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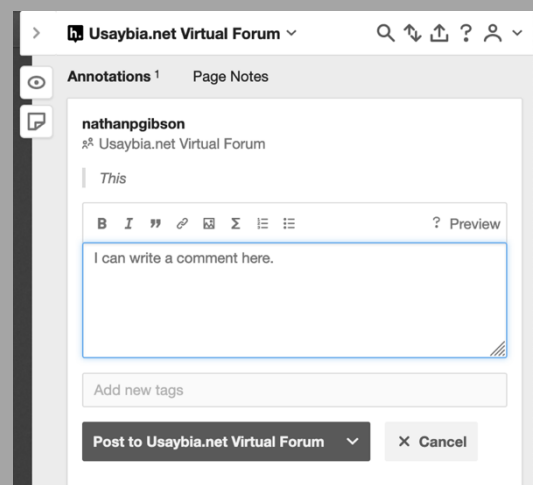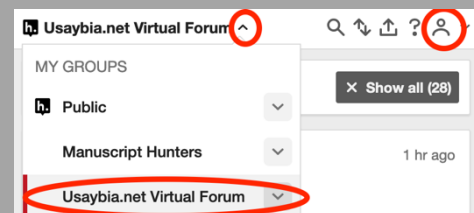# Muslim Theology in the Interreligious Writings of Patriarch Timothy I (d. 823)

Joachim Jakob

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

Joachim Jakob, Linz

– first draft! –

Syriac-speaking Christians were among the first Christians who encountered Muslims in the medieval Middle East. Therefore, several scholars have already noticed the possibility to compare the theological treatises of Syriac authors from the early Islamic period with the thoughts of their Muslim contemporaries. Already in 1994, Ulrich Rudolph stated regarding the mutual exchange between Muslim and Christian theologians during the first centuries of Islam:

> "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."[1]

With respect to the West Syriac theologian Moses bar Kephā (d. 903), Rudolph realized "an intimate knowledge of the theology, which was performed by the Muʿtazilites during his lifetime"[2]. 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 the Islamic intellectual history"[3]:

> "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."[4]

Barbara Roggema offers a first insight to the subject matter in an article published in 2016, in which she describes the aim of her analysis of Syriac disputation texts as follows:

> "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

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[1] Rudolph, Christliche Bibelexegese, 300.
[2] Ibid., 312 (English translation by Joachim Jakob).
[3] Heimgartner, Introduction, in: Timothy, Disputation with al-Mahdī (CSCO.S 245), L (English translation by Joachim Jakob).
[4] Ibid., L–LI.

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."[5]

However, an in-depth comparison of the Syriac authors' theological arguments with the doctrines of Muslim theologians of the same period is still missing.

The present paper aims to contribute to fill this gap by comparing two letters (letter 40 and letter 59/disputation with caliph al-Mahdī) of the East Syriac patriarch Timothy I (d. 823), which both contain disputations with Muslims, with what we know about the teachings of Muslim theologians from the 8th or 9th centuries. Of course, this enterprise 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 Muʿtazila, from the period in question. Almost no written works of these Muslim theologians came down to us. All we know about them derives from later books and treatises in which other authors described their thoughts and doctrines. But these accounts were, of course, far away from what we would call an objective representation of the original authors and their ideas. Nevertheless, these works "offer us often astonishing precise and informative compilations of notions disseminated among Muslim theologians (partly also of theologians of different faiths)"[6]. It is possible, therefore, to reconstruct at least parts of the teachings of Muslim theologians from the 8th and 9th centuries from these later works. It is out of the present paper's scope to try such a reconstruction. Instead, I will refer to other studies in which several experts 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.[7]

One aspect of Islamic theology, which appears in the Syriac authors' defenses of the Trinity, are the so-called divine attributes (ṣifāt Allāh). I will analyze the interpretation of such attributes as part of the apology of Christianity in the two letters of patriarch Timothy I. It becomes obvious that Timothy deals in his letters with the understanding of the divine attributes held by the Muʿtazilites. 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"[8]. A Muʿtazilite 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, was Abū l-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf (d. between 840 and 850). Abū l-Hudhayl came to the court in Baghdad during the reign of caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–833).[9] Although he arrived later at the caliphal court than Timothy, Timothy

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[5] Roggema, Pour une lecture, 262–263.
[6] Berger, Islamische Theologie, 31 (English translation by Joachim Jakob).
[7] Cf. Josef van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam, vols. 1–6, Berlin/New York 1991–1997.
[8] Timothy, Disputation with al-Mahdī (CSCO.S 244), 120 (§ 17,7; Syriac).
[9] For the biography of Abū l-Hudhayl cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft III, 210–219.

might have known certain teachings of Abū l-Hudhayl or his circles, since Timothy's letter 34 shows that he was in contact with the Christian community in Basra[10] where Abū l-Hudhayl lived before he came to Baghdad. Even if the exact connection between Abū l-Hudhayl and Timothy remains unclear, there appear 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 least, we know that Abū l-Hudhayl was engaged in theological discussions with Christians, since he wrote a book against ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī entitled *Kitāb ʿalā ʿAmmār an-Naṣrānī fī r-radd ʿalā n-Naṣārā*, which is not preserved.[11] According to van Ess, Abū l-Hudhayl was also the first Muʿtazilite who developed a teaching of the divine attributes which was more than a *theologia negativa*.[12] Abū l-Hudhayl considered all divine attributes as attributes of God himself, for he aimed to preserve the absolute unity of God (*at-tawḥīd*).

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

> "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 […]."[13]

The Qurʾān describes (*waṣafa*) God with names (*asmāʾ*) and attributes or adjectives (*ṣifāt*).[14] Obviously, Abū l-Hudhayl was aware of the fact that the Qurʾān 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, i.e., adjectives, but also the corresponding substantives.[15] This position must been regarded against the background of Abū l-Hudhayl's contemporary theological debates, which were influenced by Arabic grammar. Among the Arabian grammarians of the 8th century, the term *ṣifa* (plural *ṣifāt*) denominates the "syntactic attribution of a word as qualifying attribute to another word […], with which it coincides morphologically"[16]. As such a description (*waṣf*), a *ṣifa* refers to a noun (*ism*, plural *asmāʾ*) which it characterizes. Since the adjectives, besides the attributes, also serve as descriptions, the word *ṣifa* became also a

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[10] Cf. Timothy, Letter 34 (CSCO.S 256), 13 (Syriac).
[11] Cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft III, 275–276; van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft V, 367; Griffith, The Concept of *al-uqnūm*, 170.
[12] Cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft III, 272; cf. further Nagel, Geschichte der islamischen Theologie, 105–107.
[13] Quoted from Husseini, Early Christian-Muslim Debate, 33; cf. al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālat al-Islāmīyīn* (ed. Ritter), 165 (ll. 5–7; Arabic).
[14] Cf. Frank, Beings and Their Attributes, 10.
[15] Cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft III, 272; van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft IV, 441–442.
[16] Diem, Nomen, Substantiv und Adjektiv, 314 (English translation by Joachim Jakob).

denomination of this kind of words.[17] According to the assumption of the grammarians that the verbal forms and the verbal adjectives derive from the verbal substantives (*maṣādir*, singular *maṣdar*), and that nouns denominate entities, the Muslim theologians considered it as a challenge that the denomination of divine attributes, which imply corresponding substantives, does not lead to deiform entities and, therefore, to a threat to the unity of God (*tawḥīd*).[18] It was exactly this weak point which the Christian theologians made use of: "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."[19]

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:

> "[…] abû 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."[20]

Further examples of Abū l-Hudhayl's teachings about the divine attributes are included in al-Ashʿarī'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."[21] What is more, Abū l-Hudhayl thought of "a hearing which is God himself" and "a seeing which is God himself".[22] In his *Kitāb ash-shajara*, Abū Tammām confirmed in the 10th 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."[23]

According to al-Ashʿarī, Abū l-Hudhayl borrowed the idea of the divine attributes' identity with God himself "from Aristotle".[24] Josef van Ess, however, is not convinced that Abū l-Hudhayl relied really on Aristotle in this matter.[25] It is not possible to reconstruct the exact origins of

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[17] Cf. ibid., 314–315 and 326.
[18] Cf. Griffith, Ḥabīb ibn Ḫidmah Abū Rāʾiṭah, 177.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Frank, The Divine Attributes, 459.
[21] Al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālat al-Islāmīyīn* (ed. Ritter), 177 (ll. 14–15; Arabic).
[22] Ibid., 174 (ll. 2–3; Arabic).
[23] Abū Tammām, *Kitāb ash-shajara* (tr. Madelung/Walker), 31.
[24] Cf. al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālat al-Islāmīyīn* (ed. Ritter), 485 (ll. 7–9; Arabic).
[25] Cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft V, 395–396 (commentary on text 63, *e*).

Abū l-Hudhayl's teachings, because several possible sources are suitable.[26] Several centuries later, ash-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) blamed Abū l-Hudhayl for determining the divine attributes like the "hypostases of the Christians", if he understands the attributes as appearances of God's essence: "If Abū l-Hudhayl considers these attributes as appearances of the essence, then they are the hypostases of the Christians or the states of Abū Hāshim."[27]

Timothy's statement that the divine attributes, according to al-Mahdī, belong "truly, according to nature, and eternally to God", correspond to the teaching of the Muʿtazilite Abū l-Hudhayl, according to which the attributes equate with God himself. In Timothy's letter 40, his Muslim correspondent 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 are these references to the nature of God."[28] According to the Muslim disputant in letter 40, the divine attributes are identical to the nature of God: Every nature – also the nature of God – shows itself through 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 it was able to interpret the attributes as plurality and 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 on a plurality within God himself, without questioning the unity of God.

In letter 40, Timothy makes use of the attributes, which his Muslim counterpart mentioned, i.e., seeing, hearing, knowledge, wisdom, for his defense of the Trinity: Timothy distinguishes between three categories: the hearer/seer/knower/wise, the object, which is heard/seen/known/the object of wisdom, and the hearing/seeing/knowledge/wisdom. The last category (hearing/seeing/knowledge/wisdom) is located between the other two categories.[29] Abū Rāʾiṭa mentions also such referential attributes:

> "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."[30]

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[26] Cf. Frank, The Divine Attributes, 455–459.
[27] Ash-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa-n-niḥal* (ed. Cureton), 34 (ll. 19–20; Arabic).
[28] Timothy, Letter 40 (CSCO.S 261), 13–14 (§ 3,2; Syriac).
[29] Cf. ibid., 14–15 (§ 3,5; Syriac).
[30] Keating, Defending the "People of Truth", 177 and 179.

These attributes are referential because they are in relationship with something else. According to Martin Heimgartner, the basis of Timothy's reasoning is the *Isagoge* (εἰσαγωγή/ܐܘܣܓܘܓܐ = introduction) to the Aristotelian logic and syllogistics of the West Syriac patriarch Athanasius of Balad (d. 687).[31] Athanasius developed the relevant passage from Aristotle's *Categories*[32] one step further by introducing an act of knowledge between the knower and the object which is known. Thus, Athanasius has the triad 'knower – act of knowledge – object which is known', which reminds us of the triad 'intellect (νοῦς) – act of intellection (νόησις) – object of intellection (νοητόν or νοούμενον)' in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.[33] Since Aristotle's *Categories* were very popular among the Syriac Christians[34] and no Syriac translation of the *Metaphysics* is known[35] or occurred not before the 9th century[36], it is likely that Timothy was influenced through Athanasius of Balad. Nevertheless, it is out of doubt that Timothy was acquainted with the Greek language.[37] In any case, the triad of Athanasius of Balad appears again in Timothy's letter 40.

However, Timothy does not only dwell on the knowledge and the subject and object connected to it, but refers to further attributes of God connected to a subject and an object. Therefore, 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 already that Timothy's letter 40 includes echoes of the teachings on the divine attributes by Ḍirār b. ʿAmr or Abū l-Hudhayl.[38] However, it seems that van Ess did not know the text of letter 40.[39] The Muʿtazilite Ḍirār b. ʿAmr lived between 728 and 796[40], which means that his lifetime would fit well to the date of origin of Timothy's letter 40. According to van Ess, Ḍirār's knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy was limited to the *Categories*. Aristotle and his writings should not count as starting

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[31] Cf. Heimgartner, Griechisches Wissen, 107–108. For the Syriac text of Athanasius' *Isagoge* cf. Furlani, Contributi alla storia, 725 (l. 11)–726 (l. 1).
[32] Cf. *Categories* 6b,28–36.
[33] Cf. *Metaphysics* 1072b,18–21, and 1075a,3–5.
[34] Cf. King, The Earliest Syriac Translation, 18–29.
[35] Cf. Daiber, Die Aristotelesrezeption, 343.
[36] Cf. Watt, Syriac Translators, 21.
[37] Cf. Heimgartner, Griechisches Wissen.
[38] Cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft IV, 441.
[39] Concerning Timothy's letter 40, Josef van Ess refers only to Griffith, The Prophet Muḥammad, 101 (cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft IV, 441 [n. 8]). Griffith, however, in the publication to which van Ess refers, declares only that the letter was by then still unedited. Afterwards, he explicates: "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 the divine attributes, one has to assume that van Ess did not know the text of letter 40. He probably deduced only from Griffith's rather scanty statements to Muslim theologians of Timothy's period.
[40] Cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft III, 32–33.

point of Ḍirār's reasoning.[41] Furthermore, van Ess' reconstruction of Ḍirār's teachings[42] does not give any evidence to a reasoning, which might be comparable to the one of Timothy in letter 40. Regarding Ḍirār's opinion on the characteristics of God, it is solely known that God's names in the Qurʾān should not be understood in a terrestrial manner.[43]

There is, however, a differentiation between subject, act, and object in Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching on the divine attributes which reminds us of Timothy's reasoning in letter 40. For, 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."[44]

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 (maqdūr). Obviously, ash-Shahrastānī did already notice the closeness of Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. However, ash-Shahrastānī also recognized the difference between Abū l-Hudhayl and Aristotle:

> "Abū al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf walked in the highroads of the philosophers and said that the Creator[45] 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 (ʿāḳil = νόησις), the intellect (ʿaḳl = νοῦς), and the object of intellection (maʿḳūl = νοούμενον)."[46]

The triad act of intellection (ʿāqil), intellect (ʿaql) and object of intellection (maʿqūl), which ash-Shahrastānī mentioned, corresponds terminologically as well as with regard to the content to the triad νόησις – νοῦς – νοητόν/νοούμενον in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The Arabic term ʿaql is equivalent to the Greek νοῦς.[47] It is proved that ash-Shahrastānī knew an Arabic paraphrase of the chapters 6–10 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* book Λ, which contains this triad.[48] Thus, ash-Shahrastānī's assessment of Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching must be seen against the background of

[41] Cf. ibid., 37.
[42] Cf. ibid., 35–59; as well as the texts in: van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft V, 229–251.
[43] Cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft III, 37–38; van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft V, 240 (texts 23 and 24).
[44] Quoted from Husseini, Early Christian-Muslim Debate, 33–34; cf. al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālat al-Islāmīyīn* (ed. Ritter), 165 (ll. 8–11; Arabic).
[45] The by-name 'the Exalted' (تعالى; cf. Wehr, Arabisches Wörterbuch, 872), which is in the Arabic text, was not translated by Wolfson.
[46] Quoted from Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Kalam, 232; cf. ash-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb nihāyat al-iqdām fī ʿilm al-kalām* (ed. Guillaume), 180 (ll. 5–7; Arabic).
[47] Cf. Rahman, ʿAḳl, 341.
[48] Cf. Bertolacci, On the Arabic Translations, 256.

the corresponding passages of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. For ash-Shahrastānī, the difference between Abū l-Hudhayl and Aristotle was that, according to Abū l-Hudhayl, simply the knowledge or the act of knowledge were identical with God as a knowing being – not the object of knowledge –, while Aristotle considered the intellect, the act of intellection and the object of intellection as identical with God.

This raises the question, whether also Abū l-Hudhayl knew already 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.[49] The earliest known Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* seems to be the one accomplished by Usṭāth for Abū Yaʿqūb b. Isḥāq al-Kindī (d. between 861 and 866) during the first half of the 9th century. This translation contained also book Λ. A certain Shamlī is said to have produced another translation of book Λ in the 9th century.[50] It is therefore questionable whether Abū l-Hudhayl had an Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* at his disposal. If he knew the content of the *Metaphysics*, an Arabic translation of this work might have been available rather at the end of his life. Aristotle's *Categories*, in contrast, was among the first philosophical texts which were translated into Arabic. However, it is preserved only in an abbreviated paraphrase from the middle of the 8th century, which shall go back to Abū ʿAmr ʿAbdallāh b. al-Muqaffaʿ (d. 756) or his son Muḥammad (d. c. 760).[51] A complete Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Categories*, which survived, is the one by Isḥāq b. Ḥunayn (d. 910), the son of Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq (d. 873), who compiled it based on his father's Syriac translation.[52] Thus, it is unlikely that Abū l-Hudhayl had already a precise Arabic text of the complete *Categories* at his hand, which might been influenced by Athanasius of Balad's interpretation.

Furthermore, one has to keep in mind Josef van Ess' general skepticism concerning the relevance of the Arabic reception of Aristotelian philosophy for the Muʿtazila. 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 Muʿtazilites, by without leaving a trace".[53] Richard M. Frank, on the other hand, highlights that the knowledge about Aristotle and the discussion of his teachings were quite common among Abū l-Hudhayl's contemporaries, even if the translation of

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[49] Cf. ibid., 273–274.
[50] Cf. ibid., 244–247 and 270.
[51] Cf. Gutas, Origins in Baghdad, 18–19.
[52] Cf. Peters, Aristoteles Arabus, 8.
[53] Van Ess, Theology and Society IV, 814.

philosophical works began seriously not until the reign of al-Maʾmūn and, therefore, after the development phase of Abū l-Hudhayl's theology.[54] 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."[55]

Hence, it is not clear, whether or not it is possible or likely that Aristotelian philosophy influenced Abū l-Hudhayl directly. But what we can deem as sure is the knowledge of Christian theologians or scholars like Timothy of Aristotle's work. It remains speculative to what extent disputations with Christian theologians – perhaps even the one, which Timothy handed down in his letter 40 – may have had an impact on Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching. Accordingly, one does not get beyond Richard M. Frank's statement that it is not possible anymore to discern the origins of Abū l-Hudhayl's teaching explicitly.[56] Two aspects remain remarkable: On the one hand, Abū l-Hudhayl's doctrine of the divine attributes reminded ash-Shahrastānī of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, whereupon ash-Shahrastānī highlighted also 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-Ashʿarī reports about Abū l-Hudhayl, Abū l-Hudhayl considered God as knowing (*ʿālim*) with a 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 (*maqdūr*). 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.[57] In this regard, the wording ascribed to Abū l-Hudhayl according to which there "was or will be" (*kāna aw yakūnu*) 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.

In the further reasoning of 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

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[54] Cf. Frank, The Divine Attributes, 455.

[55] Ibid., 455.

[56] Cf. ibid., 458–459: "Very little is known concerning abû 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 abû l-Hudhayl's teaching […]."

[57] Cf. Pretzl, Die frühislamische Attributenlehre, 22–23.

"if God is eternally the knower, the wise, the seer and the hearer"[58], 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 be eternal: "[…] then, God possesses the knowledge together with the object of knowledge and the seeing together with the object of seeing eternally."[59] The attributes 'hearing' and 'object of hearing' as well as 'wisdom' and 'object of wisdom' are to add. Timothy's Muslim counterpart accepts the eternity of the divine attributes.[60] One has to assume disputes among Muslims behind these explanations about the eternity of the divine attributes. For, not all Muslims acted on the assumption of the eternity of the divine attributes. Rather, some deemed the attributes of God as created with the aim to secure the unity of God.[61] To give an example, one might refer to the followers of Abū Ḥasan Zurāra b. Aʿyan b. Sunsun (d. 766/67)[62] who, according to al-Ashʿarī, believed

> "that from eternity God continued to be not hearing and not knowing and not seeing until He created these attributes for Himself."[63]

With the exception of the wisdom, which comes along in Timothy's letter 40, this paraphrase deals with the same attributes as the disputation in letter 40. Abū Tammām describes the doctrine of Zurāra b. Aʿyan's followers in a similar manner in his *Kitāb ash-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."[64]

According to Josef van Ess, Zurāra b. Aʿyan thought probably only regarding God's knowledge of an emergence of this knowledge at the moment of the appearance of an object of knowledge. Van Ess deems the extension to all other attributes as a result of the later heresiography, because the number of attributes was still limited in the representation by al-Ashʿarī.[65]

Furthermore, Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (d. 795)[66] was aware of the problem of the objects of eternal divine attributes. Therefore, al-Ashʿarī and Abū l-Ḥusayn ʿAbdarraḥīm al-Khayyāṭ report that al-Hishām refused to call God someone who is eternally knowing, for then the object

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[58] Timothy, Letter 40 (CSCO.S 261), 16–17 (§ 3,13; Syriac).
[59] Ibid., 17 (§ 3,13; Syriac).
[60] Cf. ibid., 16 (§ 3,12; Syriac).
[61] Cf. Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Kalam, 143–146.
[62] Concerning Zurāra b. Aʿyan and the Zurāriyya cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft I, 321–333.
[63] Quoted from Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Kalam, 144; cf. al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālat al-Islāmīyīn* (ed. Ritter), 36 (ll. 4–5; Arabic).
[64] Abū Tammām, *Kitāb ash-shajara* (tr. Madelung/Walker), 71.
[65] Cf. Van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft I, 329.
[66] For the determination of Hishām b. al-Ḥakam's year of death cf. van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft I, 353.

of knowledge would also exist eternally.[67] Zurāra b. Aʿyan as well as Hishām b. al-Ḥakam belong to the so-called Rāfiḍiyya within the Shia. They testify to the discussion among Muslims about the eternity of several or one of the divine attributes in the period of patriarch Timothy. Timothy's letter 40 is reminiscent to this inner-Islamic discussion.

The problem of the objects of the divine attributes arises also in Abū ʿĪsā l-Warrāq's 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[68], 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."[69]

According to al-Warrāq, the power and the knowledge of God are connected to an object of the power (*maqdūr*) and an object of the knowledge (*maʿlūm*) which are contingent (*ḥādith*). Hence, it is would not be possible that God is powerful and knowing before the existence of these objects.

Timothy's Muslim counterpart in letter 40 takes the counter-position to Zurāra b. Aʿyan and Hishām b. al-Ḥakam, for he accepts the eternity of the divine attributes. Therefore, his attitude corresponds once more to the one of Abū l-Hudhayl. Abū l-Hudhayl, however, makes an important addition to the eternity of the divine attributes, which is reported by al-Ashʿarī as well as by ash-Shahrastānī. Al-Ashʿarī seems to have had certain doubts concerning the authenticity of this teaching of Abū l-Hudhayl, which he summed up as follows:

> Jaʿfar 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.[70]

This corresponds to ash-Shahrastānī's description of Abū l-Hudhayl's respective teaching:

> He [i.e., 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.[71]

Thus, according to Abū l-Hudhayl, God's seeing and hearing are secondary acts compared to God's eternity: As far as the construction of a time lapse is imaginable here at all, God sees and

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[67] Cf. al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālat al-Islāmīyīn* (ed. Ritter), 494 (ll. 3–4; Arabic); al-Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-intiṣār* (ed. Nader), 90 (ll. 10–12; Arabic).

[68] The term *maʾlūh* (مألوه) was used also by Dāwūd b. Marwān al-Muqammaṣ. In his *ʿIshrūn 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-Muqammiṣ's *Twenty Chapters*, 226 [n. 3]; cf. also Thomas, Anti-Christian Polemic, 204 [n. 54]). Thus, *maʾlūh* describes a person or thing, which is subordinate to God (الإ, *ilāh*).

[69] Al-Warrāq, *Kitāb ar-radd ʿalā th-thalāth firaq min an-naṣārā* (tr. Thomas), 139 (n. 113).

[70] Al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālat al-Islāmīyīn* (ed. Ritter), 173 (ll. 5–7; Arabic).

[71] Ash-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa-n-niḥal* (ed. Cureton), 36 (ll. 16–18; Arabic).

hears only secondary to his being eternal, which ash-Shahrastānī expresses more clearly by using the future tense (*sa-* + imperfect[72]) than al-Ashʿarī, who uses the simple imperfect. Al-Ashʿarī'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 omits this distinction when he describes the reasoning of his Muslim correspondent in letter 40. Possibly, Timothy did not know this distinction. In any case, it would have undermined his reasoning on the Trinity.

Due to the acceptance of the eternity of the divine attributes through Timothy's Muslim correspondent, there are three beings 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). Thereby, Timothy expresses that God is relationship within himself. Since every relationship needs at least to two relative beings, these beings must be eternal in God, because otherwise God would not be eternal on the whole, but submitted to change. Timothy takes up the attributes of God in Islamic theology, which each are in relation to something else. If God has these attributes eternally, he must also have the respective other beings, without which the attributes would be senseless.

Within Islamic theology, another view was advanced on the objects, which are in relation to the attributes. For instance, *ḥadīth* literature interprets the idea that God perceives himself in the sense that God saw his image for the first time as mirror image in the water of the primeval ocean.[73] 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"[74]. God's seeing is therefore eternal, but not the objects of this seeing, i.e. the creatures. However, God is able to see the creatures already before their creation so that his seeing can be called eternal. This view of Timothy's Muslim correspondent resembles the one of Abū l-Hudhayl, according to whom God knows the things before he creates them.[75] In contrast, the Muʿtazilite ʿAbbād b. Sulaymān (d. c. 864) refused that God is eternally seeing and hearing, because it would need then also the respective objects of these acts.[76]

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[72] Cf. Fischer, Grammatik, 94 (§ 187 b).
[73] Cf. Böwering, God and his Attributes, 323; van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft IV, 379.
[74] Timothy, Letter 40 (CSCO.S 261), 17 (§ 3,14; Syriac).
[75] Cf. Adamson, Al-Kindī and the Muʿtazila, 58.
[76] Cf. Watt, ʿAbbād b. Sulaymān, 5.

Timothy considers the reasoning of his Muslim correspondent as inapplicable, since "the creation is under the end and limit"[77]. Abū l-Hudhayl shared this opinion of Timothy that God is without end and limit, as Shlomo Pines elucidates:

> "Abu'l-Huḏayl lehrt, daß, da der Ewige (*qadīm*) ohne Ende und Grenze sei und die Begriffe Teil (*baʿḍ*) 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-ǧamīʿ* endlich gedacht) haben müsse."[78]

If God, however, sees and recognizes only the creation, 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 knowledge as well as seeing without the creation [of something], which is unlimited like he.[79]

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 of 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 eternals, and the unlimited knows the unlimited. [This is] a knowing and a seeing which is not in the creatures and limited beings, but rather in his nature and in his essence.[80]

Timothy defines "the son and the spirit which proceeds from the father"[81] as these eternals which the eternal knows and sees eternally. According to Martin Heimgartner, Timothy places the father and son within the category 'In relation to something' (πρός τι, expressed by Timothy in Syriac as ܡܠܬ ܕܠܘܬ ܡܕܡ) of Aristotle's *Categories*. Based on Aristotle, Timothy asserts that "'the in relation to something' are at the same time according to nature"[82], 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 correspondent assumed before.

Timothy uses the same argument as in letter 40 in a less elaborated version in his disputation with al-Mahdī. 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

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[77] Timothy, Letter 40 (CSCO.S 261), 17 (§ 3,15; Syriac).
[78] Pines, Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre, 14–15.
[79] Timothy, Letter 40 (CSCO.S 261), 17 (§ 3,16; Syriac).
[80] Ibid., 24 (§ 4,29–30; Syriac).
[81] Ibid., 24 (§ 4,31; Syriac).
[82] Ibid., 25 (§ 4,35; Syriac). Cf. Aristotle, *Categories*, 7b,15–16. However, Aristotle makes certain restrictions to the contemporaneity in *Categories* 7b,22–8a,9.

eternal objects of the knowledge and seeing. Therefore, God is the "principle of the interdependence of subject and object"[83]. From the point of view of al-Mahdī, God sees "his [own] nature in a completely unlimited manner"[84] without something next to him, which exists also eternally. This is a difference to the Position of Timothy's Muslim correspondent in letter 40, who argued that God saw the creatures already 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 be a further development of the Muslim correspondent's position in letter 40, which might be the result of Timothy's objections.

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?[85] The patriarch does not deny that God sees and knows eternally, but then God must have eternally existing objects of his seeing and knowing, which he does not only see and know 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 he. 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, i.e., not as his creation, but rather as his nature. He saw and knew the creation not eternally as his nature but as his creation.[86]

Thus, according to Heimgartner, 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.[87] "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."[88] 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 benefits Timothy. But Timothy did not go as far as many Christian Arab theologians

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[83] Heimgartner, Trinitätslehre, 78 (English translation by Joachim Jakob).
[84] Timothy, Disputation with al-Mahdī (CSCO.S 244), 126 (§ 18,3; Syriac).
[85] Cf. ibid., 126–127 (§ 18,5; Syriac).
[86] Ibid., 128–129 (§ 18,12–13; Syriac).
[87] Cf. Heimgartner, Trinitätslehre, 78–79.
[88] Ibid., 79 (English translation by Joachim Jakob).

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.[89]

Summary:

In the disputation with caliph al-Mahdī and in letter 40, Timothy seems to have dealt with Muslims, who were close to the Muʿtazilite Abū l-Hudhayl in their reasoning. By all means, a comparison of the Muslim correspondents' 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. Therefore, Timothy was familiar with the Islamic theology of his period and especially with 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 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 tie up to Aristotelian philosophy in this respect, but also to a similar differentiation in Abū l-Hudhayl's doctrine of the divine attributes. However, Timothy omits 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.

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[89] Cf. Haddad, La Trinité divine, 208. An overview on the Christian Arab theologian's diverging assignments of the essential attributes to the three hypostases of the Trinity offers the chart ibid., 232–233. Cf. also Swanson, Are Hypostases Attributes?, 239–240.