CHAPTER FIVE

THE QUR’AN AGAINST ISLAM

By means of selecting what at first sight may look like a random miscellany of verses from the Qur’an, the two Arabic versions of the Legend try to corroborate the thesis that the Qur’an has a demonstrable Christian origin and consists of a Christian message that has been gradually adapted to the worldview and the customs of the Arabs. The verses that appear in these versions are selected in such a way as to support these two fundamental claims of the Legend. With some verses one can recognize instantly why they would specifically have been chosen, such as when they express ideas about God and religion which are fully in line with Christian ideas. At other instances, however, this is not the case, and especially in the cases where there is no explanation of the verse in question, the reader has to search elsewhere to understand its relevance. In most cases either Muslim or Christian exegesis of the verse concerned can help us to understand its function in the Legend. Obviously, ‘Muslim exegesis’ refers to the corpus of Qur’an commentaries, tafsírs, in which interpretations of verses of the Qur’an are collected, explained and traced back to specific events in the life of the Prophet, as known from tradition. With regard to the Qur’an, the term ‘Christian exegesis’ is less straightforward and needs to be elucidated. There are no collections of Christian interpretations of Qur’anic verses, and one would not expect them to exist, given that the Qur’an is not considered a divinely revealed Scripture by Christians. However, Christian exegesis of the Qur’an does exist in another form; not in standard collections, but scattered around the many works of Christian Arab and Syriac thinkers who tried to both to understand and to refute Islam. They considered it meaningful to turn to the Qur’an for two reasons: first, to refute Islam’s claims to divine truth; and then, simultaneously, to defend Christian doctrine.¹

¹ Paul Khoury describes this phenomenon in ‘Exégèse chrétienne du Coran’, in id, Matériaux pour servir à l’étude de la controverse, vol. 5.
As one might expect, the efforts of Christian apologists to make sense of the Qur’ān were, unlike those of Muslim exegetes, not aimed at demonstrating the coherence of God’s communication to humankind. The goal of the Christian apologists was rather to show that Islam could not rival Christianity, a task they approached with what has been called a lesser degree of ‘charity’. In connection with reading holy texts the ‘principle of charity’ has been defined as ‘an interpretative method that would yield an optimally successful text’.\(^2\) A text that is part of a canon of Holy Books is read by the members of the community to whom these books belong with the understanding that it is at all times meaningful, consistent and authoritative. Senseless passages and apparent contradictions in the text are therefore harmonized with the higher overarching meaning on which the community in question has reached consensus; for in this way primary doctrines could be safeguarded and the ‘optimal text’ sustained. The principle of charity has been aptly described as a community’s ‘obligation to the text’, which in the case of Sunnī Islam is observable, for example, in the hermeneutics of nāṣīkh and mansūkh, and—somewhat paradoxically—in the Ash‘arī principle of bi-lā kayf. Some of the Qur’ānic passages that required such harmonizing drew the close attention of Christians (and other non-Muslims), who were of course not tied to these charitable hermeneutics and so were inclined to read such verses by recourse to the ṣāhir, i.e. their immediate literal meaning.\(^3\) They could demolish the interpretative structures of tafsīr by simply drawing attention to the plain and obvious meaning of certain Qur’ānic phrases. It needs to be stressed, however, that the hostile readings of the Qur’ān in their writings consisted of more than random disconnected arguments. These readings often had their own specific underlying principles and aims, through which the interpretations of individual verses were bound together. Moreover, Christians developed to some degree a communal consensus on the meaning of the Qur’ān. Both of these aspects of Christian hermeneutics of the Qur’ān can be illustrated here by an example.

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\(^2\) Halbertal, *People of the Book*, p. 27.

\(^3\) For an example of Qur’ānic exegesis of an Arabic-speaking Jew that resembles that of Christian-speaking Arabs, see below, p. 148, n. 63. Vestiges of an early ninth-century Manichean polemical reading of the Qur’ān, attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa’ and quoting several verses which appear in Arabic Christian treatises as well, can be found in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm’s refutation of it: Guidi, *La lotta tra l’Islam e il Manicheismo*. See also Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 2, pp. 29–35 and vol. 5, pp. 104–108.