

On Attributes and Hypostases: Muslim Theology in the Interreligious Writings of Patriarch Timothy I (d. 823)

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As Christians and Muslims encountered each other in the Middle East from the beginning of Islam in the 7th century CE onward, theology was not only a field of setting boundaries to distinguish one's own community from the other but also an area of mutual influence between the communities. This article analyzes two letters of the East Syriac patriarch Timothy I (d. 823), both of which have an apologetic agenda but at the same time demonstrate Timothy's familiarity with the Muslim intellectual milieu of his day. To defend the Christian doctrine of the Trinity against Muslim objections, Timothy made reference to the Islamic doctrine of divine attributes. He used relational attributes which consist of a subject, an act, and an object to show that there must be a certain plurality as well as relationships between the subjects, acts, and objects of the divine attributes. These relationships serve Timothy as a proof for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. In this article, Timothy's arguments and the teachings he ascribed to his Muslim counterparts are compared with what modern scholars have reconstructed about the teachings of Muslim thinkers from Timothy's period; so far, such comparisons have been done for Christian Arabic writings more commonly than for Syriac ones. The result of this comparison shows that the positions of Timothy's Muslim counterparts approximate very closely the ideas of the Mu'tazilite Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf. Thus, based on their content, it is possible to connect Timothy's letters to the teachings of a concrete person among Muslim intellectuals of the period or to circles where Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf seems to have been somehow involved.

Keywords: eighth century; ninth century; theology; Christianity; Islam; Christian-Muslim relations; Middle East; Church of the East; Patriarch Timothy I; Mu'tazila; Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf

Syriac-speaking Christians were among the first Christians who encountered Muslims in the medieval Middle East. Several scholars have already observed what can be gained from comparing the theological treatises of Syriac authors from the early Islamic period with the thoughts of their Muslim contemporaries. In 1994, Ulrich Rudolph stated, regarding the mutual exchange between Muslim and Christian theologians during the first centuries of Islam,

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that a comparison of the particular theology has to carve out the parallels and the points of contact. Such a comparison, according to Rudolph, is still a desideratum such that modern researchers are less than well-informed about the fruitful contacts between Islam and Christianity in the Middle East.¹ With respect to the West Syriac theologian Moses bar Kephā (d. 903 CE), Rudolph realized that he had »an intimate knowledge of the theology that was done by the Muʿtazilites during his lifetime«.² The Muʿtazilite movement within Islamic theology is often described as »rationalism« in modern research because the Muʿtazilites accepted the human intellect (*ʿaql*) as one basis of their teachings.³ The Muʿtazila is of special interest for the topic of this article, since the »history of Islamic theology during the second and third centuries of the Muslim era (8.-9. century AD) is primarily a history of the Muʿtazila«.⁴

In the context of his edition of the disputation of the East Syriac patriarch Timothy I (d. 823) with Caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-785) published in 2011, Martin Heimgartner considers it as gainful to analyze »the cross-references of the disputation to Islamic intellectual history«.⁵ According to Heimgartner, the historical references of the whole genre of literary debates to the different steps in the development of the history of Islamic theology, especially the correlations with the rise of the Muʿtazila, are of utmost importance.⁶ Barbara Roggema offers an initial insight on the subject matter in an article published in 2016, in which she describes the aim of her analysis of Syriac disputation texts as being »to understand to what extent the apologists were aware of their opponents' religious background, and especially if they knew about the development of the debates and controversies in the circles of the Muslim intellectuals«.⁷ However, an in-depth comparison of the Christian authors' theological arguments developed in Syriac with the doctrines of Muslim theologians of the same period is still missing.

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- 1 »Eine vergleichende Betrachtung der jeweiligen Theologie [...], die Parallelen und systematische Anknüpfungspunkte herausarbeiten müßte, steht im wesentlichen noch aus. Somit kommt man wohl nicht umhin, festzuhalten, daß wir ausgerechnet über die fruchtbaren Berührungen zwischen dem Islam und dem orientalischen Christentum bisher am wenigsten orientiert sind«; Rudolph, *Christliche Bibelexegese*, 300.
 - 2 »Moses bar Kephā, der Jakobit und syrische Bischof von Mosul, besaß eine intime Kenntnis der Theologie, die von den Muʿtaziliten zu seinen Lebzeiten vorgetragen wurde«; Rudolph, *Christliche Bibelexegese*, 312. All translations of primary sources in Syriac or Arabic and of secondary literature in German or French are the author's own unless otherwise noted.
 - 3 About the Muʿtazila, see the three articles in Schmidtke (ed.), *Handbook*, 130-180, as well as Jakob, *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam*, 230-233.
 - 4 Van Ess, *Wrongdoing and divine omnipotence*, 53.
 - 5 »Von grossem Interesse sind die Querbezüge der Disputation zur islamischen Geistesgeschichte [...]«; Heimgartner's introduction in Timothy I, *Disputation with al-Mahdī*, trans. Heimgartner, CSCO 632, L.
 - 6 »In diesem Zusammenhang ist nicht nur die Stellung der Disputation im Rahmen der christlich-muslimischen Kontroversliteratur überaus bedeutend, sondern auch, wie die gesamte Kontroversliteratur in historischen Interdependenzen zu den verschiedenen Stufen der Entwicklung der islamischen Theologiegeschichte steht. Insbesondere wären die Zusammenhänge mit dem Aufstieg der Muʿtazila herauszuarbeiten«; Heimgartner's introduction in Timothy I, *Disputation with al-Mahdī*, trans. Heimgartner, CSCO 632, L-LI.
 - 7 »Il s'agira en fait de regarder de plus près une grande partie des exemples conservés de ce genre, afin de comprendre dans quelle mesure les apologistes avaient connaissance de l'arrière-plan religieux de leurs opposants, et plus particulièrement s'ils étaient au courant des évolutions du débat et des controverses au sein des cercles savants musulmans«; Roggema, *Pour une lecture*, 262-263.

The present article contributes to filling this gap by comparing two letters of the East Syriac patriarch Timothy I, both containing disputations with Muslims, with what we know about the teachings of Muslim theologians from the eighth and ninth centuries. Timothy was patriarch of the Church of the East, also known as the East Syriac Church, from 780 until his death in 823.⁸ He was probably born around the year 740 in Ḥazzā (Iraq). His uncle Gīwargīs was bishop of Bēt Baghāsh and was also responsible for Timothy's education. Timothy visited the famous East Syriac school of Bāshōsh where texts of Greek philosophers and church fathers were studied. This education was the basis of Timothy's later career in his church. Around 770, Timothy was ordained bishop and succeeded his uncle as bishop of Bēt Baghāsh. In 779, he was elected as patriarch of the Church of the East. Timothy was ordained to his new office in the following year. Although his election to the patriarchy was controversial in the beginning, Timothy remained in office for a long period, until his death in 823. Apparently, he continued to consider himself patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon even after relocating his patriarchal residence to the newly founded Abbasid capital, Baghdad. Furthermore, he maintained close contact with the caliphs of the Abbasid dynasty. Together with Abū Nūh al-Anbarī, Timothy accomplished an Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Topics*, which was commissioned by Caliph al-Mahdī. Among Timothy's 59 letters that have come down to us, five letters are devoted to the theological debate with Islam, namely, Letters 34-36, 40 (disputation with a Muslim Aristotelian), and 59 (disputation with Caliph al-Mahdī). For the present purpose, the disputations of Letters 40 and 59 are of interest. The disputation with al-Mahdī was composed in 782 or 783; the disputation with a Muslim Aristotelian must have been written slightly earlier. The other three letters (Letters 34-36) do not reproduce actual disputations with Muslims, but are dedicated to the question of how Jesus can be called »servant« in a Muslim context.⁹ As they do not show the same familiarity with the debates of Muslim intellectuals as Letters 40 and 59, the present article focuses on the latter two only.

The enterprise of comparing Christian apologetics vis-à-vis Islam from the two letters of Patriarch Timothy with teachings of contemporary Muslim theologians has to deal with several challenges. First and foremost, very little is known about the thoughts and doctrines of Muslim theologians, especially those of the Mu'tazila, from the period in question. Almost no written works of these Muslim theologians have survived. All we know about them derives from later books and treatises in which other authors described their thoughts and doctrines. These accounts were, of course, far from what we would call an objective representation of the original authors and their ideas. Nevertheless, these works »often offer us astonishingly precise and informative compilations of notions disseminated among Muslim theologians (partly also of theologians of different faiths)«. ¹⁰ The Muslim authors whose accounts about the teachings of earlier theologians are particularly of interest for the topic of this article are

8 For a brief introduction on Timothy and his writings about Islam, see Jakob, *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam*, 73-86. The currently most comprehensive study about Timothy is Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I*.

9 For a detailed analysis of Timothy's argument in Letters 34-36, see Jakob, *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam*, 472-484.

10 »Derartige häresiographische (gegen Irrlehren gerichtete) Werke, deren Hauptzweck war, die falschen Ansichten anderer Gruppen zu protokollieren und gegebenenfalls die richtigen Ansichten der eigenen Gruppe dagegenzustellen, sind im islamischen Mittelalter in großer Anzahl verfasst worden und bieten uns vielfach erstaunlich präzise und informationsreiche Aufstellungen von unter muslimischen (teils auch andersgläubigen) Theologen verbreiteten Ansichten«; Berger, *Islamische Theologie*, 31.

Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Ismā‘īl al-Ash‘arī (d. 935) and Abū l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Aḥmad al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153). It is possible, therefore, to reconstruct at least parts of the teachings of Muslim theologians from the eighth and ninth centuries from these later works. It is outside the present paper’s scope to attempt such a reconstruction. Instead, I will refer to other studies in which several experts have already contributed to the reconstruction of early Islamic thought. The most important study to mention here is of course Josef van Ess’s voluminous work.¹¹

One aspect of Islamic theology that appears in Syriac authors’ defenses of the Trinity from the end of the eighth century onwards is that of the so-called divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*).¹² The Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the Islamic teaching on divine attributes have in common that they both assume a certain plurality within God.¹³ Hence, the doctrine of divine attributes provided a link for the Christian apologists. Harry Austryn Wolfson (1887-1974) even went so far as to suggest that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was the origin of the Islamic doctrine of divine attributes.¹⁴ Carl Heinrich Becker (1876-1933) thought that »Christian apologetics was also responsible for introducing into Islam the issue of divine attributes (*ṣifāt*)«.¹⁵ Current research insights contradict these hypotheses by earlier generations of scholars. Farid Suleiman, for instance, states: »The controversy about the attributes of God is probably as old as Islam itself.«¹⁶ However, these controversies about the divine attributes took a prominent position in Islamic theology only from the ninth century onward.¹⁷

As a matter of fact, the origin of the Islamic doctrine of the divine attributes seems to be the divine names in the Quran.¹⁸ While the concept of divine attributes is not mentioned in the Quran, the Quran describes God with the so-called »beautiful names« (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*).¹⁹ Based on these names, Islamic tradition developed lists of the »99 beautiful names«, to which *Allāh* was, by some accounts, added as the highest name (*al-ism al-a‘ẓam*) of God.²⁰ Many Muslims do seem to have considered *Allāh* as the highest name of God, although the

11 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*; van Ess, *Theology and Society*.

12 Concerning the *ṣifāt Allāh* in Islamic theology, see Gilliot, *Attributes of God*.

13 With regard to Islamic theology, see van Ess, *Name Gottes*, 165: »Den islamischen Theologen ging es immer in erster Linie darum, wie man von Gott etwas aussagen kann, wenn er gleichzeitig unerkennbar und einzig ist. Die Namen versuchen das Unerkennbare erkennbar zu machen, und die Eigenschaften, die mit ihnen ausgedrückt werden, tragen eine Vielheit in die Einheit des göttlichen Wesens hinein.«

14 Wolfson, *Muslim attributes*; Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam*, 112-132. A more recent consideration of this theory can be found in Dziri, *Al-Ġuwaynīs Position*, 72-74.

15 Becker, *Christian polemic*, 251.

16 »Der Streit um die Attribute Gottes ist wohl fast so alt wie der Islam selbst«; Suleiman, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 41.

17 Thus, Sabine Schmidtke assumes that the attributes of God hardly played a role in the seventh and eighth centuries; Schmidtke, *Rationale Theologie*, 170.

18 Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*, 10-11.

19 Quran 7.180; for the quranic verses with the »beautiful names« of God, see Khoury, *Themenkonkordanz*, 2-6.

20 Böwering, *God and his attributes*, 317-322; Gardet, *al-Asmā’ al-ḥusnā*; Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 51-83 (each with lists of the divine names).

highest name was generally believed to be unknown or unexpressed.²¹ Seen from a philological point of view, this interpretation is indeed problematic since *Allāh* is not a proper name but a contraction of the definite article (*al-*) and the Arabic word for »God« or »deity« (*ilāh*). Thus, *al-ilāh* becomes *Allāh*, denoting simply »the God« that is, the *one* God.²² According to Islamic theology, the divine names are propositions about the characteristics of God.²³

Muslim theologians used the Arabic term *ṣifa* (»attribute«, pl. *ṣifāt*) for »any qualifier applied to God«. ²⁴ According to Michel Allard, there are two characteristics of the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the divine attributes. On the one hand, the Mu'tazilites accepted adjectives and participles as divine attributes, but they rejected the corresponding substantives as divine attributes.²⁵ Thus, the Mu'tazilites matched the Arabic grammarians' usage of the word *ṣifa*: the grammarians used the term *ṣifa* to denote the forms of the active participle (*ism al-fā'il*) and the passive participle (*ism al-maf'ūl*) and the different forms of adjectives.²⁶ On the other hand, the Mu'tazilites differentiated between the attributes of essence (*ṣifāt al-dhāt* or *ṣifāt al-nafs*) and the attributes of action (*ṣifāt al-fi'l*). It was the Mu'tazilites' conviction that God could not be described with the opposite of his attributes of essence, that is, it was impossible for the Mu'tazilites that God ever existed without these predications. Hence, God's attributes of essence must be eternal. The attributes of action, by contrast, describe not God himself but rather his actions in time and space. Accordingly, the attributes of action are temporally determined and do not belong to God eternally.²⁷ Therefore, the existence of the attributes of action depends on their objects.²⁸ However, the differentiation between attributes of essence and attributes of action was not at first a given for the Mu'tazila. According to Josef van Ess, it was not until the Mu'tazilites Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad al-Iskāfi (d. 854) and Abū Mūsā 'Isā b. al-Haytham al-Ṣūfi (d. 859) that the differentiation between *ṣifāt al-dhāt* and *ṣifāt al-fi'l* had established itself.²⁹ Thus, the doctrine of the *ṣifāt al-dhāt* and the *ṣifāt al-fi'l* seems to have spread in the Mu'tazila from the middle of the ninth century onward.³⁰

21 Van Ess, *Name Gottes*, 174; Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 89-90. There were, however, also adherents to other theories concerning the highest name of God; see Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 85-94.

22 Van Ess, *Name Gottes*, 156; Schumann, *Christus der Muslime*, 9; for the different theories of the Muslim theologians concerning this matter, see Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 121-131.

23 Van Ess, *Name Gottes*, 163.

24 Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, 235 (»tout qualificatif appliqué à Dieu«).

25 Allard, *Le problème des attributs divins*, 115.

26 Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, 235.

27 Allard, *Le problème des attributs divins*, 115-116; see also Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, 236; Pretzl, *Früh-islamische Attributenlehre*, 9-10.

28 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 4, 443; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 4, 497.

29 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 4, 443; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 4, 496-497.

30 Suleiman, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 88.

It was also van Ess who noted that the differentiation between attributes of essence and attributes of action was introduced to Christian Arabic theology almost at the same time to distinguish the three hypostases of the Trinity from the other predicates of God.³¹ The Christian Arabic scholars who adopted the differentiation in this period were the miaphysite Abū Rā'īṭa (d. c. 830) and the East Syriac scholar 'Ammār al-Baṣrī (d. around the middle of the ninth century), but not the Melkite Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 820).³² Among the Christian apologists writing in Syriac during this period, the East Syriac patriarch Timothy (d. 823) and the miaphysite archdeacon Nonnus of Nisibis (d. after 862) resorted to the Islamic doctrine of the divine attributes.³³ But only the latter of these two Syriac scholars referred to the differentiation between the attributes of essence and the attributes of action.³⁴

The usage of the Islamic doctrine of divine attributes by Christian Arabic apologists who defended their faith against Islam has received some attention among modern scholars.³⁵ Sidney H. Griffith, for instance, highlights that

A centrepiece of Arab Christian theology in the first 'Abbāsīd century was the undertaking to demonstrate the credibility of the doctrine of the Trinity in Arabic terms that figured in the burgeoning systematic theology of the contemporary Muslim *mutakallimūn* about the ontological status of the divine attributes.³⁶

An analysis of the Syriac sources has so far been tackled only cursorily, compared to research about how the doctrine of divine attributes was used in Christian Arabic sources.³⁷ David Thomas supposed that the East Syriac scholar 'Ammār al-Baṣrī went further in his Arabic *Kitāb al-burhān* than Patriarch Timothy did by using contemporary patterns of argumentation from Muslim theologians to demonstrate Christian doctrine.³⁸ However, Thomas takes only Timothy's disputation with Caliph al-Mahdī into consideration,³⁹ not Timothy's other writings which are relevant for this topic. Indeed, Timothy was the first Syriac writer who made use of the Islamic doctrine of the divine attributes for his apologetic concern, especially in his disputation with a Muslim Aristotelian in Letter 40.

31 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 4, 437; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 4, 489-490.

32 For the references to the relevant passages in the works of these Christian Arabic writers, see Jakob, *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam*, 355 n. 668.

33 For a detailed analysis of Timothy's and Nonnus's references to the Islamic doctrine of the divine attributes, see Jakob, *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam*, 352-407.

34 Jakob, *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam*, 397-399.

35 See, e.g., Griffith, *Doing Christian theology*, 157-171; Griffith, *Unity and Trinity of God*, 13-27; Haddad, *La Trinité divine*, 188-233; Husseinī, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate*, 64-67 (Theodore Abū Qurra), 88-97 (Abū Rā'īṭa), 115-120, 131-136 ('Ammār al-Baṣrī), 181-186; Landron, *Chrétiens et Musulmans*, 170-177; Rissanen, *Theological Encounter*, 112-163; Thomas, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 88-91; Varsányi, *Christian terminology*.

36 Griffith, *Christian theological thought*, 96.

37 See, e.g., Cheikho, *Dialectique du langage*, 128-152 (Letter 40 of the East Syriac patriarch Timothy). Brief hints about arguments involving the doctrine of divine attributes in Timothy's Letter 40 are also offered by Griffith, *Syriac letters*, 110-111; Hurst, *Syriac Letters*, 129-133, 170-173; Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 82; Rissanen, *Theological Encounter*, 134-135. Concerning the doctrine of the divine attributes in the *Apologetic Treatise* of Nonnus of Nisibis, see Griffith, *Apologetic treatise*, 123-124; Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 95; Van Roey, *Nonnus de Nisibe*, 56. The first more detailed study of the usage of the doctrine of divine attributes in Syriac sources is Jakob, *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam*, 352-407, 504-513 (the present article is a slightly abridged English version of a part of this study).

38 Thomas, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 89.

39 Thomas, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 82-83.

Timothy's Muslim Counterparts and Abū l-Hudhayl on the Divine Attributes

In what follows, the interpretation of divine attributes as part of the apology for Christianity in Patriarch Timothy I's disputation with a Muslim Aristotelian (Letter 40) and in his disputation with Caliph al-Mahdī (Letter 59) is analyzed. This section demonstrates that Timothy's Muslim interlocutors in both letters connect the divine attributes to the nature of God, which very much resembles what is known about the position of the Mu'tazilite Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf. In the following section, a special triad of relational attributes in Timothy's Letter 40 is compared to a similar teaching ascribed to Abū l-Hudhayl bringing further entities (such as the objects of the attributes) into the discussion about the divine attributes. The fact that the attributes as well as the entities connected to them were at least partly considered to be eternal provided the basis for Timothy's argument in favor of the Trinity, and this is analyzed in the final section.

It becomes obvious that in Timothy's Letters 40 and 59 he is dealing with an understanding of the divine attributes held by the Mu'tazilites. In Timothy's well-known disputation with al-Mahdī, the caliph argues that the divine attributes belong »truly, according to nature, and eternally to God«. ⁴⁰ Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf (d. between 840 and 850) was a Mu'tazilite who solved the problem of the compatibility of monotheism with the divine attributes in a similar way as al-Mahdī in the disputation with Timothy. Abū l-Hudhayl came to the court in Baghdad during the reign of Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833). ⁴¹ Although he arrived later at the caliphal court than Timothy, the latter might have known certain teachings of Abū l-Hudhayl or his circle, since his Letter 34 shows that he was in contact with the Christian community in Basra where Abū l-Hudhayl lived before he came to Baghdad. ⁴² Even if the exact connection between Abū l-Hudhayl and Timothy remains unclear, there seem to be parallels between what we know about Abū l-Hudhayl's teachings and the arguments of Timothy's Muslim counterparts in Letters 40 and 59. At the least, we know that Abū l-Hudhayl was engaged in theological discussions with Christians, since he wrote a book against 'Ammār al-Baṣrī entitled *Kitāb 'alā 'Ammār al-Naṣrānī fī l-radd 'alā l-Naṣārā*, which is not preserved. ⁴³ According to van Ess, Abū l-Hudhayl was also the first Mu'tazilite who developed a teaching of the divine attributes which was more than a *theologia negativa*. ⁴⁴ Abū l-Hudhayl considered all divine attributes as attributes of God himself, for he aimed to preserve the absolute unity of God (*al-tawḥīd*).

We have several short reports by al-Ash'arī (d. 935) about Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching concerning the divine attributes. In one of these reports, al-Ash'arī describes Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching as follows:

40 Timothy I, *Disputation with al-Mahdī*, 17.7, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 631, 120 (Syriac).

41 For the biography of Abū l-Hudhayl, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 3, 210-219; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 3, 226-237.

42 Timothy I, *Letter 34*, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 661, 13 (Syriac).

43 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 3, 275-276; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 3, 297; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 5, 367; Griffith, *Concept of al-uqūm*, 170.

44 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 3, 272; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 3, 293; see further Nagel, *Geschichte der islamischen Theologie*, 105-107.

He [God] is knowing by a knowledge that is He, and He is powerful by a power that is He, and He is living by a life that is He, and similarly he [Abū al-Hudhayl] speaks of His hearing, His sight, His eternity and His forgiveness and His might and His exaltedness and His greatness and of the rest of the attributes of His essence [...].⁴⁵

These theologians' discussions of God's attributes had much to do with the particulars of Arabic grammar. The Quran describes (*waṣāfa*) God with names (*asmā'*) and attributes or adjectives (*ṣifāt*).⁴⁶ Obviously, Abū l-Hudhayl was aware of the fact that the Quran does not just ascribe the characteristics to God in the form of adjectives, but also as nouns. Therefore, one was able to predicate of God not only the names as adjectives (such as *al-ʿālim*, »the knowing«), but also the corresponding substantives (*ʿilm*, »knowledge«).⁴⁷ This position must be regarded against the background of Abū l-Hudhayl's contemporary theological debates, which were influenced by Arabic grammar.⁴⁸ Among the Arabic grammarians of the eighth century, the term *ṣifa* (pl. *ṣifāt*) denotes the »syntactic attribution of a word as a qualifying attribute for another word [...], with which it coincides morphologically«. ⁴⁹ As such a description (*waṣf*), a *ṣifa* such as *ʿālim* refers to a noun (*ism*, pl. *asmā'*) such as *ʿilm* which it characterizes. Besides the attributes, adjectives also serve as descriptions so that the word *ṣifa* also became a denomination for adjectives.⁵⁰ The grammarians assumed that verbal forms and verbal adjectives derive from verbal substantives (*maṣādir*, sg. *maṣdar*), and that these nouns denote entities. Thus, Muslim theologians considered it a challenge that the nominalization of divine attributes, which implies corresponding substantives, does not lead to deiform entities, thereby threatening the unity of God (*tawḥīd*).⁵¹ It was precisely this weak point which Christian theologians exploited: »The fact that in Arabic grammar the *ṣifāt* imply nouns (*maṣādir*), and the fact that nouns name entities, prompted the Christian apologists to draw comparisons between *ṣifāt* and hypostases.«⁵²

In the light of these discussions, Abū l-Hudhayl wanted to protect the perfect unity of God by identifying the substantives connected to the attributes with God himself. Richard M. Frank summarized this aim of Abū l-Hudhayl as follows:

45 English translation of al-Ash'arī quoted from Husseini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate*, 33; see al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, 165, ll. 5-7 (Arabic).

46 Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*, 10.

47 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 3, 272; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 3, 294; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 4, 441-442; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 4, 495-496.

48 On the term *ṣifa* in the Arabic grammatical tradition and its relevance for the doctrine of *ṣifāt Allāh*, see also Versteegh, *Ṣifa*; Gilliot, *Attributes of God*.

49 Diem, *Nomen, Substantiv und Adjektiv*, 314: »Der Terminus *ṣifa* [...] geht von der syntaktischen Zuordnung eines Wortes als qualifizierendes („beschreibendes“) Attribut zu einem anderen Wort hin aus, mit dem es morphologisch kongruiert [...]«.«

50 Diem, *Nomen, Substantiv und Adjektiv*, 314-315, 326.

51 Griffith, Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rā'īṭah, 177.

52 Griffith, Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rā'īṭah, 177.

[...] abū l-Hudhayl's aim [...] was to describe God as absolutely one in the perfect unity of His being, so that, although we speak of the perfections or attributes of His being and predicate them of Him as truly belonging to Him, what is signified by the attribute is precisely God Himself in the perfection which is His being: *nomina significant substantiam divinam et praedicantur de Deo substantialiter*. In brief, he wanted to affirm the ontological reality of the attributes which the *Koran* gives to God (which God gives Himself, in Muslim terms) without implying any division or plurality in His being.⁵³

Further examples of Abū l-Hudhayl's teachings about the divine attributes are included in al-Ash'arī's work: »[Abū l-Hudhayl said] the same about the rest of the attributes which are ascribed to him because of himself. He said: They are the Creator, as he said about the knowledge and the power.«⁵⁴ What is more, Abū l-Hudhayl thought of »a hearing which is God himself« and »a seeing which is God himself«.⁵⁵ In his *Kitāb al-shajara*, Abū Tammām confirmed in the tenth century that the followers of Abū l-Hudhayl identified the attributes with God himself:

Again, they insist that God's knowledge is God and likewise God's power is God; and that what God knows has a total and sum and whatever God has power over is limited whether it becomes actual or not.⁵⁶

According to al-Ash'arī, Abū l-Hudhayl borrowed the idea of the divine attributes' identity with God himself »from Aristotle«.⁵⁷ Josef van Ess, however, is not convinced that Abū l-Hudhayl really relied on Aristotle in this matter.⁵⁸ It is not possible to reconstruct the exact origins of Abū l-Hudhayl's teachings, because several sources might fit.⁵⁹ Several centuries later, al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) blamed Abū l-Hudhayl for defining the divine attributes like the »hypostases of the Christians«, if he understood the attributes as aspects of God's essence: »If Abū l-Hudhayl considers these attributes to be aspects of the essence, then they are the hypostases of the Christians or the states of Abū Hāshim.«⁶⁰

Coming back to Timothy, his statement that the divine attributes, according to al-Mahdī, belong »truly, according to nature, and eternally to God« corresponds to the teaching of the Mu'tazilite Abū l-Hudhayl, according to which the attributes equate with God himself. In Timothy's Letter 40, his Muslim interlocutor holds the same view as al-Mahdī. After listing a few of the divine attributes, the Muslim in Letter 40 states: »If every nature shows itself through that which it is, and God is all these [attributes], then these are references to the nature of God.«⁶¹ According to the Muslim disputant in Letter 40, the divine attributes are identical to the nature of God: every nature – including God's nature – shows itself through

53 Frank, *Divine attributes*, 459.

54 Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, 177, ll. 14-15 (Arabic).

55 Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, 174, ll. 2-3 (Arabic).

56 Abū Tammām, *Kitāb al-shajara*, trans. Madelung and Walker, 31.

57 Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, 485, ll. 7-9 (Arabic).

58 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 5, 395-396 (commentary on text 63, e).

59 Frank, *Divine attributes*, 455-459.

60 Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal*, ed. Cureton, 34, ll. 19-20 (Arabic).

61 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 3.2, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 13-14 (Syriac).

that which it is. Therefore, the predications are identical to the nature. This equation of the divine attributes with God himself was an ideal starting point for Timothy to defend the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, for he was able to interpret the attributes as plurality and as self-references within God's essence. While Abū l-Hudhayl aimed to secure the Muslim understanding of the unity of God through his teaching about the divine attributes, Timothy used this teaching for his reasoning for a plurality within God himself, without questioning the unity of God.

The Triad of Relational Attributes in Timothy's Letter 40 and in Abū l-Hudhayl's Teachings

For his defense of the Trinity in Letter 40, Timothy makes use of the attributes that his Muslim counterpart mentioned,⁶² which are seeing, hearing, knowledge, and wisdom. Timothy distinguishes between three categories regarding each of these four attributes:⁶³

| | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| the hearer (ܟܠܘܬܐ) | the object which is heard (ܟܠܘܬܐܬܐ) | the hearing (ܟܠܘܬܐ) |
| the seer (ܟܠܘܫܐ) | the object which is seen (ܟܠܘܫܐܬܐ) | the seeing (ܟܠܘܫܐ) |
| the knower (ܟܠܘܡܐ) | the object which is known (ܟܠܘܡܐܬܐ) | the knowledge (ܟܠܘܡܐ) |
| the wise one (ܟܠܘܫܘܬܐ) | the object of wisdom (ܟܠܘܫܘܬܐܬܐ) | the wisdom (ܟܠܘܫܘܬܐ) |

The last category (hearing/seeing/knowledge/wisdom) in the right column of the chart is located between (ܟܠܘܫܐ, ܟܠܘܫܐܬܐ, and ܟܠܘܫܐܬܐ) the other two categories. The Christian Arabic writer Abū Rā'īṭa also mentions such relational attributes (*al-asmā' al-muḏāfa al-mansūba ilā ghayrihā*):

As for the predicative names, [they] are related to something else, just as »knower« and »knowledge« [are related to each other], »seer« and »seeing«, »wise« and »wisdom«, and anything similar to this. So the knower is knowing through knowledge, and the knowledge is knowledge of a knower. And the wise person is wise through wisdom, and the wisdom is wisdom of a wise person.⁶⁴

These attributes are relational because they are in relationship with something else. According to Martin Heimgartner, the basis of Timothy's reasoning is the Syriac *Isagoge* (εἰσαγωγή/ܟܠܘܫܘܬܐܬܐ), the »Introduction« to Aristotelian logic and syllogistics by the West Syriac patriarch Athanasius of Balad (d. 687).⁶⁵ Athanasius developed the relevant passage from Aristotle's *Categories* one step further by introducing a »knower« to the knowledge and the object which is known:

62 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 3.2, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 13 (Syriac).

63 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 3.5, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 14-15 (Syriac).

64 Abū Rā'īṭa, *Al-risālat al-awwala*, trans. Keating, 177, 179.

65 Heimgartner, *Griechisches Wissen*, 107-108.

| Aristotle, <i>Categories</i> 6b,28-36 | Athanasius of Balad |
|--|---|
| All relatives [τὰ πρὸς τι] are spoken of in relation to correlatives that reciprocate. For example, the slave is called slave of a master and the master is called master of a slave; the double double of a half, and the half half of a double; the larger larger than a smaller, and the smaller smaller than a larger; and so for the rest too. Sometimes, however, there will be a verbal difference, of ending. Thus knowledge is called knowledge <i>of</i> what is knowable, and what is knowable knowable <i>by</i> knowledge; perception perception <i>of</i> the perceptible, and the perceptible perceptible <i>by</i> perception. ⁶⁶ | But »these in relation to something« (ܐܘܬܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܐ [...] = Syriac technical term for »relatives«/τὰ πρὸς τι) are the relationship of two, each one of them being what it is because it is said to belong to something else. Thus, something is called double when it belongs to something else, for it is the double of a half, and likewise the half is the half of a double. The servant is the servant of a lord, and the lord is the lord of a servant, and the possession [is the possession] of a possessor, and knowledge is the knowledge of a knower, and the known is known by knowledge. In short, every one of them is constantly in relation to another. For the father is called father of a son, and likewise the son is the son of a father. ⁶⁷ |

Hence, both Aristotle and Athanasius speak of a knowledge (ἐπιστήμη in Greek, ܐܘܠܡܐ in Syriac), and both have an object of knowledge which Aristotle calls that »what is knowable« (ἐπιστητὸν), while Athanasius names it »the known« (ܐܘܠܡܐ). Athanasius adds »the knower« (ܐܘܠܡܐܝܢ) to these two relational entities. Thus, Athanasius has the triad »knower – (act of) knowledge – object which is known«, which reminds us of the triad »intellect (νοῦς) – thinking (or act of intellection, νόησις) – object of thought or intellection (νοητὸν or νοούμενον)« in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.⁶⁸ Since Aristotle’s *Categories* was very popular among the Syriac Christians⁶⁹ and no Syriac translation of the *Metaphysics* is known⁷⁰ or at least did not exist before the ninth century,⁷¹ it is likely that Timothy drew from Athanasius of Balad. Nevertheless, since Timothy was doubtless acquainted with the Greek language,⁷² he could have read the original. In any case, the triad of Athanasius of Balad appears again in Timothy’s Letter 40.

66 Aristotle, *Categories* 6b28-36, trans. Ackrill, 18.

67 For the Syriac text, see Furlani, *Contributi alla storia*, 725, l. 11-726, l. 1.

68 In chapter 7 of *Metaphysics* book Λ, Aristotle writes: »And thinking in itself is of what is best in itself, and the highest kind of thinking is of the highest kind of what is best. And it is itself which the intellect thinks, by sharing in the object of thought; for <intellect> comes to be an object of thought in touching and thinking <it>, so that the intellect and the object of thought are the same«; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072b,18-21, trans. Judson, 32. Aristotle returns to this line of thought in chapter 9: »Since what is thought [*tau noumenou*] and the intellect are not, then, different, in respect of things which have no matter, <they> will be the same thing; and its thinking [*hē noēsis*] <will be> one with what is thought [*tōi noumenōi*]«; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1075a,3-5, trans. Judson, 38-39.

69 King, *Syriac Translation*, 18-29.

70 Daiber, *Aristotelesrezeption*, 343.

71 Watt, *Syriac translators*, 21.

72 Heimgartner, *Griechisches Wissen*.

Timothy not only dwells on knowledge together with the subject and object connected to it, but also refers to further attributes of God connected to a subject and an object. Timothy seems to adapt Athanasius of Balad's reception and interpretation of Aristotle to the Muslim teaching of the divine attributes. Josef van Ess assumed that Timothy's Letter 40 includes echoes of the teachings on the divine attributes by ʿAṣṣā b. ʿAmr or Abū l-Hudhayl.⁷³ However, it seems that van Ess did not know the text of Letter 40.⁷⁴ The Muʿtazilite ʿAṣṣā b. ʿAmr lived between 728 and 796,⁷⁵ which means that his lifetime would fit the date of Timothy's Letter 40 well. According to van Ess, ʿAṣṣā's knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy was limited to the *Categories*, and Aristotle and his writings should not be considered the starting point of ʿAṣṣā's reasoning.⁷⁶ Furthermore, van Ess's reconstruction of ʿAṣṣā's teachings⁷⁷ does not evince any reasoning that might be comparable to that of Timothy in Letter 40. Regarding ʿAṣṣā's opinion on the characteristics of God, it is only known that he believed that God's names in the Quran should not be understood in a terrestrial manner.⁷⁸

Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching on the divine attributes, however, does differentiate between subject, act, and object, which reminds us of Timothy's reasoning in Letter 40. Al-Ashʿarī recapitulates Abū l-Hudhayl's position as follows:

If I said that God is knowing, I affirm of Him a knowledge which is God and I deny of God ignorance and I indicate [an object] which is, was, or will be known. And if I said powerful, I deny weakness of God and affirm of Him a power, which is God, be He praised, and I indicate [an object] which is decreed, and if I said God is living, I affirm of Him life, which is God, and deny of God death.⁷⁹

Hence, according to Abū l-Hudhayl, God is knowing (*ʿālim*) with knowledge or an act of knowledge (*ʿilm*) and an object of knowledge (*maʿlūm*) as well as powerful (*qādir*) with power (*qudra*) and an object of power (*maqḍūr*). Evidently al-Shahrastānī had already noticed the closeness of Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. However, al-Shahrastānī also recognized the difference between Abū l-Hudhayl and Aristotle:

73 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 4, 441; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 4, 495.

74 Concerning Timothy's Letter 40, van Ess refers only to Griffith, Prophet Muḥammad, 101 (van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 4, 441 n. 8; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 4, 495 n. 8). Griffith, however, in the publication to which van Ess refers, declares only that Timothy's Letter 40 was by then still unedited. Afterwards, he explains: »It is quite evident in this letter that Timothy is fully conversant with the current debates among the Muslim *mutakallimūn*. For example, he takes advantage of their concern with the divine attributes, to suggest that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity furnishes the only adequate approach to the description of God.« Since Griffith does not add further details of Timothy's statements on the Islamic doctrine of divine attributes, one has to assume that van Ess did not know the text of Letter 40. He was probably only making a deduction from Griffith's rather scanty statements to Muslim theologians of Timothy's period.

75 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 3, 32-33; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 3, 34-35.

76 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 3, 37; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 3, 40.

77 See van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 3, 35-59; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 3, 37-64; as well as the texts in van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 5, 229-251.

78 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 3, 37-38; van Ess, *Theology and Society* 3, 40; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 5, 240 (texts 23 and 24).

79 English translation of al-Ashʿarī quoted from Husseini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate*, 33-34; see al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, 165, ll. 8-11 (Arabic).

Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf walked in the highroads of the philosophers and said that the Creator⁸⁰ is knowing in virtue of a knowledge which is He himself, [...] but His self is not to be called knowledge after the manner of the philosophers who say that He is the act of intellection (‘*ākīl* = νόησις), the intellect (‘*aql* = νοῦς), and the object of intellection (‘*ma’qūl* = νοούμενον).⁸¹

The triad act of intellection (‘*ākīl*), intellect (‘*aql*), and object of intellection (‘*ma’qūl*), which al-Shahrastānī mentioned, corresponds in terminology and in content to the triad νόησις – νοῦς – νοητόν/νοούμενον in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. The Arabic term ‘*aql*’ is equivalent to the Greek νοῦς.⁸² It is known that al-Shahrastānī was aware of an Arabic paraphrase of chapters 6-10 of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* book Λ, which contains this triad.⁸³ Thus, al-Shahrastānī’s assessment of Abū l-Hudhayl’s teaching must be seen against the background of the corresponding passages of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. For al-Shahrastānī, the difference between Abū l-Hudhayl and Aristotle was that, according to Abū l-Hudhayl, it was only the knowledge or the act of knowledge which were identical with God as a knowing being – not the object of knowledge – whereas Aristotle considered the intellect, the act of intellection, and the object of intellection as identical with God.

This raises the question of whether Abū l-Hudhayl knew of the triad in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* book Λ. Book Λ was that part of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* which was most often translated into Arabic due to the theological content of this book.⁸⁴ According to Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist*, the earliest known Arabic translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* was done by Uṣṭāth for Abū Ya‘qūb b. Ishāq al-Kindī (d. between 861 and 866) during the first half of the ninth century and included book Λ. A certain Shamli is said to have produced another translation of book Λ in the ninth century.⁸⁵ It therefore can be questioned whether Abū l-Hudhayl had an Arabic translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* at his disposal. If he did know the content of the *Metaphysics*, an Arabic translation of this work might have been available only towards the end of his life. Aristotle’s *Categories*, in contrast, was among the first philosophical texts to be translated into Arabic. The text is preserved in an abbreviated paraphrase from the middle of the eighth century, which goes back to Abū ‘Amr ‘Abdallāh b. al-Muqaffa’ (d. 756) or his son Muḥammad (d. c. 760).⁸⁶ A complete Arabic translation of Aristotle’s *Categories* that survived is by Ishāq b. Ḥunayn (d. 910), the son of Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 873), who compiled it based on his father’s Syriac translation.⁸⁷ Thus, it is unlikely that Abū l-Hudhayl had a precise Arabic text of the complete *Categories* at hand which might have been influenced by Athanasius of Balad’s interpretation.

80 The by-name »the Exalted« (تعالى; see Wehr, *Arabisches Wörterbuch*, 872), which is in the Arabic text, was not translated by Wolfson.

81 English translation of al-Shahrastānī quoted from Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam*, 232; see al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb nihāyat al-iqdām*, ed. Guillaume, 180, ll. 5-7 (Arabic).

82 Rahman, ‘Aql, 341.

83 Bertolacci, Arabic translations, 256.

84 Bertolacci, Arabic translations, 273-274.

85 Bertolacci, Arabic translations, 244-247, 270.

86 Gutas, *Origins in Baghdad*, 18-19.

87 Peters, *Aristoteles Arabus*, 8.

Furthermore, one has to keep in mind Josef van Ess's general skepticism concerning the relevance of the Mu'tazila's reception of Aristotelian philosophy in Arabic. According to van Ess, »the *kalām* was part of a diffuse, refracted, and unconsciously adapted tradition« of Aristotle, »and the effectiveness of the *bayt al-ḥikma* passed people such as Abū l-Hudhayl or Naẓẓām, to say nothing of later Mu'tazilites, by without leaving a trace«. ⁸⁸ Richard M. Frank, on the other hand, highlights that knowledge about Aristotle and the discussion of his teachings were quite common among Abū l-Hudhayl's contemporaries, even if the translation of philosophical works did not begin seriously until the reign of al-Ma'mūn and, therefore, after the developmental phase of Abū l-Hudhayl's theology. ⁸⁹ Thus, Frank judges:

[...] the precise form and manner in which the earliest mutakallimîn got their Aristotle is somewhat uncertain. It is clear, at any rate, that while some of their Aristotle was genuine some was spurious. ⁹⁰

Hence, it is not clear whether it is possible or likely that Aristotelian philosophy influenced Abū l-Hudhayl directly. But what we can deem as sure is that Christian theologians or scholars like Timothy knew Aristotle's work. It remains speculative to what extent disputations with Christian theologians – perhaps even the one that Timothy handed down in his Letter 40 – had an impact on Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching. Accordingly, one should not go beyond Richard M. Frank's statement that it is no longer possible to discern the origins of Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching explicitly. ⁹¹ Two aspects remain remarkable: On the one hand, Abū l-Hudhayl's doctrine of the divine attributes reminded al-Shahrastānī of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, whereupon al-Shahrastānī also highlighted the differences between the two. On the other hand, most of the parallels to Abū l-Hudhayl's doctrine of the divine attributes among his Christian contemporaries feature in the letters of Patriarch Timothy I.

To sum up: According to what al-Ash'arī reports, Abū l-Hudhayl considered God as knowing (*ʿālim*) with a knowledge or an act of knowledge (*ʿilm*) and an object of knowledge (*ma lūm*) as well as powerful (*qādir*) with power (*qudra*) and an object of power (*maqḍūr*). From Abū l-Hudhayl's point of view, this knowledge and this power are identical with God. Seen from the Muslim perspective, it is impossible that the objects of these attributes were identical with God. ⁹² In this regard, the wording ascribed to Abū l-Hudhayl according to which there »was or will be« (*kāna aw yakūnu*) ⁹³ an object of the divine knowledge is significant. This aspect is elucidated more closely in the following remarks about the eternity of the divine attributes.

88 Van Ess, *Theology and Society* 4, 814; see also van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* 4, 731.

89 Frank, *Divine attributes*, 455.

90 Frank, *Divine attributes*, 455.

91 »Very little is known concerning abū l-Hudhayl's theological background and to seek sources by grasping at the straws of too easily paralleled formulae is fruitless. A close examination of the system will reveal several possible origins, more or less identifiable as to their general character, for certain of abū l-Hudhayl's teaching [...]«; Frank, *Divine attributes*, 458-459.

92 See Pretzl, *Frühislamische Attributenlehre*, 22-23.

93 Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, 165, l. 9 (Arabic).

Timothy's Proof for the Hypostases of the Trinity from the Eternity of God's Relational Attributes

As he reasons further in Letter 40, Timothy refers to the eternity of God. It has been already mentioned that the divine attributes are references to God's nature. Since God exists without beginning and without end, his attributes must also exist eternally. Thus, Timothy argues that »if God is eternally the knower, the wise, the seer, and the hearer«,⁹⁴ the objects of these attributes as well as the category of terms, which Timothy locates between these two categories of the subjects and objects, must all be eternal: »[...] then, God eternally possesses the knowledge together with the object of knowledge and the seeing together with the object of seeing.«⁹⁵ One should add here the attributes »hearing« and »object of hearing« as well as »wisdom« and »object of wisdom«. Timothy's Muslim counterpart accepts the eternity of the divine attributes.⁹⁶ One has to infer disputes among Muslims behind these explanations about the eternity of the divine attributes.

But not all Muslims acted on the assumption that the divine attributes are eternal. Rather, some deemed the attributes of God as created, aiming to safeguard the unity of God.⁹⁷ To give an example, one might refer to the followers of Abū Ḥasan Zurāra b. A'yan b. Sunsun (d. 766 or 767)⁹⁸ who, according to al-Ash'arī, believed »that from eternity God continued to be not hearing and not knowing and not seeing until He created these attributes for Himself«. ⁹⁹ With the exception of wisdom, which comes along in Timothy's Letter 40, this paraphrase deals with the same attributes as the disputation in Letter 40 does. Abū Tammām describes the doctrine of Zurāra b. A'yan's followers in a similar manner in his *Kitāb al-shajara*:

They say that God is a body not like other bodies, a form not like other forms. He existed eternally without being all-hearing or all-seeing or powerful or all-knowing until He created all these for Himself. Thereafter He hears by means of a created hearing, sees with created sight, has power through a created power, and knows by a created knowledge. The rest of the attributes, such as speech, wisdom and others, are like these.¹⁰⁰

According to Josef van Ess, it was probably only God's knowledge that Zurāra b. A'yan thought to emerge at the moment when an object of knowledge appeared. Van Ess deems the extension to all other attributes as a result of later heresiography, since, in al-Ash'arī's representation, the number of attributes was still limited.¹⁰¹

94 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 3.13, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 16-17 (Syriac).

95 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 3.13, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 17 (Syriac).

96 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 3.12, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 16 (Syriac).

97 Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam*, 143-146.

98 Concerning Zurāra b. A'yan and the Zurāriyya, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft 1*, 321-333; van Ess, *Theology and Society 1*, 373-390.

99 English translation of al-Ash'arī quoted from Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam*, 144; see al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, 36, ll. 4-5 (Arabic).

100 Abū Tammām, *Kitāb al-shajara*, trans. Madelung and Walker, 71.

101 Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft 1*, 329; van Ess, *Theology and Society 1*, 386.

Furthermore, Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (d. 795)¹⁰² was aware of the problem of the objects of eternal divine attributes. Therefore, al-Ash‘arī and Abū l-Ḥusayn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Khayyāṭ report that al-Hishām refused to call God someone who is eternally knowing, for then the object of knowledge would also exist eternally.¹⁰³ Zurāra b. A‘yan and Hishām b. al-Ḥakam belong to the so-called Rāfiḍiyya within the Shia. They testify to the discussion among Muslims about the eternity of one or several of the divine attributes in the period of Patriarch Timothy, whose Letter 40 is reminiscent of this intra-Islamic discussion.

The problem of the objects of divine attributes also arises in Abū ‘Īsā l-Warrāq’s (d. c. 864) refutation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Al-Warrāq replies to the Christians:

If you claim that he is only divine because of a contingent being which is subject to him,¹⁰⁴ that is because of the occurrence of a subject being, then you are obviously forced to claim that he is only powerful because of a contingent object of his power, and knowing because of a contingent object of his knowledge, so that before the occurrence of these he was neither divine nor powerful nor knowing.¹⁰⁵

According to al-Warrāq, the power and the knowledge of God are connected to an object of the power (*maqḍūr*) and an object of the knowledge (*ma’lūm*) which are contingent (*ḥādith*). Hence, it would not be possible for God to be powerful and knowledgeable before the existence of these objects.

Timothy’s Muslim counterpart in Letter 40 takes the counter-position to Zurāra b. A‘yan and Hishām b. al-Ḥakam, for he accepts the eternity of the divine attributes. Therefore, his attitude corresponds once more to that of Abū l-Hudhayl. Abū l-Hudhayl, however, made an important addition to the eternity of the divine attributes, which is reported by al-Ash‘arī as well as by al-Shahrastānī. Al-Ash‘arī seems to have had certain doubts concerning the authenticity of this teaching of Abū l-Hudhayl, which he summed up as follows:

Ja‘far b. Ḥarb reports about Abū l-Hudhayl that he said: I do not say that God is eternally hearing and seeing, unless in such a way that he will hear and see, because this presumes the existence of an object of the hearing and seeing.¹⁰⁶

This corresponds to al-Shahrastānī’s description of the relevant teaching of Abū l-Hudhayl:

He [God] is eternally hearing and seeing in the sense that he will [eternally] hear and see. Likewise, he is eternally forgiving, merciful, beneficent, creator, sustainer, rewarder, chastiser, friend, enemy, commanding, and prohibiting in the sense that he will be this.¹⁰⁷

102 For the determination of Hishām b. al-Ḥakam’s year of death, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft 1*, 353; van Ess, *Theology and Society 1*, 414-415.

103 Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, 494, ll. 3-4 (Arabic); al-Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-intiṣār*, ed. Nader, 90, ll. 10-12 (Arabic).

104 The term *ma’lūh* was also used by the Jewish scholar Dāwūd b. Marwān al-Muqammaṣ (ninth century). In his *Ishrūn maqāla*, one can define it as »someone who has an *ilāh*, or, more accurately, someone who is had by the *ilāh*« (Stroumsa, *Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ: Twenty Chapters*, 248 n. 2; Stroumsa, *Dāwūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ’s Twenty Chapters*, 226 n. 3; see also Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 204 n. 54). Thus, *ma’lūh* describes a person or thing that is subordinate to God (*ilāh*).

105 Al-Warrāq, *Kitāb al-radd*, 113, trans. Thomas, 139.

106 Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, 173, ll. 5-7 (Arabic).

107 Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-mīlāl wa-l-niḥāl*, ed. Cureton, 36, ll. 16-18 (Arabic).

Thus, according to Abū l-Hudhayl, God's seeing and hearing are secondary acts compared to God's eternity: to the extent a time lapse can conceivably be constructed here at all, God sees and hears only secondarily to his being eternal, which al-Shahrastānī expresses more clearly by using the future tense (*sa-* + imperfect¹⁰⁸) than al-Ash'arī, who uses the simple imperfect. Al-Ash'arī's report shows that Abū l-Hudhayl knew about the problem of the necessary existence of things seen and heard as objects of the seeing and hearing. He tried to evade this problem by teaching that God will be eternally seeing and hearing only by the time when the respective objects are created. Timothy does not accept such a distinction in the discussion with his Muslim interlocutor in Letter 40, since it would have undermined his reasoning on the Trinity.

Given that Timothy's interlocutor accepts the eternity of the divine attributes, Timothy proposes three entities in God which are eternal: the one who performs an act (the hearer, the seer, the knower, and the wise), the objects of these acts (the objects of hearing, seeing, knowledge, and wisdom), and the acts themselves (the hearing, seeing, knowing, and wisdom). Thus, Timothy expresses that God is relational within himself. Since every relationship needs at least two relational entities, these entities must be eternal in God, because otherwise God would not be wholly eternal, but rather subject to change. Timothy takes up the attributes of God in Islamic theology, each of which are in relation to something else. If God has these attributes eternally, he must also have other corresponding entities, without which the attributes would be meaningless.

Within Islamic theology, another view on objects was advanced in relation to the attributes. For instance, hadith literature interprets the idea that God perceives himself in the sense that God saw his image for the first time as a mirror image in the water of the primeval ocean.¹⁰⁹ Accordingly, there is no eternal counterpart in God which God sees eternally. However, in Timothy's Letter 40, the Muslim Aristotelian holds the view that »God saw and recognized the creatures eternally and before their creation«. ¹¹⁰ God's seeing is therefore eternal, but the objects of this seeing, that is, the creatures, are not. However, God is already able to see the creatures before their creation so that his seeing can be called eternal. This view of Timothy's Muslim interlocutor resembles that of Abū l-Hudhayl, according to whom God knows the things before he creates them.¹¹¹ In contrast, the Mu'tazilite 'Abbād b. Sulaymān (d. c. 864) rejected the position that God is eternally seeing and hearing, because it would necessitate the respective objects of these acts.¹¹²

Timothy considers the reasoning of his Muslim interlocutor to be inapplicable, since »the creation is under an end and limit«. ¹¹³ Abū l-Hudhayl shared this opinion of Timothy that God is without end and limit, as Shlomo Pines elucidated:

108 See, e.g., Fischer, *Grammatik*, 94, § 187 b.

109 Böwering, *God and his attributes*, 323; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft 4*, 379; van Ess, *Theology and Society 4*, 424.

110 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 3.14, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 17 (Syriac).

111 Adamson, *Al-Kindī and the Mu'tazila*, 58.

112 Watt, 'Abbād b. Sulaymān, 5.

113 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 3.15, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 17 (Syriac).

Abū l-Hudhayl says that, since the eternal (*qadīm*) is without end and limit and the terms »part« (*ba'ḏ*) and »whole« (*kull*) are not applicable to him, the created, in contrast to him [the eternal], must have an end and a limit, a whole and a total (*kull wa-jamī'* in a finite sense).¹¹⁴

If God, however, sees and recognizes only what he has created, as the Muslim in Letter 40 thinks, this would mean according to Timothy that God must also be finite and limited. But, since this is not possible, Timothy concludes: »Thus, God has a knowledge as well as a seeing apart from that of the creation, [a knowledge and a seeing] which is unlimited like him.«¹¹⁵ In the further course of the discussion, Timothy identifies these attributes with the three hypostases of the Trinity. For if God is »seeing«, »hearing«, and »knowing« according to his nature, he must have seen, heard, and known something before the creation of all things. Hence, these attributes must be understood as intrinsic to God's nature. Timothy concludes:

If he sees and knows those which are creatures, it is not possible that they are eternal, for not one creature is eternal. However, if they are not creatures, but every uncreated and unmade being is eternal, then the eternal sees the eternal, and the unlimited knows the unlimited. [This is] a knowing and a seeing which is not in creatures and limited beings, but rather in his nature and in his essence.¹¹⁶

Timothy defines »the Son and the Spirit which proceeds from the Father«¹¹⁷ as these eternal, which the eternal knows and sees eternally.¹¹⁸ According to Martin Heimgartner, Timothy places the Father and Son within the category of »in relation to something« (πρός τι, expressed by Timothy in Syriac as ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ) of Aristotle's *Categories*.¹¹⁹ Based on Aristotle,¹²⁰ Timothy asserts that »'the in relation to something' are at the same time according to nature«,¹²¹ so that the procreation of the Son and the proceeding of the Holy Spirit do not imply a chronological subordination of these two persons of the Trinity vis-à-vis the Father, as the Muslim interlocutor had assumed.

114 »Abu'l-Hudayl lehrt, daß, da der Ewige (*qadīm*) ohne Ende und Grenze sei und die Begriffe Teil (*ba'ḏ*) und Ganzes (*kull*) auf ihn nicht angewendet werden können, das Geschaffene im Gegensatz zu ihm ein Ende und eine Grenze, ein Ganzes und Gesamtes (*kull wa-ġamī'* endlich gedacht) haben müsse«; Pines, *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomlehre*, 14-15.

115 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 3.16, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 17 (Syriac).

116 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 4.29-30, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 24 (Syriac).

117 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 4.31, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 24 (Syriac).

118 For a similar argument in the writings of the miaphysite scholar Yahyā b. 'Adī (d. 974), see Jakob, *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam*, 377-380.

119 See Heimgartner's German translation of Timothy's Letter 40: Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 4.33-35, trans. Heimgartner, CSCO 674, 20.

120 »Relatives [τὰ πρὸς τι] seem to be simultaneous by nature; and in most cases this is true«; Aristotle, *Categories* 7b,15-16, trans. Ackrill, 21. However, Aristotle places certain restrictions on the simultaneousness in *Categories* 7b,22-8a,9: »Yet it does not seem to be true of all relatives that they are simultaneous by nature. For the knowable would seem to be prior to knowledge. For as a rule it is of actual things already existing that we acquire knowledge; in few cases, if any, could one find knowledge coming into existence at the same time as what is knowable. [...]«

121 Timothy I, *Letter 40*, 4.35, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 673, 25 (Syriac).

In his disputation with al-Mahdī, Timothy uses the same argument as in Letter 40, but in a less elaborated version. According to Timothy, the differentiation between the hypostases in God is necessary if God is an eternally knowing and seeing subject, because such a subject needs eternal objects of knowledge and seeing. Therefore, God is the »principle of the interdependence of subject and object«. ¹²² From the point of view of al-Mahdī, God sees »his [own] nature in a completely unlimited manner« ¹²³ without anything beside him that also exists eternally. This is different from the position of Timothy's Muslim interlocutor in Letter 40, who argues that God already saw creatures even before their creation. Since Letter 40 originates before the disputation with al-Mahdī, and since both disputations took place in the same context – the caliphal court in Baghdad – al-Mahdī's reasoning might further develop the Muslim interlocutor's position in Letter 40 in response to Timothy's objections there.

However, according to Timothy, the same problem as in Letter 40 ensues from the Muslim position in the disputation with al-Mahdī: How can God be eternally seer and knower, if there is nothing else which coexists eternally with him and which he can eternally see and know? ¹²⁴ The patriarch does not deny that God sees and knows eternally, but in that case God must have eternally existing objects of his seeing and knowing, which he does not see and know only partially. Timothy labels the Son and the Spirit as objects of God's seeing and knowing. They are the »mirror« of God's essence:

God sees and knows himself through his speech and his spirit, for the Son and the Spirit of the Father are a pure mirror, not an alien mirror, but a consubstantial [mirror], which is equal with his nature and without end and limit like him. He saw his speech, his spirit and his creation essentially and eternally before the eons. But he saw and knew his speech and his spirit as his nature, that is, not as his creation, but rather as his nature. He saw and knew the creation, not eternally as his nature, but as his creation. ¹²⁵

Thus, as Heimgartner posits, Timothy adapts considerations about the interdependence of subject and object from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* for his reasoning on the Trinity: God is an eternal seer and knower, which requires an equally eternal object of the divine seeing and knowing, but which is at the same time different from God. This object is the Son and the Spirit, who are consubstantial with God. ¹²⁶ »Thus, Trinity means that God is able to confront himself as object of his eternal activities of seeing and knowing by confronting himself as Son and Spirit.« ¹²⁷

¹²² Heimgartner, Trinitätslehre, 78 (»Prinzip der Interdependenz von Subjekt und Objekt«).

¹²³ Timothy I, *Disputation with al-Mahdī*, 18.3, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 631, 126 (Syriac).

¹²⁴ Timothy I, *Disputation with al-Mahdī*, 18.5, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 631, 126-127 (Syriac).

¹²⁵ Timothy I, *Disputation with al-Mahdī*, 18.12-13, ed. Heimgartner, CSCO 631, 128-129 (Syriac).

¹²⁶ Heimgartner, Trinitätslehre, 78-79.

¹²⁷ »Trinität bedeutet also, dass Gott sich selbst als Objekt seiner ewigen Seh- und Erkenntnistätigkeit gegenüber-treten kann, indem er sich selbst als Sohn und Geist gegenübertritt«; Heimgartner, Trinitätslehre, 79.

Therefore, Timothy used certain divine attributes to demonstrate that God is relational within himself. The equation of these attributes with God himself by Muslim theologians like Abū l-Hudhayl benefited Timothy. But Timothy did not go as far as many Christian theologians writing in Arabic who leaned toward a reduction of the number of essential attributes to three, just to assign these three essential attributes to the three hypostases of the Trinity.¹²⁸

Conclusion

In the disputation with Caliph al-Mahdī and in Letter 40, Timothy seems to have been dealing with Muslims who were close to the Muʿtazilite Abū l-Hudhayl in their reasoning. It is certainly the case that a comparison of the Muslim interlocutors' positions in both disputations with the opinions of contemporary Muslim theologians – as far as it is possible to reconstruct these opinions in the face of the problematic status of source materials – shows that the largest agreement is between Timothy's opponents and the teachings ascribed to Abū l-Hudhayl. Accordingly, Timothy was familiar with the Islamic theology of his period and especially with the doctrine of the divine attributes. What is more, he knew how to use the teachings of Muslim theologians for his defense of the Trinity. Abū l-Hudhayl's equation of the divine attributes with God himself, which Timothy's opponents in Letters 40 and 59 share, allowed the patriarch to interpret the attributes in the sense of a plurality and of self-reference in God's essence. Moreover, in Letter 40, Timothy singles out four attributes which imply a subject, an act, and an object. He was not only able to connect with Aristotelian philosophy in this respect, but also to a similar differentiation in Abū l-Hudhayl's doctrine of the divine attributes. However, Timothy does not accept Abū l-Hudhayl's opinion concerning the eternity of the divine attributes' objects, which would have undermined his argument. Timothy's counterpart considers the divine attributes as being eternal, as Abū l-Hudhayl did. From Timothy's point of view, this requires that the subjects, acts, and objects of the attributes must be eternal. Hence, the acts must take place within the nature and the essence of God, and the relations, which are intrinsic to the chosen attributes, are the relations between Father, Son, and Spirit in the Trinity.

This in-depth analysis of Timothy's theological thought and the comparison with contemporary Islamic theology shows that Christian and Muslim theologians of the early Islamic period were not only religious adversaries. It also demonstrates that there must have been a certain exchange of ideas and arguments between the two groups which shines through texts with an overall apologetic agenda (such as the letters of Timothy). Furthermore, alongside the works written by Christians in Arabic, the Syriac letters of Timothy also reveal a considerable acquaintance of their author with the thoughts of Muslim intellectuals of his period.

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¹²⁸ See Haddad, *La Trinité divine*, 208, who offers in the chart on 232-233 an overview of Christian Arabic theologians' diverging assignments of the essential attributes to the three hypostases of the Trinity. See also Swanson, *Are hypostases attributes?*, 239-240.

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Abbreviations

CSCO = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium

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