construction, which is logically weak but rhetorically strong. It exploits the tendency of the audience to take a narrative unity as a logical unity and hence as 'a fact'. The parable is not pre-

²¹ Qustaiḥīn Bāshā, *Muṣṣawwir: Thawāḍir us-Ṣūfī Ḥarrān* (Beirut, 1904), p. 38; transl. Georg Graf, *Die arabischen Schriften des Theodor Abū Qurra Bischofs von Harrān (ca. 740-820)*, Forschungen zur christlichen Literatur- und Dogmengeschichte, vol. 10 (Paderborn, 1910), pp. 149-150.

²² In its most recent edition: Ignace Dick, *Theodore Abū Qurra, Maymar fī wujūh al-khāliq wa 'l-dīn al-qawīm*, Patrimoine Arabe Chrétien, 3 (Journé/Rome, 1982), pp. 212-218; transl. Georg Graf, *Des Theodor Abū Qurra Traktat über den Schöpfer und die wahre Religion*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters. Texte und Untersuchungen, vol. 14 (Münster, 1913), pp. 31-35.

sentied as support of what has already been put forth, but rather the other way around. The part about how to choose the True Religion follows the parable and is dependent on the credibility of the parable. The fact that it can be selected by reason in the first place is, however, not yet firmly established.

The version of the same parable included in the *Disputation of George the Monk* rounds off the story more carefully.²³ It is a more theatrical version that puts more blame on the son, i.e. mankind, for his sickness. The son does not just get ill; he is corrupted as the result of engaging with the wrong type of people and indulging in the wrong type of food. In this version the procedure of the physician is still part of the narrative. It tells us on what grounds he rejects the false letters. From the four letters that the son receives the first is rejected as contrary to the nature of the father, whereas the second and the third propose a cure that he considers only suitable for children. In his explanation of the parable the old monk tells his Muslim interlocutors that the first stands for the Sabian religion and the second and third for Judaism and Islam. It is obvious that the message of this piece is that polytheism is contrary to the Divine nature, whereas Judaic and Islamic monotheism represent a simplified version of the truth.

Designations and textual embedment

The examples discussed show that not all of these king parables are rendered in the same format. They can be hypothetical cases, which are meant to reason out a certain proposition ('what if a king were to...?'), comparisons that draw on royal customs (like a king who ...), and allegorical tales that represent one-time events that are modelled on the particular theological points that they have to elucidate or underscore. They are nevertheless all *amthāl* (sing. *mathal*), explanatory parallels, and the majority of them are univocal. This is not to say that they cannot have a double agenda. In certain cases one notices how the parable, apart from making a clear doctrinal point, wants to convey to the audience a sense that one's community is the Divinely favoured one and that others are straying.²⁴

²³ Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, pp. 125-128; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', pp. 435-438.

²⁴ As in the example from the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān* about the direction of prayer quoted above. Abū Qurra presents a parable about a king who sees a damaged image of his daughter. He uses it in his refutation of the claim that since everyone is made in the

It is interesting to look at how the texts under discussion here designate their own parables and how they integrate them into their discourse. The apologists often introduce their parable as a *mathal*, but we also find the parable referred to by the term *qiyās*, 'analogy'.²⁵ In many cases a parable is introduced as something that is *bi-manzila*, 'at the rank of', so 'equal to', the point that it has to illustrate.²⁶ Theodore Abū Qurra also uses the term *nazīr*, 'parallel' or 'equal',²⁷ and at another instance he introduces a parable as a *tahqiq*, 'confirmation',²⁸ of his point. Other parables he simply introduces with *yushbihu*, 'this is like...'; or with *ashbaha*, 'this was like'.²⁹ At the end of the analogy it is often linked back to the initial point by means of *(fa-)ka-dhālika*, 'likewise', which allows for a repetition of the doctrinal notion concerned. The circle that is created in this way heightens the sense of the validity of the comparison.

The *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān* presents its parables in a number of cases according to the formula 'the *mathal* of X is the *mathal* of Y', X being the notion that has to be exemplified and Y being the parable. As in most other parables, Y is often followed by *ka-dhālika* to refer back again to X. One finds for example³⁰:

ومثل اكرامه ايانا مثل ملك خطب لابنه من بيت من بيوت اهل مملكته
وجعل في نفسه ان ينقل اهل ذلك البيت ويتركهم في جواره ويخطبهم بنفسه
ويدعوهم اهل بيته ويشركهم مع ورثته كذلك الخالق اكرما بناسه ويتوحد بشرو
بلاهوته وباختلاطه بنا ومعاشرته ايانا ما صلاح لنا

The *mathal* of His honouring us is the *mathal* of a king who marries off his son [to someone] from one of the families of the people of his kingdom and

image of God every one deserves to be venerated like an icon. One remarks upon how he uses it also to blame those who make this claim of having spoiled their own resemblance to God. Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Qurra*, p. 44; Griffith, *A treatise on the veneration*, pp. 88-89.

²⁵ MS BL Or. 4950, f. 123a; Cachia and Watt, *The Book of Demonstration*, vol. 1, p. 133.

²⁶ MS BL Or. 4950, f. 122b, 123a, 171b, Cachia and Watt, *The Book of Demonstration*, vol. 1, p. 116, p. 123.

²⁷ Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Qurra*, p. 47.

²⁸ Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Qurra*, p. 45.

²⁹ Dick, *Muṣṣar fī wujūh al-khāliq*, p. 212; Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Qurra*, p. 38, p. 49; Bāshā, *Muṣṣar Thawādūsiy Abi Qurra*, p. 175.

³⁰ MS BL 4950, f. 29a. This is the opening passage of the part that was edited; see Ma'ūf, 'Aqdam al-makhtūfāt', p. 1014. (Read, however, *khāṭiba* for *al-khāṭiba*, and *lawāḥid* for *lawḥid*). There is another parable later on in this work which starts off in the same way and continues with a story of the envy which this created with others; MS BL Or. 4950, ff. 138a-139a.

he decides to move the people of that family to him and make them live in his vicinity and lets them mingle with him and calls them his family and lets them share in his inheritance. Likewise the Creator has honoured us with His Incarnation and the unification of His humankind with His divinity and with His mingling with us and His living amongst us, which reconciled us.

This construction with a repetition of *mathal*, similar to the Qur'anic '*mathal* X *ka-mathal* Y'³¹, is a noteworthy aspect of the language of the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*. In the same section this construction occurs four times more and in other sections at least twice.³² Occasionally one finds it with the parables of some of the other Melkite apologists, but Theodore Abū Qurra does not use it at all.³³ There is a debate about as to whether Theodore Abū Qurra was the author of the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*.³⁴ In this by now century-long debate the predilection for parables also plays a role. Their presence in the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān* reminded Ma'ūf of Abū Qurra, and Graf also notes that similarly, although he finds the work more 'volkstümlich' than Abū Qurra's work.³⁵ Griffith's argument about the parables is that it may be a common trend in this type of literature and that it would be more useful to make a detailed linguistic comparison of Abū Qurra's works and the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*.³⁶ It is striking that from amongst the dozens of parables Abū Qurra tells there is not one that follows this format, and in my view, this difference is an argument against his authorship of the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān*.

With the longer parables that integrate several metaphors like the one of the sick son mentioned above and the parable of the incognito king that will be discussed below, the symbolic references are revealed at the end by means of equations: the sick son *is* mankind, the king *is* God,

³¹ There are ten parables in the Qur'an that are framed in this way, for example Q 2:261: *mathalhu* 'iladhina yunqifina amwālihim fī sabīli 'ilāhi *ka-mathal* ḥabbatin anbatat sab'a sanābila fī kullī surbūlatin mi'atin ḥabbatin.

³² Ma'ūf, 'Aqdam al-makhtūfāt', p. 1014, p. 1015, p. 1017, p. 1019; MS BL Or. 4950, f. 147a, f. 171b.

³³ With Peter of Bayt Ra's: Cachia and Watt, *The Book of Demonstration*, vol. 1, p. 150, and with Paul of Antioch: Paul Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche. Évêque melkite de Sidon (XIIe s.)*, *Introduction, édition critique, traduction* (Beirut, 1965), p. 45.

³⁴ see above: n. 6.

³⁵ Ma'ūf, 'Aqdam al-makhtūfāt', p. 1013; Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 5 vols. (Rome, 1944-1953), vol. 2, p. 19.

³⁶ As he does in his article 'A ninth-century Summa', p. 134. He also notes that there are indications that the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān* is a compilation; Griffith, 'Greek into Arabic: life and letters in the monasteries of Palestine in the ninth century: the example of the Summa Theologiae Arabica', *Byzantion* 56 (1986), pp. 117-138, see pp. 137-138.

etc. This is where one recognizes the rhetorical strength of such a story: because of the convincingness of the equations themselves and because of the awareness of the audience that the events of the story are allusions to a fixed external reality that same audience may be led to translate this into the factuality of the second half of the equation.

The parable of the incognito king

Having looked at the diversity of king parables and some of their structural and rhetorical aspects, I will move on to discuss one of the longer king parables that was used in the presentation of the Christian faith to Muslims: the parable of the incognito king. In two of the texts under discussion, Peter of Bayt Ra'i's *Kitāb al-burhān*³⁷ and the *Disputation of George the Monk*³⁸ an attempt is made to explain the purpose of the Incarnation by means of a story about a king who mingles with his people in disguise. In the former text the parable appears as an illustration of a long exposé on the Divine economy. The latter text contains a more elaborate version of the parable, which the monk tells when one of the Muslims asks him whether God did not have the power to save mankind and vanquish Satan without having to be born from a woman and suffer humiliations.³⁹ The monk answers that God would have had the power but that His justice held Him back. When the Muslims ask for an explanation of this, the monk presents his *mathal*, but not without first remarking in rather rude terms that they need such a thing because of their simple-mindedness.⁴⁰

The parable can be summarized as follows. A certain king was said to have three unsurpassable virtues, justice, power and wisdom. A servant of his, in a high position, became envious of him and the king expelled him. The servant wanted to take revenge and bought a garden into which he lured passers-by. Once in the garden his victims would be thrown into an abyss. The king heard about this and he would have been capable of destroying the servant and the garden, but when the rebellious servant protested that the people had come to his garden voluntarily, his justice

³⁷ Cachia and Watt, *The Book of Demonstration*, vol. 1, pp. 133-135 (text); vol. 2, pp. 108-109 (transl.).

³⁸ Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, pp. 86-92; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', pp. 423-426.

³⁹ Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, p. 82; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', p. 422.

⁴⁰ Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, pp. 84-85; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', p. 423.

'suppressed' (*abjalā*) his power. Instead he dressed in servants' clothes and went to the garden, but he did not respond to the rebellious servant's temptation. The latter then became suspicious of him and wanted to imprison and torture him, but the king showed his royal authority and might and confronted the servant with his actions. The evil servant defended himself indeed by saying that people had themselves chosen to be with him. The king rejects his plea and forces him to admit that he tempted them. Then he binds the evil servant in chains forever, destroys the garden, and returns triumphantly.

The same story is to be found in the *Kitāb al-burhān*, albeit with slightly different emphases and in a more condensed form. Most of its elements are, at least for a Christian audience, easily recognizable: mankind as servants of God, the Fall, Satan tempting and deceiving mankind, God's plan for salvation, the Incarnation, Satan's tempting Christ, the crucifixion and the resurrection.

The 'disguise' or 'veiling' (*ihitāb*) of God in the flesh is a metaphor for the Incarnation that is frequently used by Christian Arab apologists, and Christ himself is sometimes referred to as 'the veil'. This imagery was not their own invention — we find it with several Greek and Syriac fathers as well — but it came to play an important role in their apologetics vis-à-vis Islam.⁴¹ One of the interesting aspects of this parable about a king dressing up like his subjects is that it takes this metaphor and returns it to its original literal meaning. The veiling once again becomes concrete, albeit in a fictitious setting.

Rumours about certain kings walking amongst their people incognito have circulated through the centuries.⁴² They have captured the imagination of numerous storytellers, who have gone on to spin all kinds of suspenseful tales about political intrigues and romantic affairs.⁴³ Several

⁴¹ See below.

⁴² For example about the Roman emperor Nero and the caliph 'Umar. See Tacitus, *The Annals*, book 13, ch. 27, for the havoc that Nero caused amongst the population while roaming around the city like a slave, and Victor Chauvin, *Bibliographie des ouvrages arabes ou relatifs aux Arabes publiés dans l'Europe chrétienne de 1810 à 1885*, 6 vols. (Liège, 1892-1922), vol. 1, pp. 44-45, for references to Muslim rulers about whom this is reported. To that list we can now add the present king of Jordan, 'Abdallah II, who, according to his palace officials, regularly checks out the Jordanian bureaucratic apparatus in this way.

⁴³ This literary motif is common not only in folktales from the Middle East but from all around the world. One finds it from the *Arabian Nights* to Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*, and from Japanese to Latvian fairytales. For the use of this motif in the *Arabian Nights* and other Arab folktales see: Hasan M. El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions of the Arab World. A guide to motif classification*, 2 vols. (Bloomington, 1995), vol. 1, p. 251. In *Henry the Fifth* the motif appears in Act 4, scene 1. Many of its permutations in numerous

Christian Arab apologists show that this literary motif was well suited to depict Christ's mission. In the *Jāmi' wujūh al-īmān* there is a parable that is meant to show that Christianity is not an innovation but rather the one true religion of old. Again an envious servant gains dominion over most of the servants of the king against whom he rebels. After some time the king comes to one of the villages of his old servants in order to rescue them personally, appearing 'with a small troop, a humble carriage and in the apparel of commoners' (*fī rakb qalī wa markab dhālī wa fī ziyy al-āma*), but many people do not return to their earlier obedience to him.⁴⁴ Theodore Abū Qurra tells a less elaborate parable of a king who appears in public wearing 'deplorable lowly ragged clothes' (*thawban haqīran daniyan bāliyan*) and is subsequently beaten up. He rewards the few who despite his humiliation stood by his side.⁴⁵ In a religious dialogue between the Coptic Patriarch Abraham b. Zur'a and the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz, one also finds the comparison of Christ with a king who goes around in disguise in the streets, and then returns to his palace.⁴⁶

In none of these cases an attempt is made to demonstrate why the king would want to go around masquerading. The parable under discussion here, however, is much more than a folkloric illustration of Christ's 'hidden' divinity. Its aim is to elucidate the soteriological function of the Divine disguise. In the *Disputation of George the Monk* this story arises in connection with a remark by one of the Muslims who considers the

other tales are given and classified in the foundational work of folkloric motifs Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature. A classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Mediaeval Romances, Exemplars, Fables, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, 6 vols. (rev. ed., Copenhagen, 1955-58), vol. 4, pp. 430-431, and in some of its later complements such as Lena Neuland, *Motif-Index of Latvian Folktales and Legends*, FF Communications, 229 (Helsinki, 1981), p. 348, and Hiroko Ikeda, *Type and Motif Index of Japanese Folk-Literature*, FF Communications, 209 (Helsinki, 1971), p. 142. In the Old Testament the motif of disguised kings occurs as well. In a number of cases a king actually disguises as an attempt to be invisible for God, but without success. See for example the stories about Saul in 1 Samuel 28, about the King of Israel in 1 Kings 22, and about Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35, and the discussion of this theme in: R. Coegins, 'On Kings and Disguises', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991), pp. 55-62. The motif also occurs in Sufi literature, in which generally 'veiling' is an often-used term. See for example: Michel Lagarde, 'Le Paradox Albarthen chez 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'iri', in: M.Th. Urvoy (ed), *En Hommage au père Jacques Jonnier, o.p.* (Paris, 2002), pp. 131-141, see pp. 132-133.

⁴⁴ MS BL Or. 4950, ff. 138a-139a.

⁴⁵ Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Qurra*, pp. 47-48.

⁴⁶ This dialogue is contained in the 11th c. biography of this patriarch by Mīkhā'īl b. Tīmīs: L. Leroy, 'Histoire d'Abraham le Syrien Patriarche Copte d'Alexandrie', *ROC* 14 (1909), pp. 380-400, *ROC* 15 (1910), pp. 26-41, see pp. 35-36 (text); p. 28 (trans).

Christian belief in the Incarnation an attribution of weakness to God and therefore asks whether God could not have saved mankind in a less laborious way. Similarly, Peter of Bayt Ra's is driven by the question 'what drove the Creative, Sublime and Exalted Word to endure all that humiliation and abasement?'.⁴⁷ The answer that is formulated is constructed ahead of potential objections to the 'logic' of Christian salvation history. The central point is that there was no question of weakness, but only of a restraint of power on the part of God with the aim of giving way to His mercy on mankind and of facilitating a true defeat of Satan. This 'restrained power' manifested itself in Christ. The message is that God's use of power at the expense of His mercy would have been unjust, whereas using His mercy at the expense of His power is just, wise and ultimately effective.

A strategic factor of Christ's humanity lies in the fact that Satan did not know whom he was tempting when he was standing face to face with Christ. This meant that Satan was exposed 'red-handed' as the one who tempts mankind and does injustice to them even though mankind has not done any injustice to him, who is of a stronger nature than they are. Our texts underscore the ingenuity of that strategy by reasoning out what would have happened if there had not been a Divine disguise. God could have come upon Satan 'in full might' and destroyed his realm. However, Satan would not have been impressed if God had vanquished him in this way, since he acknowledges God's omnipotence, and hence would be ready to accept defeat in these terms, all the more so given that his own achievement of leading humankind astray would still stand.⁴⁸ In such a defeat, furthermore, his guilt would not be truly exposed, for he would be able to plead that humankind followed him out of their free will, while he himself was overpowered by God.⁴⁹ By contrast, the strategy of the Divine 'undercover operation' takes away that excuse from

⁴⁷ Cachaia and Watt, *The Book of Demonstration*, vol. 1, p. 113 (text); vol. 2, p. 91 (trans).

⁴⁸ This point is only made in the *Kitāb al-burhān*, in a somewhat cryptic way. 'Iblīs and his hosts' would have said: 'We gained mastery over slaves like ourselves and our Lord has gained mastery over us, so there is nothing to wonder at'; Cachaia and Watt, *The Book of Demonstration*, vol. 1, p. 127 (text); vol. 2, p. 103 (trans). In a passage with the same antithetical approach in the earliest Arabic apology for Christianity, the *Taḥthīh Al-lāh al-Wāḥid* this point is made more clearly. See: Samir, 'The earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (C. 750)', in: S.Kh. Samir & J.S. Nielsen (eds), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, Studies in the History of Religions, 63 (Leiden, 1994), pp. 57-114, see p. 93 (text); p. 91 (trans).

⁴⁹ Cachaia and Watt, *The Book of Demonstration*, vol. 1, p. 127 (text); vol. 2, p. 103 (trans); Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, pp. 88-89; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', pp. 424-425.

Satan: he proves on the spot that he tempts by his own will those who have not done anything wrong to him. Hence Satan is put to shame and feels remorse. The parable is a stage on which these ideas can be acted out in a simple concrete way; the evil servant comes to the scene with his excuses, but eventually he hangs his head down in shame.⁵⁰

Neither the outline of this parable nor the issues of soteriology and theodicy that it brings to light are unique to Christian Arab theology. The parable can be traced back in rudimentary form to Origen, who, inspired by Paul's saying that Christ 'assumed the form of a slave' (Phil. 2:7), presented a comparison between Christ's liberating humankind from the dominion of death with the story of a noble king who goes in disguise into the land of his enemy to persuade the captives whom the enemy has taken amongst his slaves to come back to their rightful lord.⁵¹ Origen presents this as a strategy that the king preferred to losing his servants of old in a violent conflict.

The notion of the just deception and defeat of Satan can be traced in the thought of Ephrem the Syrian, who stresses the importance of Satan not being constrained, as our texts do. This comes to the fore, for example, in three of his *Hymns on Virginity* in which he dwells on the temptation of Christ by Satan (Matt 4:1-11) as part of the strategy to outwit Satan by making him confused about his identity.⁵² Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa both describe Christ's veil of human nature as part of the strategy vis-à-vis Satan and stress that he was duly paid back in his own coin.⁵³

This emphasis of the early Church Fathers on the victory over Satan as a central aspect of the doctrine of redemption was objectionable to some, however. It had a dualist flavour to it, and it was dismissed as

⁵⁰ Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, p. 91; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', p. 426.

⁵¹ Origenis, 'Commentariorum in Epistolam B. Pauli ad Romanos', PG 14 (1862), col. 857-1292, see col. 1051-1052.

⁵² The hymns 12, 13, 14 of the *Hymns on Virginity*: E. Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrens Hymnen De Virginitate*, GSCO 223-224, 2 vols. (Louvain, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 38-51 (text); vol. 2, pp. 38-50 (transl.). For a discussion of this theme see: J. Martinkaman, *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrens. Eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung* (Åbo, 1978), pp. 77-82.

⁵³ Gregory Nazianzen in his *Oration* 39, 13 about Satan: 'after he had deceived us with the hope of becoming gods, he was himself deceived by the screen of the flesh'. Translated by J.P. Egan in his 'The Deceit of the Devil according to Gregory Nazianzen', *Studia Patristica* vol. 22 (Louvain, 1989), pp. 8-13; see p. 9; Gregory of Nyssa: 'Just as he deceived humankind through the lure of pleasure so too is he deceived by the screen of humankind'; R. Wirling, *Grégoire de Nyssse. Discours Catéchétique. Texte grec de E. Mühlhberg* (GNO III, IV), Sources Chrésiennes, 453 (Paris, 2000), p. 262.

Marcionism for that reason.⁵⁴ Then there was the sense that the Divine veiling constituted a kind of deception of Satan, which was unfair. At any rate, that is a critique that Gregory of Nyssa, who invented the metaphor of the live bait with the Divine fishhook inside, defends himself against.⁵⁵ These types of criticism were clearly not of any concern to the authors of the Melkite apologies that have come down to us. They deliberately bracket Satan's deception of mankind and Christ's deception of Satan together, and do not shun the use of terms like *khud'a*, *makra* and *hīla* to refer to the latter event. The *Disputation of George the Monk* brings one of the Muslims onto the scene to pose essentially the same question as Gregory of Nyssa had asked almost a millennium earlier: 'But if Christ be, as you say, God all powerful and the Creator, how could he have endured to be the instrument of such deception?'.⁵⁶ Whether any Muslim has ever asked that question is to be doubted — one gets the impression that the Muslim's question is nothing more than a facilitation of a further explanation of the rightfulness of the defeat of Satan. The monk exemplifies once more and asks: who is guilty when a man gives a cup of poison to another, who recognizes his evil intention and then gives back the cup of poison and lets the first man drink?⁵⁷

This urge to counteract any sense that the events of Christ's life on earth were signs of weakness was undoubtedly stronger than the urge to avoid a possible accusation of dualism. The challenge of Islam increased the efforts of Christian apologists to underscore the cleverness of the Incarnation and the crucifixion. They try to present what seems a fiasco to Muslims as part of a great wise scheme. In order to increase the sense that the Incarnation was the perfection of the ingenious Divine economy the *Jāmi' wujūth al-īmān* and the *Kitāb al-burhān* consistently burnish their expositions with expressions such as *hīmanathu wa husn tadbīrihi*, *tamām 'azīm al-tadbīr*, *wa-llāh ahkam wa 'ahyal*, *ihkām Allāh* and *ihkām al-tawwāhu*.

The parable of the veiled king was presented first of all to illustrate the cleverness of that plan in a simple true-to-life setting. A closer look at it makes us aware of some of its more indirect tactics. By digging into

⁵⁴ H.E.W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption. A study in the Development of Doctrine during the first five centuries* (London, 1952); Chapter 3, 'Christ the Victor and the doctrine of the recapitulation', pp. 47-69.

⁵⁵ Wirling, *Grégoire de Nyssse*, pp. 258-261.

⁵⁶ Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, p. 83; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', p. 422.

⁵⁷ Carali, *Le Christianisme et l'Islam*, p. 92; Nicoll, 'Account of a disputation', p. 426.

the question of why the redemption of mankind happened the way it did, attention is diverted from the question as to whether it happened to start with. Then, paradoxically, the more the parable convinces its sceptical audience that the Incarnation and crucifixion are not contrary to reason the more that audience may regard these as historically true.

Another reason why this parable was told by those who wrote their apologies in the light of the challenge of Islam is to be found in the Qur'an. As noted, Arab Christians had a great predilection for 'veiling metaphors' for the Incarnation. Well-known apologists from the various Christian communities, such as 'Ammār al-Basrī, Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', Abū Rā'ita and Paul of Antioch, all use terms like *hiǧāb* and *iḥiǧāb* in relation to Christ and the Incarnation, as do several of the ex-tant anonymous apologetic treatises.⁵⁸ The Qur'an clearly plays a role in the development of that predilection. In Q 42:51 it is stated that God cannot speak to humans 'except through revelation, *from behind a veil*, or through an apostle who is sent to reveal by His command'.⁵⁹ Some Christian apologists quoted this verse, others referred to it implicitly, but in any case it is clear that they were eager to use this as support for their claim that Christ *was* the veil through which God revealed Himself. Some even go as far as saying that the Incarnation took place because of what is claimed in the Qur'an!⁶⁰ It is obvious that this Qur'anic assertion fuelled the parable of the incognito king.

Perhaps the parable of the incognito king also tries to give a Christian spin on the Qur'anic claim that Christ 'did not disdain to be a servant'.⁶¹ Whereas this is undoubtedly a way of saying that he was of the same nature as other 'servants of God' the parable could visualize that Christ

⁵⁸ For example: Graf, *Habīb ibn Hiḥna Abū Rā'ita*, p. 160; R. Y. Ebied and M. J. L. Young, *The Lamp of the Intellect of Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa', Bishop of al-Ashmūnah*, 2 vols. CSCO, 365-366 (Louvain, 1975), vol. 1, p. 1, p. 11; Hayek, 'Ammār al-Basrī', pp. 68-69; Samir, 'The earliest Arab Apology', p. 92, p. 97, and the references in n. 59 and n. 60 below.

⁵⁹ Mark Swanson discusses the veiling metaphor in the light of Qur'anic 'resonances' in Christian apologetics in 'Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur'an in some early Arabic Christian apologies', *The Muslim World* 88 (1998), pp. 297-318, see pp. 297-302. See also his 'The Cross of Christ in the earliest Arabic Melkite Apologies' in Samir and Nielsen, *Christian Arabic Apologetics*, pp. 115-145, see pp. 126-127, for a discussion of the veiling motif in the Jamī' *wuǧūh al-mān*.

⁶⁰ In the *Jamī' wuǧūh al-mān* and with Paul of Antioch. See: MS BL Or. 4950, f. 114b and Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche*, pp. 72-73 (text), pp. 179-180 (transl.).

⁶¹ Q 4:172: *Lan yastankifa al-nashiḥ al-ḡabra* 'abadan. It is clear that Christian apologists wanted to refute Christ's 'servantship' in general, but am I reading too much into the *Kitāb al-burhān* when I claim that it echoes this verse when it says that Christ 'did not disdain humiliation' (*lan ya'naf al-tawāḍu'*)?; Cachia and Watt, *The Book of Demonstration*, vol. 1, p. 124.

willingly assumed the 'form of a servant' for the sake of the Divine plan.⁶²

And yet, the more one realises that the Qur'an was used to support Christian Arabic apologetics, the more one is surprised to find all these parables. Only God Himself is in the position to make comparisons between the Divine and the perceptible world, the Qur'an clearly states. As one can read in the famous light verse (Q 24:35) and elsewhere in the Qur'an: 'God sets forth parables for man', but Q 16:74 states that humans should not do so, for 'God knows and you do not'.⁶³ We may conclude by way of a *mathal* that the Melkite apologists picked the fruits of their choice from the Qur'an, but methodologically they did not yield to its commandments.

⁶² A passage in the Christian Legend of Bahīrā that echoes our theme is a striking example of the eagerness of Christian apologists to show that the Qur'an agreed with their views. One of its many quotations from the Qur'an is taken from Q 47:20: *Those who believe say, 'Why has a sura not been sent down?' Then when a decisive sura is sent down and therein fighting is mentioned, thou seest those in whose hearts is sickness looking at thee as one who swoons of death. Of this verse the words 'a decisive sura' is quoted in the Legend of Bahīrā, and this is explained as referring to 'a veiled mighty king', *sūra* being read as *sāra* and *mukhama* being interpreted as 'ingenious'. The two words together are apparently associated with the Incarnation and explained by means of the veiling motif; R. Gottheil, 'A Christian Bahira legend', pp. 56-102, see p. 58.*

⁶³ Q 24:35: *wa yadrību 'lāhu 'l-amhāla li-'l-nāsi wa 'lāhu bi-kalīli shay'in 'alimūn* vs. Q 16:74: *fa-lā tadribū li-'lāhi al-amhāla, innā 'lāhu ya'lamu wa antum lā ta'lamūna*.