

Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rā'īṭah,
a Christian *mutakallim* of the First Abbasid Century

by

Sidney H. GRIFFITH

The prophet Muḥammad died in the year 632 of the Christian era. Within two decades of his death Arab/Islamic rule had spread over Syria/Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, much of Asia Minor and Persia. Many of the centers of Christian intellectual life in the late classical world are located in this geographical area. One has only to call to mind the names of such places as Alexandria, Jerusalem, Caesarea, Antioch, Edessa, Nisibis, and Gundišapor. The very mention of these cities already sets in motion in one's fancy the parade of fathers, heretics and general councils which constitutes the history of the Christian patristic era. But unfortunately, with the single notable exception of the Syro-Palestinian scholar/monk, John Damascene (d.c. 750 A.D.), hardly a name is now widely remembered in the West of a person from the Christian community of this area, who lived after the seventh century. Even among those who are conversant with Syriac Christian literature, it is fashionable to speak of an age of cultural decline beginning in the seventh century, with a final spasm of literary activity erupting in the thirteenth century, followed by silence from then until now. It is as if Christian thought had died in the East, where it had been born.

Under Arab/Islamic rule, in fact, the Christian community, which along with the Jewish community, far outnumbered the Muslim faith community in the conquered areas for many years, did not jettison its intellectual life. It adapted itself to meet the challenge proposed by Muslims. But the theological and apologetical achievements of this eastern Christian community, first in Syriac and then in Arabic, have been largely unappreciated in the West. A reason for this state of affairs has been the West's general unawareness of the religious convictions of Muslims. The fact is that at least in the beginning of Christian theology in Arabic, the parameters of the discourse were drawn by questions posed by Muslims to Christians. These questions, posed in characteristically Muslim phraseology, provoked answers from Christian scholars in terms calculated to be intelligible to Muslims. Now that our understanding of Islam and the history of its religious thought is improving in the West, it is, perhaps ironically, providing us with a key to unlock interesting chapters of Christian intellectual history.

I. THE FIRST ABBASID CENTURY

It was not in the first century of Muslim Arab rule, which corresponds roughly with the years of the Umayyad dynasty (i.e., 650-750), that Christian Arabic theology was born. These were the years when the Arabs were consolidating their power, and Muslims were in the process of establishing their distinctive patterns of faith and worship. Both Christians and Muslims thought of Islam as the religion of the conquering Arabs, which made no special appeal for conversion to the "people of the book"¹. Meanwhile the Christian communities were just becoming aware of the fact that Islam was something more than "the heresy of the Ishmaelites", as John Damascene and many later Greek writers referred to it². The several Christian communities in the Near East continued to conduct their own affairs and their own quarrels during this period, in their own languages, i.e., principally Greek, Syriac and Coptic. It was only with the Abbasid revolution (750 A.D.), and its espousal of the principle of the social equality of all Muslim believers, that conversion to Islam became an attractive option to upwardly mobile Christians³. This circumstance, taken together with the general growth and development of a sophisticated and cosmopolitan Arabic culture, which had been proceeding apace, set the stage for the development of Christian Arabic apologetics, and Muslim anti-Christian tracts and legislation. It gave the impetus to the growth of a distinctly Arabic ecclesiastical expression, which manifested itself in the translation into Arabic of the Bible, the texts of the liturgy, and many Christian classics. The initial steps in these enterprises were taken during the first century of the rule of the Abbasid dynasty (750-850). In particular, it was during this first Abbasid century that Christian Arabic apologetics came to its initial flowering. Patterns and procedures in apologetics were set down during this time which determined the entire subsequent development of Christian thought in Arabic. The topics of discussion were chosen. The process was initiated whereby Christian scholars stated and explained their characteristic doctrines in an Arabic phraseology modelled on that employed by contemporary Muslim *mutakallimūn*, i.e., religious dialecticians. Negatively they attempted to prove that the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, is not simply a contradiction in terms, and not a species of unbelief (*kufṛ*) by reason of associating others

¹ Cf. Claude Cahen, "Note sur l'accueil des chrétiens d'orient à l'islam", *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 166 (1964), pp. 51-58.

² Cf. the study of Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam, the 'Heresy of the Ishmaelites'* (Leiden, 1972).

³ Cf. M. A. Shaban, *The Abbasid Revolution* (Cambridge, 1970).

with God (*širk*). Positively they hoped to make the case that Christianity preserves accurately and fulfills completely the promises of the scriptures.

Of the dozen or so Christian controversial theologians from this period whom we know, three of them are particularly suitable for study because their works are available to us in modern editions. As it happens, they are each from one of the three major Christian confessional groups then current. Theodore Abū Qurrah was a Melkite. Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rā'īṭah was a Jacobite. 'Ammār al-Baṣrī was a Nestorian. Of the three of them, Abū Rā'īṭah is the most suitable for an extended review of his work. Not only is a modern edition of his treatises available, but Georg Graf, their editor, has translated them all into German⁴. The works of Abū Qurrah and their French and German translations are not as readily available as are those of Abū Rā'īṭah⁵. The Arabic works of 'Ammār al-Baṣrī have only recently been published in a modern edition and they are not yet translated into a western language⁶.

Before turning our attention to Abū Rā'īṭah more exclusively, it is important to call to mind the fact that contemporary with these Christian controversialists there are not only the first great Muslim jurists, traditionists, *Qur'ān* commentators and *mutakallimūn*. The first Muslim, anti-Christian writers also wrote during this first Abbasid century. Here we may mention the elderly convert from Christianity to Islam, 'Alī Rabbān aṭ-Ṭabarī⁷,

⁴ Georg Graf, *Die Schriften des Jacobiten Ḥabīb Ibn Ḥidma Abū Rā'īṭa* (CSCO 130 and 131; Louvain, 1951).

⁵ Abū Qurrah's available Greek works are in PG, 97, cols. 1461-1610. His Arabic works are in the following editions: I. Arendzen, *Theodori Abu Kurra de cultu imaginum libellus e codice arabico nunc primum editus latine versus illustratus* (Bonn, 1877); Constantin Bacha, *Les œuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara, évêque d'Haran* (Beyrouth, 1904); *idem*, *Un traité des œuvres arabes de Théodore Abou-Kurra, évêque de Haran* (Tripoli de Syrie and Rome, 1905); Georg Graf, *Die arabischen Schriften des Theodor Abū Qurra, Bischofs von Harrân* (ca. 740-820) (Forschungen zur Christlichen Literatur- und Dogmengeschichte, X. Band. 3/4 Heft; Paderborn, 1910); Louis Cheikho, "Mīmar li Tadurus Abī Qurrah fī Wuḡūd al-Ḥāliq wa d-Dīn al-Qawīm", *al-Machriq* 15 (1912), pp. 757-774; 825-842; Georg Graf, *Des Theodor Abū Kurra Traktat über den Schöpfer und die wahre Religion* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters. Texte und Untersuchungen, Band XIV, Heft. 1; Münster i. W., 1913); Ignace Dick, "Deux écrits inédits de Théodore Abuqurra", *Le Muséon* 72 (1959), pp. 53-67; Sidney H. Griffith, "Some Unpublished Arabic Sayings Attributed to Theodore Abū Qurrah", *Le Muséon* 92 (1979), pp. 29-35.

⁶ Michel Hayek (ed.), *'Ammār al-Baṣrī, Apologie et Controverses* (Beyrouth, 1977). Cf. the editor's French introduction to the texts, also published in *Islamochristiana* 2 (1976), pp. 69-113.

⁷ A. Khalifé et W. Kutsch, "Ar-Radd 'ala-n-Naṣārā de 'Alī aṭ-Ṭabarī", *MUSJ* 36 (1959), pp. 115-148. A. Mingana, *The Book of Religion and Empire* (English text: Manchester, 1922; Arabic text: Cairo, 1923). Regarding the latter work cf. M. Bouyges, "Nos informations sur 'Aliy ... aṭ-Ṭabariy", *MUSJ* 28 (1949-1950), pp. 67-114.

al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm, the Zaydī scholar⁸, and the *littérateur* al-Ġāhiz⁹. We know of many other anti-Christian writings from Muslim scholars of this period. But the majority of their writings are not widely available today¹⁰. Their value for the historian of Christian thought is incomparable. Here we find not only the Muslim answers to the Christian arguments. We also find the challenges which the Christians are attempting to meet in their own works.

A. Biography

Only two dateable events are known from Abū Rā'īṭah's lifetime. Around the year 817, at the request of the Armenian prince Ashot Msaker (806-825), he sent the deacon Nonnus of Nisibis to the prince's court to argue in favor of the Jacobite doctrinal formulae in Christology, against the Melkite Abū Qurrah. This we know from the prefatory paragraphs to Abū Rā'īṭah's own refutation of the Melkites on the subject of the union of divinity and humanity in Christ¹¹. Secondly, on the basis of a report contained in the chronicle of Michael the Syrian, we know that at a synod held in the year 828, Abū Rā'īṭah conspired with the same Nonnus mentioned above to bring about the removal of a certain Philoxenus from the office of bishop of Nisibis¹². These notices are sufficient to enable us to conclude that Abū Rā'īṭah lived during the first half of the ninth century.

In the manuscripts, Abū Rā'īṭah is regularly called *at-Takrītī*, meaning that he was from, or at least associated with the Jacobite center at the city of Takrīt in Mesopotamia¹³. The mention of his name which occurs in the Arabic *Book of the Confession of the Fathers*, a dogmatic *florilegium* belonging to the Coptic community, calls him the bishop of Takrīt¹⁴. This claim that he was a bishop is not *a priori* unlikely, given his role in the synod of 828, and the fact that the Armenian prince applied to him for aid in debating with Abū Qurrah. But the thirteenth century Copt al-Mu'taman

⁸ Ignazio Di Matteo, "Confutazione contro i Cristiani dello Zaydita al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm", *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 9 (1921-1923), pp. 301-364.

⁹ J. Finkel, *Three Essays of Abu 'Othman 'Amr Ibn al-Jāhiz* (Cairo, 1926). Cf. the partial French trans. by I.S. Allouche in *Hespéris* 26 (1939), pp. 123-155; and partial English trans. by Finkel in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 47 (1927), pp. 311-334.

¹⁰ Robert Caspar et al. (eds.), "Bibliographie du Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien (VII^e-X^e s.)", *Islamochristiana* 1 (1975), pp. 125-181.

¹¹ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 65-66.

¹² J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien; Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche* (4 vols.; Paris, 1899-1910), vol. III, pp. 50 and 65. Cf. also J.M. Fiey, *Nisibe, métropole syriaque orientale et ses suffragants des origines à nos jours* (CSCO, 388; Louvain, 1977), p. 83.

¹³ Cf. J. M. Fiey, "Tagrīt", *OrSyr* 8 (1963), pp. 289-341.

¹⁴ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 160.

ibn al-ʿAssāl calls him bishop of Nisibis¹⁵. So the matter remains unresolved.

There can be no doubt that Abū Rā'īṭah's native language was Syriac. He belongs to that group of Christians whose theological traditions are rooted in Syriac culture, and who were among the first controversialists who attempted to translate their beliefs into Arabic. Nonnus of Nisibis also belonged to this number. In fact he was a relative of Abū Rā'īṭah. Among other works, he too wrote an apologetic treatise in Syriac in defense of Christianity, and in reply to Muslim challenges¹⁶. The significance of noting this fact for the purposes of our present endeavor lies in the recognition that much of what was to become standard fare in Christian Arabic thought has its roots in the Syriac intellectual tradition. Initially it was a question of expressing in Arabic what had been elaborated in Syriac¹⁷. However, the Arabic language was not a passive instrument in the process of translation. It became the catalyst for new thought models in Christian theology, especially in as much as Arabic was and is inextricably intertwined with an Islamic religious consciousness.

Here lies the key to understanding the fundamental reason for the birth of Christian Arabic religious literature in the first Abbasid century. By then Arabic was widely understood and freely spoken throughout the body politic. This fact, taken in conjunction with the recognition of the civil and social equality of all Muslims, that was theoretically achieved in the Abbasid revolution, explains one aspect of the new persuasiveness and attractiveness of Islam to Christians. It became essential for the Christian churches to make their doctrines as intelligible as possible in Arabic, or at least to defend themselves from charges of intellectual absurdity, in the new *lingua franca*. It was the claim of al-Ġāḥiẓ, probably widely shared by others, that Christian doctrinal formulae, at least when expressed in Arabic, simply make no sense. Of the Christians themselves and their interpretations of the scriptures he says that their «ugly» doctrines demonstrate, «Their ignorance of the figures of speech and the inflections of languages, and the translation of one language into another, and of what it is possible [to say] about God, and what is not possible.»¹⁸ It was necessary to reassure the Christians themselves on these points, as well as to answer the questioning Muslims.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁶ A. Van Roey, *Nonnus de Nisibe, traité apologétique: étude, texte et traduction* (Bibliothèque du Muséon, vol. 21; Louvain, 1948).

¹⁷ This was also the case with the celebrated Apology of Timothy, the Nestorian *catholicos*, who was a contemporary of Abū Rā'īṭah. Cf. Hans Putman, *L'élise et l'Islam sous Timothée I (780-823)* (Beyrouth, 1975).

¹⁸ Finkel, *Three Essays ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

B. Bibliography

There are eleven separate pieces in Georg Graf's edition of Abū Rā'īṭah's writings. They are all that is presently known of his literary output. Two of them are very short excerpts of originally longer works. They have been preserved by the Coptic community, in the work of al-Mu'taman ibn al-'Assāl, and the *Book of the Confession of the Fathers*. A third *opusculum*, preserved in at least three different manuscripts in three different places, is the report of an occasion on which Abū Rā'īṭah, a Jacobite, Abū Qurrah, a Melkite, and a certain Nestorian metropolitan named 'Abd ʾĪsū, were brought together in the presence of an unnamed government official. Each one was ordered to relate his distinctive doctrine, in a concise statement, without any one of them making an objection to another one. Each one then states the classic Christological doctrine of his own confessional community, and offers a brief justification (*burhān*) for their characteristic formulae¹⁹. Scholars have been inclined to doubt the authenticity of this report. They point out that the only known Nestorian metropolitan named 'Abd ʾĪsū was the metropolitan of Nisibis who died in 1318. And they conclude that the report must therefore be a much later fabrication which simply makes use of the names of two earlier, well known controversialists. This conclusion, however, not only discounts two known persons in favor of an unknown one, but it ignores the fairly numerous known instances of Christians being called before Muslim government officials to give an account of themselves. But we must let this issue rest here²⁰. We have eight other works of Abū Rā'īṭah to mention.

Georg Graf reckoned that four of these remaining pieces were written against the Muslims. He lists an epistle (*risālah*) on the Trinity; an epistle on the Incarnation; a list of testimonies from the Old Testament in favor of both of these doctrines; and an epistle substantiating the Christian religion. The four remaining pieces are directed against Melkites. They are an epistle addressed to an Armenian prince, against the Melkite conception of the union of divinity and humanity in Christ, as this doctrine was taught by Abū Qurrah; an epistle addressed to the same Armenian prince in defence of the Monophysite addition to the *Trishagion*²¹, also against the counter

¹⁹ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 163-165.

²⁰ Consider, e.g., the Patriarch Timothy's interview with al-Mahdī, cf. n. 17 above; M.F. Nau, "Un colloque du Patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716", *Journal Asiatique* 11th^e série, 5 (1915), pp. 225-279; K. Vollers, "Das Religionsgespräch von Jerusalem (um 800AD); aus dem Arabischen übersetzt", *ZKG* 29 (1908), pp. 29-71; 197-221.

²¹ On this subject in general cf. Vincenc-S. Janeras, "Les byzantins et le trishagion christologique", in *Miscellanea Liturgica; in onore di sua eminenza il Cardinale Giacomo Lercaro* (2 vols.; Rome, 1967), vol. II, pp. 469-499.

arguments of Abū Qurrah; another short essay (*maqālah*) on the same subject; and finally a long epistle against the Melkites which is in fact a treatise on the proper understanding of the technical terms 'person', 'nature', 'being', 'hypostasis', as these are used in Trinitarian theology²².

This bare recital of the works of Abū Rā'īṭah and their topics scarcely conveys an adequate idea of their significance. Recognizable among the four anti-Muslim treatises are examples of the two basic genres of Christian Arabic apologetic literature²³. The one is a general apology for the Christian religion. The author of such an apology usually discusses not only the basic doctrines, such as Trinity and Incarnation, but also the criteria for recognizing the true religion. In addition, he usually attempts to answer objections to such typical Christian practices as facing east in prayer, the veneration of the cross, and the rituals of the sacraments. Among Abū Rā'īṭah's works the piece described above as a substantiation of the Christian religion is such a general apology. Each of Abū Rā'īṭah's famous contemporaries, viz., Abū Qurrah and Ḥammad al-Baṣrī, wrote similar general apologies²⁴. They have the character of a *vademecum* or a compendium intended to provide the reader with ready responses to common inquiries about the Christian religion. Typically, they do not go beyond giving the gist of a suitable reply to specific questions that may be asked about the topics we have listed above.

The epistle-treatise genre is the second of the two basic categories of Christian Arabic apologetic literature. Two of Abū Rā'īṭah's anti-Muslim works have this format. It is quite clear that each piece is addressed to a much wider audience than the persons who are named in the introductory paragraphs. Often enough these addressees are completely unidentifiable. They are presented as persons who have consulted Abū Rā'īṭah, or one of the other apologists, on some doctrinal issue. The inquiries are, of course, phrased in terms that had become catchwords in the religious controversies of the time. Abū Rā'īṭah develops his responses as one who would furnish his correspondents with a whole arsenal of replies to possible distinctions, objections, and counter-proposals on any given topic. Once the initial query is proposed, in fact, he generally ignores the epistolary format altogether, and his treatise is carried forward on the momentum of its own dialectical style. At the beginning of his epistle on the Trinity, to mention only one place, he identifies this style as the question and answer method

²² Cf. Graf's *résumé* of the contents of these works in Graf, CSCO, vol. 131, pp. iv-xxvii.

²³ Cf. Georg Graf, "Christliche Polemik gegen den Islam", *Gelbe Hefte* 2 (1926), pp. 825-842.

²⁴ For Abū Qurrah cf. the treatise edited by Cheikho, cited in n. 5 above. *Kitāb al-burhān* is Ḥammad al-Baṣrī's comparable work. Cf. Hayek, *op. cit.*

of inquiry. It was popular in Syriac treatises of this same nature²⁵. Doubtless its ancestry is to be found in the Greek *Erotapokriseis* apologetical style²⁶. The formal designations, 'question' and 'answer', have given way to a more fluid narrative technique. For this reason we have every incentive to believe that this style played a role in the development of the characteristic dialectical usage of the formal *ilm al-kalām*, or dialectical theology, within Islam. In the days of Abū Rā'īṭah the essential features of this usage were already well established in Islamic religious texts²⁷.

Abū Rā'īṭah's works were written for the benefit of his fellow Jacobites, whom he calls the people of the truth (*ahl al-ḥaqq*). His principal adversaries are the Melkites and the Muslims. We should not assume that his quarrel with these two groups, especially as it was conducted in Arabic, was aimed in two different directions. In his time the apologetic enterprise of any one group (Jacobites, Melkites, Nestorians, Muslims, Jews) was necessarily conducted in view of all of the others. There was always the suspicion on the part of the Jacobites, for example, that the doctrines of Melkites and Nestorians played into the hands of Muslims, whom they considered to be professing a blend of Nestorianism and Arianism. Melkites and Nestorians, on the other hand, felt that certain Jacobite formulations such as those which mention the suffering and death of God, played into the hands of Muslim anti-Christian polemicists. Muslims, meanwhile, followed the discussions of Christian differences with interest. They commented on them and even expressed preferences among them²⁸. So Abū Rā'īṭah obviously hoped that Muslims and others would understand his Jacobite position, and especially how it differed from the teachings of the Melkites, as well as its opposition to Nestorianism.

But what did Abū Rā'īṭah think of the Muslims, and how did he identify them in his writings? He never calls them Muslims. When he refers to them at all, in any way other than by repeating their religious formulae, by quoting the *Qur'ān*, or by citing their objections to Christianity, he uses such general characterizations as, «Those who differ from us» (*muḥālīfūna*). Only in the first pages of his epistle on the Trinity does he use a more

²⁵ Cf. in particular the *scholia* of Bar Kōnī. No. 10 is written in reply to Muslim questions. A Scher (ed.), *Theodorus bar Kōnī, Liber Scholiorum* (2 vols., CSCO 55 and 69; Paris, 1910 and 1912), vol. 69, pp. 231-284.

²⁶ Cf. Heinrich Dörries, "Erotapokriseis," in *RAC* VI (Stuttgart, 1966), cols. 342-370.

²⁷ Cf. Josef van Ess, "Disputationspraxis in der islamischen Theologie. Eine vorläufige Skizze", *Revue des Études Islamiques* 44 (1976), pp. 23-60.

²⁸ Cf., e.g., Armand Abel, *Abū 'Isā Muḥammad B. Harun al Warraq; le livre pour la réfutation des trois sectes chrétiennes, texte arabe traduit et présenté* (mimeo ed.; Bruxelles, 1949); and the catalog of Christian groups and their beliefs in *al-Kitāb al-Awsaṭ* of Naṣī' al-Akbar, Josef van Ess (ed.), *Frühe mu'tazilitische Häresiographie* (Beirut, 1971), pp. 76-87.

definite designation. Here he calls them «southerners», or more exactly «people of the south» (*ahl at-tayman*)²⁹. Initially one is inclined to emend the text to something seemingly more likely, such as «people of faith» (*ahl al-īmān*). Muslims of Abū Rā'īṭah's time called themselves "the believers" (*al-mu'minūn*), following the preferred usage of the *Qur'ān*³⁰. Abū Qurrah regularly refers to them in his treatise written against them, in favor of the veneration of images, as "people who claim faith".³¹ But there is no indication of difficulties at this point in Abū Rā'īṭah's manuscript tradition. Perhaps the solution is to be found in understanding the epithet as a reference to the *qiblah*, i.e., the direction to which Muslims turn when praying, i.e., towards the *Kābah* in Mecca. There is some support for this suggestion in a Syriac chronicle from later times. It says that Muslims worship while facing toward the south³². And so "people of the south" is not a preposterous designation for Muslims who pray in Takrit, Iraq, which is located on the Tigris, some fifty kilometers northwest of Baghdad.

II. ABŪ RĀ'ĪṬAH'S CONTROVERSIAL THEOLOGY

A. The Topics

The standard topics in Muslim/Christian controversy have always included the Christian doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation. These two doctrines are in fact the two faces of the same coin as they figure in these discussions. The pivotal point is the Christian insistence that God has a consubstantial son, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Muslims, of course, not only deny that God generates or is generated (*al-Ihlās*, 112)³³, but they insist that Jesus the son of Mary, the Christ, is the messenger of God, his word and his spirit, who should not figure in any affirmation of three (i.e., *at-tathlith*; cf. *an-Nisā'* (4), 171). Accordingly, Abū Rā'īṭah's treatise on the Trinity seeks to demonstrate that the affirmation of the three hypostases of the one God does not involve any contradiction to the affirmation of his unity (*at-tawḥīd*). The treatise on the incarnation seeks to explain that Jesus the son of Mary is the incarnate Son of God, without positing any change or

²⁹ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 1.

³⁰ Cf. Frederick M. Denny, "Some Religio-Communal Terms and Concepts in the *Qur'ān*", *Numen* 24 (1977), pp. 26-59.

³¹ "*Man yaddā'i l-īman*." Arendzen, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³² I.-B. Chadot (ed.), *Anonymi Auctoris Chronicon ad Annum Christi 1234 Pertinens* (CSCO, vol. 81; Paris, 1920), p. 230.

³³ Citations from the *Qur'ān* are according to the modern Egyptian edition of the text. Translations designated as done by Arberry are from Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (2 vols.; London, 1955).

alteration in the divine being. The treatise that is a general apology for Christianity adds another basic topic to the discussion, viz., how one may discern the true religion. These three topics are the standard ones to be found in the works of all of the religious controversialists who wrote in Arabic during the first Abbasid century.

B. *The Method*

For both Muslims and Christians what is at issue in their controversies about the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation is the proper understanding of what is said about God in the Bible. Muslims interpret the Old and New Testaments according to the principles laid down in the *Qur'ān*. In regard to the doctrines which were the topics of controversy, they customarily accused the Christians of distorting (*at-tahrif*) the evident meanings of the scriptural testimonies³⁴.

Abū Rā'īṭah, along with the other Christian apologists, is on the defensive in his treatises. He argues that the scriptures and their testimonies must be interpreted according to the dictates of reason and the doctrines of the fathers and the councils. If he puts his emphasis on reason it is because the fathers and councils were, of course, unacceptable to Muslims. And even in regard to the scriptural testimonies the arguments often come down to a discussion of the usages of language.

Abū Rā'īṭah does not hesitate to quote the *Qur'ān* in defense of his beliefs. In fact his work abounds not only with explicit quotations, but with allusions to the *Qur'ān* and many typically Qur'anic turns of phrase. This fact should alert the reader to notice his awareness of the extent to which the phraseology of the *Qur'ān* conditions the Muslim religious consciousness. It also raises, to some extent, questions about the interpretation of the *Qur'ān*. Some modern scholars have maintained that what the *Qur'ān* has to say about the Christians and their beliefs has no relationship to main-line Christianity, i.e., such groups as the Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians. Rather, they say that these references are to what was taught by splinter Christian groups, whose members had somehow gotten lost in the desert³⁵. This is not the place to pursue this issue. But here it must be said that in the religious controversies of the first Abbasid century, the passages from the *Qur'ān* which deal with Christians were freely quoted by both sides as

³⁴ For a quick review of the basic issues cf. W. Montgomery Watt, "The Early Development of the Muslim Attitude to the Bible", *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society* 16 (1955-56), pp. 50-62.

³⁵ Cf., e.g., W. Montgomery Watt, "The Christianity Criticized in the Qur'ān", *The Muslim World* 57 (1967), pp. 197-201; Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (London, 1965).

pertinent to their discussions. They were understood by Muslims to be accurate judgments of the gist of the Christian doctrines, even though the Christian theologians may wish to question the veracity of these judgments.

As for Abū Rā'īṭah's purpose, it is to offer a proof (*al-burhān*) for the veracity of Christian doctrines, of the sort that the *Qur'ān* demands of the people of the book, "Produce your proof (*burhān*) if you speak truly" (*al-Baqarah* (2), 111 Arberry). As he says, he hopes to accomplish this purpose through conversation (*muḥāwarah*) and debate (*munāẓarah*). In his epistle on the Trinity he instructs his Christian readers to say to their Muslim interrogators, "The hope is that you will treat us fairly in the discussion (*al-kalām*) and that you will bargain with us as brothers who share in the goods they inherit from their father. All of them share in them [i.e., the goods]. Nothing belongs to one rather than to another. So we and you are on a par in the discussion."³⁶

It has been said, "The distinctive character of apologetic, as compared with other ways of commending Christian faith, is the attempt to find common ground with those whom it seeks to persuade."³⁷ Such is clearly the distinctive character of Abū Rā'īṭah's treatises. He writes in Arabic phrases that are replete with words and expressions from the *Qur'ān*, as we have said, and further, he consciously reflects the style of the *kalām* of the Muslim *mutakallimūn*. To this extent it can be said that he was influenced by them. He consciously appropriates their idiom for the purpose of giving a new expression, or at least a new defense, to traditional Christian doctrines. We must insist on this point because of the positions of those who search the works of the earlier Christian Arabic writers for evidences of how they have influenced the Muslim writers, rather than the other way about³⁸. Such an approach prevents one from observing the noteworthy achievements of the Christian apologists themselves. On the other hand, our insistence that these apologists are consciously modeling their discourse on that of the contemporary Muslim dialecticians should not be taken as a denial of the obvious influences of the church fathers on the origins of Muslim theology³⁹. Nor is it incompatible with the suggestion that the refinement of the *ilm al-kalām* owes much to the involvement of the Muslim *muta-*

³⁶ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 3 and 4.

³⁷ Maurice Wiles, *The Christian Fathers* (London, 1966), p. 16.

³⁸ This approach is one of the factors that marks H. A. Wolfson's *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976).

³⁹ Cf. Morris S. Seale, *Muslim Theology; A Study of Origins with Reference to the Church Fathers* (London, 1964).

kallimūn in arguments with non-Muslim controversialists, including Christians⁴⁰.

C. The Arguments

The most convenient way to sketch Abū Rā'īṭah's arguments against the Muslims is to follow the outline of his general apology for Christianity, supplementing it in the proper places by reference to his epistles on the Trinity and the Incarnation.

The epistle on the substantiation of the Christian religion is unfinished in the form in which we have it⁴¹. Yet it has four major sections. The first of these discusses the marks of the true religion. The second is an argument in defense of the Trinity, from reason and the scriptures. The third seeks to justify the doctrine of the Incarnation. The fourth and unfinished section deals with several areas of Christian life and practice about which Muslims have questions, viz., the veneration of the cross, the Eucharist, the forty day fast.

1. The True Religion

Abū Rā'īṭah argues that the only defensible reason for the profession of any religious doctrine is evidence of God's own endorsement of that doctrine. Such an evidence, he maintains, is to be found in the miracles worked with God's permission by the messengers who preach the doctrine. He recalls that this is the precedent set in scripture. God enabled Moses to work certain miracles in confirmation of his claim to be God's messenger (cf. Exodus 4:1-8). The same story about Moses is to be found in the *Qur'ān*, e.g., in *Ṭa Ha* (20), 18-23. On this model, he argues, Christianity alone of the contemporary religions has a just claim to allegiance. The miracles worked by the prophets who foretold Christ, and those worked by Jesus himself, and by the apostles with the permission of Jesus, prove God's endorsement of Christianity⁴². The reason for reliance on miracles as an evidence of God's endorsement, according to Abū Rā'īṭah, is that they are a matter of historical record. As such they are clearer proof of divine approval than anything rhetorical fancy can devise. They are evident to the simple minded person as well as to the wise man. "There is no way to deny or disown [the

⁴⁰ Cf. L. Gardet, "Quelques réflexions sur la place du *'ilm al-kalām* dans les 'sciences religieuses' musulmanes", in George Makdisi, (ed.), *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A. R. Gibb* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1965), pp. 258-259; S. Pines, "A Note on an Early Meaning of the Term *Mutakallim*," *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971), pp. 224-240.

⁴¹ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 131-159.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

miracles] in the heart," he says, "and if the tongue denies them it is because of envy or an antecedent hatred."⁴³ For this reason Abū Rā'īṭah takes it as axiomatic that miracles are the basic warranty for the acceptance of Christian doctrines. As he puts it,

The clearest evidence and the plainest proof in evidence of what we say, and the correctness of our manner of speech, which we have spoken on the authority of the *imāms* of Christianity, and taken from the Old and New divine scriptures, whose claim is authenticated, consists in the signs and wonders we have described, rather than opinion or reasoning⁴⁴.

Such a reliance on the miracles of Christ and his disciples as a basic motive for accepting the credibility of Christian teaching is certainly not an original argument on the part of Abū Rā'īṭah. It is at least as old as the work of the earliest extra-biblical apologist of whom we have a record, viz. Quadratus, who wrote in the early second century⁴⁵. Abū Rā'īṭah, however, is following a method of presenting traditional Christian apologetic arguments in the idiom of the *Qur'ān*. This method is already evident in his referral to the miracles of Moses which are described in the *Qur'ān*; in his use of Arabic terms such as "*imām*" in the quotation given above; and in his description of miracles as "signs" (*ayyāt*) that are wrought by the leave, or the permission of God (*idhn Allāh*). His use of the latter phrase is particularly significant. The *Qur'ān* insists that the miracles worked by all of God's messengers, including those of Jesus, son of Mary, were performed only by the permission of God (cf., e.g., *Āl 'Imrān* (3), 49). Whereas Abū Rā'īṭah insists that it is a matter of record that Jesus worked miracles in his own name, and that his apostles and disciples worked them by Jesus' permission (*bi 'idhnihi*).

There is another important element in Abū Rā'īṭah's discussion of how one may discern the true religion. He has argued that the miracles worked by the prophets, by Jesus, and by the apostles and disciples are an evidence of God's endorsement of Christianity. He maintains that this endorsement is the only worthy motivation for sustaining a firm religious conviction (*i'tiqād*). By way of contrast, he lists six other motives or incentives which he considers to be unworthy reasons for professing any religious creed. They are worldly desire, ambition, overpowering fear, license, personal aggrandizement, and tribal solidarity. He quickly points out that no one should profess Christianity for any one or all of these reasons. He leaves it unsaid, but his

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

⁴⁵ Cf. G. W. H. Lampe, "Miracles and Early Christian Apologetic", and M. F. Wiles, "Miracles in the Early Church", in C. F. D. Moule (ed.), *Miracles* (London, 1965), pp. 203-234.

implication is clearly that these six motives do play a part in the religious convictions of those who adhere to non-Christian religions. In his own milieu these other religions are principally Judaism and Islam.

Abū Rā'īṭah's list of the unworthy reasons for sustaining religious conviction calls attention to the fact that his contemporaries, Abū Qurrah and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, outline similar reasons for which a religion should not be accepted⁴⁶. Like Abū Rā'īṭah, they too are silent about what religions they think are professed for these unworthy reasons. But the later Christian Arabic apologist who is known under the pseudonym 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, who uses the same argument, did not hesitate to allege that most converts to Islam were motivated by these same unworthy incentives⁴⁷. The only other place where such an argument is to be found in Christian apologetics is in Roger Bacon's *Moralis Philosophia*. He lists almost the same six unworthy incentives as does Abū Rā'īṭah. Since a Latin translation of al-Kindī's apology for Christianity was available in the West from the time of Peter the Venerable⁴⁸, one wonders if it was Bacon's source for this sort of argument. He himself mentions only Aristotle and Boethius.

Since the Christians were arguing already in the first Abbasid century that the miracles worked by Jesus, and by subsequent Christian holy men with the permission of Jesus, prove God's endorsement of Christian teaching, it is not surprising to discover that Muslim apologists began to respond in the same vein, in defense of Muḥammad's claim to prophecy and Islam's claim to universal allegiance. For example, stories which are typically told about Christian holy men are now seen to have counterparts even in Ibn Ishāq's eighth century biography of the prophet⁴⁹. So the influence of Christian apologists such as Abū Rā'īṭah can be understood as having an effect even in the development of Muslim apologetics.

⁴⁶ Cf. Hayek, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-41; 136-138; Bacha, 1904, pp. 71-75; Van Roey, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-32; 64-67.

⁴⁷ Cf. the English summary of this apology in William Muir, *The Apology of Al Kindy, Written at the Court of al-Mamun, in defense of Christianity* (London, 1887).

⁴⁸ Cf. James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton, 1964), pp. 101-107; José Muñoz Sendino, "Apología del Cristianismo de Al-Kindi", *Miscelanea Comillas* 11 and 12 (1949), pp. 339-460. Cf. Eugenio Massa (ed.), *Rogeri Baconis Moralis Philosophia* (Turin, 1958), pp. 188-192.

⁴⁹ Cf., e.g., Gordon D. Newby, "An Example of Coptic Literary Influence on Ibn Ishāq's Sirah", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 31 (1972), pp. 22-28. One should point out that the themes to be found in the relevant hagiographic literature are not limited to Coptic. Cf. Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity", *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), pp. 80-101; *idem.*, "Town, Village and Holy Man: the Case of Syria", in *Assimilation et résistance à la culture gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien: Travaux du VI^e Congrès international d'études classiques [Madrid, 1974]* (Paris/Bucharest, 1976), pp. 213-220.

2. The Trinity

It should be stated at the outset of our discussion of the Trinity that for Abū Rā'īṭah this doctrine is a datum of the scriptures. His purpose is not to prove its truth, but to explain the formula that expresses it. In the comparatively small space he devotes exclusively to the Bible in his apologies for the Trinity, he contents himself with listing the traditional scriptural testimonies⁵⁰. The testimonies, and their accompanying interpretations had become traditional over the centuries of Christian, anti-Jewish apologetic and polemic writing. The purpose there had been to prove from scripture that Christians are not tritheists, and that Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity become incarnate⁵¹. No change appears in the basic thrust of these arguments when the Muslims join the Jews as the adversaries. But there is a new objection to face, as we mentioned above.

The *Qur'ān* says that the people of the book distort and misconstrue (*at-tahrīf*) the testimonies of the scriptures. Abū Rā'īṭah deals with this objection in his epistle on the Trinity. He maintains that the charge might be granted some credence if it were not for the fact that the Jews, who are inimical to Christians, have the same Old Testament scriptures as the Christians have. If the response to this claim is that the Jews have allowed the distortion of the scriptures at the hands of Christians for the sake of misleading the Muslims, Abū Rā'īṭah retorts that such a supposition would involve the self-defeat of the Jews⁵². This defense involves only the Old Testament to be sure. But, especially in regard to the Trinity, it is the Old Testament that is the major source of the scriptural testimonies that he mentions.

The major objection that Muslims of Abū Rā'īṭah's time raised to the doctrine of the Trinity did not focus on the scriptures. Rather they objected to what they perceived as a contradiction in the terms of the doctrine itself, i.e., the statement that there is one God in three hypostases. They viewed this doctrine as a threat to monotheism. The simple fact is, they argued, that positing three (*at-tathlīth*) divine hypostases is directly contradictory to the profession of monotheism (*at-tawḥīd*). Certain Muslims who were adept in Greek philosophy, such as Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 873), a near contemporary of Abū Rā'īṭah, even argued that the doctrine is untenable on the grounds of Greek logic⁵³.

⁵⁰ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 19-23, 94-106, 146-147.

⁵¹ Cf. the study of these scriptural testimonies in A. P. Hayman, *The Disputation of Sergius the Stylite Against a Jew* (CSCO, vol. 339, Louvain, 1973), pp. 9-32.

⁵² Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 23 and 24.

⁵³ Cf. al-Kindī's objections as repeated in A. Perier, "Un traité de Yahyā ben 'Adī, défense du dogme de la trinité contre les objections d'al-Kindī", *ROC* 22 (1920-1921), pp. 3-21.

Abū Rā'īṭah's defense of the doctrine has two main emphases. They are, first, what is meant by saying that God is one. And, second, what is meant by 'describing' (*waṣf*) God in terms of hypostases that are named 'father', 'son', and 'spirit'. A larger and more basic concern is the whole notion of describing God or ascribing predicates to him. We must turn our attention briefly to this larger subject prior to following Abū Rā'īṭah's more specific arguments.

The description (*waṣf*) of God and the proper understanding of any predicate (*ṣifah*) applied to him in divine revelation was the subject of a major religious controversy among Muslims in Abū Rā'īṭah's day. It was the existence of the Muslim controversy on this subject that supplied the 'common ground' and much of the terminology for Abū Rā'īṭah's defense of the Christian doctrinal formulae. The controversy centered on the divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*) and how one may affirm their reality without compromising one's affirmation of God's unity⁵⁴.

Without here undertaking a review of the Muslim controversies about the divine attributes, we must nevertheless pause for a moment to say something about the Arabic verb *waṣafa* and its associated forms. Word for word, this verb in its various grammatical manifestations occurs more often in Abū Rā'īṭah's treatises than any other single locution. It basically means 'to describe' something. The *maṣdar* or verbal noun of the same root, i.e., *waṣf*, means 'description' or the act of describing. The noun *ṣifah* indicates first of all a descriptive term, i.e., an adjective. Then it can be considered as a predicate which affirms some given meaning (*al-mā'nā*) to be true of a given subject entity. In this functional sense the *ṣifah* as predicate is equivalent of a relative clause. 'God is knowing (*ālīm*)' for example, is a proposition in which the *ṣifah*, or predicate, 'knowing', says that God is one who knows. It is a name or a noun in as much as it says that God is a knower. This understanding of *ṣifah* as a descriptive predicate had already been elaborated by the Arabic grammarians in the eighth century⁵⁵. As we shall see, Abū Rā'īṭah was well aware of the implications of this understanding.

It is not the verb *waṣafa* or its associated forms as such, however, which evoke the immediate context for Abū Rā'īṭah's apologetic arguments. Rather, as we said above, it is when God is the subject of description, and when predicates (*ṣifāt*) are spoken of him, and the Muslim scholars are discussing the meanings and the implications of these predicates, in the light

⁵⁴ Cf. Michel Allard, *Le problème des attributs divins* (Beyrouth, 1965); Richard Frank, *Beings and their Attributes* (Albany, N.Y., 1978).

⁵⁵ Cf. W. Diem, "Nomen, Substantiv und Adjektiv bei den arabischen Grammatikern", *Oriens* 23-24 (1974), pp. 313-316.

of the developing Arabic grammatical understanding, that the proper intellectual context is found for Abū Rā'īṭah's apology for the Trinitarian doctrinal formula. The discussion within Islam centered around certain ones of the beautiful names of God (*al-'asmā' al-ḥusnā*)⁵⁶ which are common in the *Qur'ān*, e.g., 'knowing' (*ālīm*), 'powerful' (*qādir*), 'hearing' (*samī*), 'seeing' (*baṣīr*), etc. All Muslims agree that the propositions to be found in the book of revelation, in which God is the subject and one of these *ṣifāt*, or adjectives, is the predicate, are true. In Abū Rā'īṭah's time, and for more than a century thereafter, there was a considerable controversy over what the truth of such propositions implies, and how they are to be understood, in the light of the suppositions of Arabic grammar. The grammarians of that day thought, to quote Richard Frank, "The inflected forms of the verb and the verbal adjectives ... are derived from nouns, viz., from the *maṣādir* [i.e., verbal nouns], which, as nouns are (or may be) understood to name or designate entities of some kind."⁵⁷ If one were to hold that the predicates ascribed to God must be understood in a strict sense, and not metaphorically, then in the light of this grammatical supposition, some explanation must be forthcoming as to how it is possible to affirm the truth of such propositions as we have mentioned, without compromising one's affirmation of God's unity (*at-tawḥīd*). After all, one could hardly maintain on Islamic premises that there are distinct entities in God, as the use of the usual descriptive predicates is now seen to imply in Arabic. This issue was the focus of the Muslim controversy. Abū Rā'īṭah did not enter into it as such, but he was certainly conversant with its idiom, as we shall see.

The Christian apologists, and Abū Rā'īṭah among them, were quick to see that the prominence of such a controversy provided them with a context, and even with a phraseology, in which they could argue in behalf of their traditional doctrine of the Trinity. 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. Eventually, as it happened, in the work of Yaḥya Ibn 'Adī (893-974), Abū Rā'īṭah's Jacobite successor in apologetics, it was even affirmed, amid the proper definitions and distinctions to be sure, that, "God is one being (*ḡawhar*), of three predicates (*ṣifāt*), each one of which is other than the

⁵⁶ Cf. this term used in *Ṭa Ha* (20), 8; *al-Isrā'* (17), 110.

⁵⁷ Richard Frank, in an untitled paper prepared for the Society for the Study of Islamic Philosophy, and presented at their meeting on March 30, 1976, private typescript, p. 4.

other two in meaning (*al-mā'nā*)."⁵⁸ It is no surprise, in response to this state of affairs, to find later Muslim scholars accusing their own earlier Muslim adversaries of having advocated positions regarding the *ṣifāt Allāh* which in effect put these *ṣifāt* on the same plane of significance as the Christians' divine hypostases. Such was aš-Šahrastānī's (d. 1153) judgment on the position regarding God's attributes advocated by Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf (d. 841), Abū Rā'īṭah's famous Mu'tazilite contemporary. He said, "Abū l-Hudhayl's affirmation of these attributes as aspects of the essence is the same as the hypostases of the Christians."⁵⁹ And from the bibliographer Ibn an-Nadīm (d. 995) we have an alleged report from the ninth century Nestorian scholar Pethion about 'Abd Allāh Ibn Kullāb (d. 855), another Mu'tazilite. He supposedly summed up his position regarding the speech (*kalām*) of God with the saying, "The word of Allāh is Allāh." For this reason his fellow Mu'tazilite, 'Abbād, called him a Christian. Pethion is quoted as saying, "God be merciful to 'Abd Allāh. While he was sitting beside me in this cloister, he pointed in the direction of the church and learned this saying from me. If he had lived we would have overcome the Muslims."⁶⁰ The influence of the Christian apologists who took advantage of the Muslim discussions for their own purposes clearly had an effect. But our business is with Abū Rā'īṭah's arguments.

a. God is One

Abū Rā'īṭah opens his treatise on the Trinity with the insistence that the Muslims should not assume that they and the Christians are operating with the same concept of unity (*waḥdānīyah*), when they both say that God is one (*wāḥid*). The Muslims, on Abū Rā'īṭah's report, argued that since both Christians and Muslims agree that God is one, this affirmation should of itself rule out the possibility of any affirmation of three divine hypostases. Abū Rā'īṭah is probably thinking here of the statement in the *Qur'ān*, instructing the Muslims about their relationship with the people of the book. Say, "We believe in what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God is one." (*al-Ankabūt* (29), 46). In response to this claim Abū Rā'īṭah asks, "In how many ways can

⁵⁸ Augustin Perier, *Petits traités apologétique de Yahya ben 'Adi* (Paris, 1920), p. 11. On this subject, look for the publication of Avril Makhlouf, "The Trinitarian Doctrine of Yahya Ibn 'Adi."

⁵⁹ Translation of W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh, 1973), p. 246.

⁶⁰ Bayard Dodge, (ed. and trans.), *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm; a Tenth Century Survey of Muslim Culture* (2 vols.; New York, 1970), vol. I, p. 448.

something be said to be one?" The immediate answer is that in general something may be called 'one' in genus, or 'one' in species, or 'one' in number. But none of these may apply to God, he says, and particularly not the last one. That is to say, he argues that God may not be said to be one in number, which, he suspects, is his Muslim adversary's position⁶¹. He proceeds to build his own argument against this Muslim position on the basis of another assertion about God to be found in the *Qur'ān*, viz., "Like him there is aught" (*aṣ-Ṣūrā* (42), 11). This verse, he says, contradicts the claim that God is one in number. This particular verse from the *Qur'ān* was also widely quoted by Abū Rā'īṭah's contemporary Muslim *mutakallimūn*, especially the Mu'tazilites, and specifically in connection with the adjective 'one' (*wāḥid*), as it is predicated of God⁶². So Abū Rā'īṭah's purposes are clearly to subvert the Muslim position. His argument is easy to follow, if not easy to accept. First he explains what he means by maintaining that God cannot be one in number. Then he argues that God must be one in being or substance, if it is true that there is nothing like him. And finally, basing himself on what amounts to a numerology, he argues that the numeral 'three' is the only numeral that is unlike any other numeral, and therefore it is fitting that it be applied to God, "Like whom there is aught," and who is one in being, but three in hypostases.

i. *Not One in Number*. Muslim scholars argued that to say that God is one (*wāḥid*) in number is to maintain that he is a unique one (*wāḥid fard*). This is the terminology employed by the Basrian Mu'tazilite Abū 'Alī al-Ġubbā'ī (d. 915)⁶³. We have every reason to believe Abū Rā'īṭah's report that his own Muslim contemporaries employed the same terminology. Abū Rā'īṭah argues that this position is impossible to maintain if we are to take the testimony of the *Qur'ān* seriously, viz., "Like him there is aught." His argument is that the number 'one' is a digit. It is merely the first digit of a series of digits. The first digit anticipates the series. It is a part (*ba'd*) of the series. To say, that God is one in number is to describe him in terms of division (*tab'īd*) and diminution (*nuqṣān*). Furthermore, it is to accept a description (*ṣifah*) of him which fails to distinguish him from the rest of his creation. He is merely a part of a series. The fact is, he

⁶¹ It is in fact the position espoused by the philosopher al-Kindī. Cf. A. Perier, *art. cit.*, p. 11.

⁶² Cf. H. Ritter-(ed.), *Die dogmatischen Lehren der Anhänger des Islam von Abu l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Ismā'il al-As'ari* (Istanbul, 1929), p. 155.

⁶³ Cf. the report in al-Ḥasan 'Abd al-Ġabbar, *Al-Mughnī* (15 vols; Cairo, 1960), vol. V, p. 245.

concludes, "The perfection of number is what comprises all species of number, whereas 'one' is a part of number."⁶⁴

ii. *One in Being*. Abū Rā'īṭah contends that the Christian description of God as 'one' means that he is one in being (*ḡawhar*). He uses the Arabic word *ḡawhar* where we should find οὐσία in Greek, or *ithyā* in Syriac. In English, following the custom of the Latin theologians, we often find the word 'substance' used in such a context. Abū Rā'īṭah's use of the word *ḡawhar* here is noteworthy because it contrasts with the general meaning of the term as it is used in the writings of the contemporary Muslim *mutakallimūn*. In their system of thought *ḡawhar* indicates something on the order of an 'atom' which is thought of as a constructive element or principle in the ontological structure of composite, created beings. It presumes an entirely different metaphysics than what one finds in Christian contexts⁶⁵. This Muslim usage has nothing to do with what Abū Rā'īṭah is saying about God. As a matter of fact the Mu'tazilite *mutakallimūn* agreed that God is not a *ḡawhar*⁶⁶. In his affirmation that God is 'perfect one' (*wāḥid kāmīl*) in 'being' (*ḡawhar*) Abū Rā'īṭah means, as he clarifies it, that God's 'whatness' (*al-māhiyyah*)⁶⁷ is indivisible. He is simple (*baṣīṭ*), non-composite, spiritual (*rūḥānī*), non-bodily. He transcends all of his creatures, both sensible and intelligible. Nothing resembles him, and nothing other than himself is intermingled with him. He is unique in 'being'.⁶⁸

When Christians say that God is three, Abū Rā'īṭah next points out, they are not speaking of his 'being' (*ḡawhar*). Rather, they are speaking of three divine hypostases, i.e., 'individuals' or 'persons' (*aṣḥāṣ*). He uses the latter term to explain the meaning of the term *uqnūm* (pl. *aqānīm*), which is an Arabic transliteration of the Syriac word *q^enômā*. This is the word that does duty for the Greek term 'hypostasis'. He will explain what these terms mean further along in his treatise. At the present juncture he intends only to show what Christians mean when they say God is one. "We describe him as perfect one (*wāḥid kāmīl*) in being (*ḡawhar*), not in number, because in number, i.e., in hypostases, he is three."⁶⁹

iii. *'Three' the Perfect Number*. The number 'three' expresses the perfection of number, Abū Rā'īṭah argues, because it comprises each species of number,

⁶⁴ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Cf. Richard M. Frank, *The Metaphysics of Created Being According to Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf, a Philosophical Study of the Earliest Kalam* (Istanbul, 1966), pp. 39-41, esp. p. 39, n. 5.

⁶⁶ Cf. Ritter, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

⁶⁷ For the terminological parallelism, *ḡawhar*||*māhiyyah*, cf. Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 145.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7 and 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

both odd and even. He mentions this point very briefly, as if he could rely on the reader's immediate understanding. But we must turn to his nephew, the deacon Nonnus of Nisibis, to appreciate what he is saying. Nonnus spells it out in his Syriac apology for Christianity.

One is an odd number, but two is an even number. While three is even and odd at the same time, one even [digit], and one odd [digit]. Every number above three, either does not preserve this completeness of the species of numbers (e.g., four is two even numbers, and there is no odd number; while five, even though it includes an odd number, also has two even numbers.) Or, if they somewhere preserve the appearance [i.e., of the completeness of number], they are doubled, and they proceed to an infinite magnitude without cause⁷⁰.

Abū Rā'īṭah's conclusion is that the Christian description (*waṣf*) of God as one, and the Muslim description of God as one are not the same things at all. Therefore, he is arguing, *at-tawḥīd* does not necessarily exclude *at-tathlīth*, as the Muslims may think. Rather, he maintains, God is one in being, and his three hypostases express the fullness and perfection of the species of number⁷¹.

b. God is Three Hypostases

As we mentioned above, Abū Rā'īṭah believes that the doctrine of the Trinity is a datum of the scriptures. In his treatises he cites the standard testimonies. He includes texts from the Old Testament in which God speaks in the first person plural. For good measure he also provides a list of six verbs in the first person plural which occur in God's speech as it is recorded in the *Qur'ān*⁷². Beyond this much however his task is to explain that the doctrine is reasonable, that it involves no contradiction, and that there are analogies to be found among created things where the numbers one and three may both be used to describe the same thing from different perspectives, without mutual exclusivity. Here we may review the main features of his arguments. They will be sufficient to enable us to observe his methodology, and to see his attempt to walk on at least some terminological common ground with his Muslim contemporaries.

i. *Description*. Abū Rā'īṭah establishes a common ground with the Muslim *mutakallimūn* at the outset of his discussion. He uses the same device he employed at the beginning of his section on the meaning of the statement that God is one. He has his imaginary Muslim interlocutor claim that the

⁷⁰ Van Roey, *op. cit.*, pp. 7* and 8*.

⁷¹ The philosopher al-Kindi argued that this notion is absurd. Cf. A. Perier, *art. cit.*, pp. 11 and 12.

⁷² Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 20-21.

Christians testify to the truth since they do not hesitate to describe God as living (*ḥayy*), knowing (*ʿālim*), hearing (*samīʿ*), and seeing (*baṣīr*)⁷³. These four adjectives appear frequently in the *Qurʾān* as epithets of God. They also figured prominently in the current Muslim debates about the *ṣifāt Allāh*.

Abū Rāʾīṭah loses no time in pointing out that these adjectives are not univocal names, but relative names (*asmāʾ muḍāfah*). That is to say, they do not designate a definite object. Rather, they bespeak a relationship of one thing to another. In the present instance, for example, each one of these four adjectives, which are commonly predicated of God, bespeak a corresponding act or fact in the subject of which they are predicated. As Abū Rāʾīṭah himself puts it, choosing one of them as an example, "The knower is knowing by means of an act of knowledge, and the act of knowledge is an act of knowledge of a knower."⁷⁴ We should have no trouble in recognizing in this statement the positioning of the question which so bothered the Muslim *mutakallimūn*. What is the ontological status of an act of knowing (*ilm*) as it is affirmed of God, who is the subject (*mawṣūf*) of the predicate (*ṣifah*) 'knowing' (*ʿālim*)? Does it pertain to his being (*ḡawhar*) in its eternity?

A distinction must be made at this juncture, Abū Rāʾīṭah reminds his readers, between a predicate which can be said to be a natural predicate (*ṣifah ṭibāʾiyyah*), and by which, in the nature of the case, God must be eternally described; and a predicate of action (*fiʿl*). In the latter instance, Abū Rāʾīṭah explains, one is speaking of a predicate which God has acquired by an act of acquisition (*iktisāb*). For example, he is described as a creator (*ḥāliq*) only subsequently to his act of creation (*ḥalq*). He cannot be described as eternally creating, or, for that matter, as eternally bringing about the resurrection, enlivening the dead, rewarding the just or punishing in hell those who deserve it, to mention just a few of the actions ascribed to him in the *Qurʾān*. But God cannot even for an instant be said to be devoid of life or knowledge. They are eternal facts of his nature.

Again we quickly recognize in this distinction of predicates the distinction made by Muslim *mutakallimūn* between the so-called "attributes of the essence" (*ṣifāt adh-dhāt*) and "attributes of action" (*ṣifāt al-fiʿl*)⁷⁵. The distinction was also familiar to other Christian apologists, in a slightly different form, e.g., in Nonnus of Nisibis' general apology⁷⁶. It is a common ground between Abū Rāʾīṭah and the Muslims.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁵ Cf. R. M. Frank, "The Divine Attributions According to the Teaching of Abū l-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf", *Le Muséon* 82 (1969), pp. 451-506.

⁷⁶ Cf. Van Roey, *op. cit.*, pp. 7*-9*.

So it must follow, Abū Rā'īṭah proceeds to argue, that life (*ḥayah*) and knowledge (*ilm*), for example, are eternal in God if he is truly to be described as living (*ḥayy*) and knowing (*ālīm*). His life and knowledge must be said to be 'of' him or 'from' him (*minhu*) in some way. The only other alternative, he argues, is to say that are entities other than him altogether, and then they would be related to him as partner to partner (*aš-šarik ilā š-šarik*). This option Abū Rā'īṭah takes to be obviously inadmissible. And here again one immediately recalls the *Qur'ān*'s statement that God has no partner, "*lā šarik lahu*" (e.g., in *al-'An'ām* (6), 163).

Since life and knowledge must be 'of' or 'from' God in some natural way, Abū Rā'īṭah's argument continues, and since they must pertain to his very being (*ḡawhar*), and cannot be products of his action, as already explained, they must somehow be perfect entities 'of' or 'from' a perfect entity (*kāmilah min kāmilin*). The only other option is that they be parts of a perfect being (*ab'ād min kāmilin*). But this conclusion is clearly inadmissible since no parts can be allowed in the description of God. Furthermore, as perfect entities, God's life and knowledge must be considered not only as distinguishable, but also as simultaneously in union (*ittiṣāl*) with one another and with his perfect being.

I suppose it is already clear that Abū Rā'īṭah will argue that God's life and knowledge may be considered to be hypostases of his one divine being (*ḡawhar*). With this suggestion he hopes to fulfill all of the logical requirements he has mentioned, and to avoid the pitfalls to which he has alluded. But if the introduction of the Christian notion of divine hypostases is to be defended as a way out of the dilemma facing the Muslim *mutakallimūn*, Abū Rā'īṭah must explain what a hypostasis is, and how a whole host of other objections may be met. Here we shall sketch the highlights of his argument, explaining those essential aspects of it that he himself repeats in the *précis* of it contained in his general apology for Christianity⁷⁷. It should be clear from the outset, however, that this whole effort on Abū Rā'īṭah's part, amounts to an attempt to explain some very complicated Greek theologico-philosophical elaborations in an Arabic idiom designed to express a very different set of metaphysical principles. Abū Rā'īṭah consciously appropriates the terminology of the Muslim scholars. However, the fact remains that it is an idiom that is foreign to his own system of thought. One is reminded of the difficulties encountered by the philosophers who attempted to incorporate Greek ideas of logic into Arabic intellectual life⁷⁸. But this is another story.

⁷⁷ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 140-148.

⁷⁸ Cf. the account of the debate between the *mutakallim* as-Sīrāfī and the Christian logician Mattā ibn Yūnus, in Muḥsin Maḥdī, "Language and Logic in Classical Islam", in G.E.von Grunebaum (ed.), *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture* (Wiesbaden, 1970), pp. 51-83.

For Abū Rā'īṭah the divine hypostases (*aqānīm*) are the being (*ḡawhar*) of God. He argues this point at a considerable length in his treatise against the Melkites⁷⁹. The conceptual difference between the two terms, *uqnūm* and *ḡawhar*, as he explains it in his treatise on the Trinity, is like the difference between a universal entity (*šay' āmm*) and the particularities (*ḥawāṣṣ*) which it comprehends. That is to say, as Abu Rā'īṭah interprets it, the term *uqnūm* designates particular individuals. So it differs from *ḡawhar* only in regard to the numerousness of its comprehension (*kathrat ḍammihī*)⁸⁰. It introduces the notion of numerousness. In other words, the individuals (*aṣḥāṣ*) which comprise a universal entity, which can be counted, are the *aqānīm* or hypostases of that entity, according to him. For example, the being, or the substance, of all men is one. But there are many human individuals. "Regarding the name (*ism*) of a single hypostasis (*uqnūm*)," Abū Rā'īṭah says, "it is like 'Abd Allāh, Mōses, Aaron, and other such names."⁸¹ It is for this reason that he chooses the Arabic word *šaḥṣ*, 'individual', to render the transliterated Syriac word *uqnūm*, which in turn translates the Greek word ὑπόστασις. Not all of Abū Rā'īṭah's Christian contemporaries agree with this equivalence of terms. 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, to name one of them, rejects the equivalence of *šaḥṣ* and *uqnūm*⁸². On the other side, the Syriac lexicographer Bar Bahlūl accepts it⁸³. Doubtless Abū Rā'īṭah finds the term *šaḥṣ* acceptable because it designates something on the order of a 'person', or a 'man's self'. Unlike the term 'body' (*ḡism*), a *šaḥṣ*, when divided, ceases to be a *šaḥṣ*⁸⁴. It is instructive to note at this juncture that on the Muslim side, the Mu'tazilite *mutakallimūn*, many of whom were contemporaries of Abū Rā'īṭah, and some of whom wrote treatises against Christian beliefs, are reported to have agreed specifically that God cannot be said to be a *šaḥṣ*⁸⁵.

According to Abū Rā'īṭah, his Muslim adversary counters that something whose being is other than its hypostases, or whose hypostases are other than its being, is as a matter of fact already differentiated or at variance (*muḥtalifah*) in its description (*ṣifah*), and not at all consistent or in harmony. The mention of this objection gives Abū Rā'īṭah the opportunity to

⁷⁹ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 105-130.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁸² Cf. Hayek, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-164.

⁸³ Rubens Duval (ed.), *Lexicon Syriacum auctore Hassano bar Bahlule* (3 vols.; Paris, 1901), vol. II, cols. 1804-1806.

⁸⁴ W. E. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (7 vols.; London, 1863-1893), vol. IV, p. 1517. 'Ammar al-Baṣrī, by the way, rejects the term *šaḥṣ* precisely because it reminds him of a *ḡism*. Cf. Hayek, *loc. cit.*

⁸⁵ Cf. the report of al-Aṣ'arī in Ritter, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

ask his own question, "Is not our description (*wasf*) of his [i.e., God's] being (*ḡawhar*) as other than his hypostases like what you describe?"⁸⁶ With this question Abū Rā'īṭah is putting his finger on the issue at hand. The Muslim describes God as living, knowing, etc. As mentioned above, these adjectives imply nouns which designate entities of some kind, i.e., acts or facts of life and knowledge. This implication is what posed the ontological problem for the Muslim *mutakallimūn*. Abū Rā'īṭah is arguing that in his view the problem is solved. The implied acts or facts refer to the three divine *aqānīm*.

We know on the testimony of the scriptures, Abū Rā'īṭah says, that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. According to traditional Christian teaching these names specifically indicate the properties or particularities (*ḥawāṣṣ*; *ḥaṣṣah* = ἰδιότης) which distinguish the three hypostases that are the one being of God⁸⁷. Fatherhood is the particularity of the Father, sonship is the particularity of the Son, and procession from the Father is the particularity of the Holy Spirit. Adam, Abel, and Eve, we are reminded, are the scriptural types (*ṣirr*, μυστήριον) of these divine properties⁸⁸. But the three divine hypostases are not three gods, as the Muslim polemicists argue⁸⁹, in the way in which Adam, Abel, and Eve are three human beings. The three divine hypostases do not exist in a state or circumstance (*ḥāl*) of materiality which provides such differentiation (*iḥtilāf*). Rather, their divine being is spiritual, non-bodily, refined⁹⁰. The particularities (*ḥawāṣṣ*) which distinguish the divine hypostases designate merely the state or circumstance (*ḥāl*) of subsistence (*qiwām*) of each one of the hypostases in the one divine being⁹¹.

⁸⁶ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 11.

⁸⁷ Cf. G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (2nd ed.; London, 1952), pp. 244-245.

⁸⁸ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 7-9.

⁸⁹ This was the charge of 'Alī ibn-Rabbān aṭ-Ṭabarī. Cf. Khalifé and Kutsch, *art. cit.*, p. 121.

⁹⁰ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 10 and 11.

⁹¹ Abū Rā'īṭah's expression *ḥāl qiwām* corresponds to what the Greek theologians meant by the expression τρόπος ὑπάρξεως, i.e., mode of existence. Cf. Prestige, *op. cit.*, pp. 245-249. As a matter of fact, the Arabic word *naḥw* (pl. *anḥā'*), in its meaning of 'manner' or 'mode', corresponds more closely to the meaning of the Greek word τρόπος in this expression. Abū Rā'īṭah does indeed speak of the *anḥā'* or modes of the divine being, which correspond to the three divine *aqānīm*. Cf. Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 17 and 19. But he clearly thinks of each mode (*naḥw*) more concretely as a property or particularity (*ḥaṣṣah*) which constitutes a state (*ḥāl*) of the divine being. Hence his use of the expression *ḥāl qiwām*, or state of subsistence of the essence (*dhāt*) of each one of the *aqānīm*. It should also be mentioned here that in the usage of the Arabic grammarians, the term *ḥāl* indicates what is being attributed to a given subject when it is construed with a particular predicate (*ṣifah*). And this is one more reason for Abū Rā'īṭah's use of the term. Later, during the debates of the 10th and 11th centuries, the term *ḥāl* came to have a highly technical meaning in Muslim speculative theology. Cf. R. M. Frank, "Ḥāl," *ET*², to appear.

God, praise be to him, is three hypostases (*aqānīm*) bound together because of the identity (*ittifāq*) of their being (*ḡawhar*), and distinct because of the circumstance (*hāl*) of subsistence (*qiwām*) of the essence (*dhāt*) of each one of them, without their unity (*ittiṣāl*) taking precedence over their distinction or their distinction over their unity⁹².

The Muslims next ask, according to Abū Rā'īṭah, "What prompts you to describe God as three *aqānīm* rather than ten or twenty, or more or fewer of them?"⁹³ He answers that it is the existence (*wuḡūd*) of the three hypostases which is the cause (*'illah*) which prompts Christians to describe God as three hypostases⁹⁴. Christians say that God is one being who is three hypostases for the following reason.

God is possessed of knowledge and spirit (*dhū 'ilm wa rūḥ*). God's knowledge and his spirit are eternally existent. It is not possible to describe God, praise be to him, if he is to be described in his eternity without knowledge or spirit. Would not this statement in itself be absurd?⁹⁵

It would be absurd to Muslims not only on the face of it, but also, as Abū Rā'īṭah well knows, because God's knowledge (*'ilm Allāh*) and God's spirit (*rūḥ Allāh*) are mentioned in the *Qur'ān* (e.g., in *Hūd* (11), 14 and *Yūsuf* (12), 87 respectively). It is noteworthy in this connection that Abū Rā'īṭah does not here mention God's word (*kalimat Allāh*) and his spirit, as do other Arabic writing Christian apologists in similar circumstances⁹⁶. These two entities also have a place in the *Qur'ān*, where they are associated with Jesus son of Mary. But the context of the verse in which they appear, viz. *an-Nisā'* (4), 171, is explicitly anti-Trinitarian. We must judge that Abū Rā'īṭah is purposefully keeping his own argument close to the terms of the contemporary Muslim controversies, and that he is avoiding an easy rebuttal at the hands of anyone who would point out the anti-Trinitarian sentiment of this verse from the *Qur'ān*.

Since God has no origin and no originator, according to both Abū Rā'īṭah and the Muslims, they both can agree that there can be no external cause (*'illah*) for his three divine hypostases. They differ about the presence of an internal divine *'illah*, or cause. Abū Rā'īṭah sharpens the point of the difference by asking the Muslims,

What would you answer if someone of those who deny the single one (*al-wāḥid al-fard*) whom you worship, should ask you, 'Why is he a single one, according

⁹² Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 16.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17 and 18.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17 and 18.

⁹⁶ Cf., e.g., Abū Qurrah's argument in Bacha, 1904, pp. 44 and 45.

to you, rather than two or three or more?" What prompts you to describe him by means of this predication (*ṣifah*)? Is there, in your estimation, a cause ('*illah*) or a ground (*sabab*) for it?⁹⁷

As we shall see, with this question Abū Rā'īṭah hopes to face the Muslims with their own theoretical dilemma, and then to press his argument that Christian doctrine provides a way to escape from it.

The significance of Abū Rā'īṭah's use of the Arabic term '*illah*' in this argument, and particularly in his question to the Muslims, lies in the fact that among the *mutakallimūn* and Arabic grammarians of his day, this term was used in a technical sense to indicate the entity, that is to say the act or fact existing in a particular subject, which grounds the judgment that a particular predicate (*ṣifah*) may in truth be ascribed to that subject⁹⁸. So, for example, an act of knowledge ('*ilm*) may be said to be the cause ('*illah*) which grounds the judgment that a given subject may be said to be knowing ('*ālim*). According to this usage, Abū Rā'īṭah can claim that the existence of the three divine hypostases is the cause ('*illah*) for describing God as *tota simul* a father (*wālid*), a son (*walad*), and one who processes or emanates (*munbathiq*). At another place in his treatise on the Trinity he had reminded the reader, echoing the Cappadocian fathers, that in an ontological sense the Father himself may be considered the cause ('*illah* = αἰτία) of each one of the other two divine hypostases⁹⁹. But the Muslims, Abū Rā'īṭah is now arguing, and especially the Mu'tazilite theologians who are his contemporaries, because of their understanding of the profession of an exclusive monotheism (*at-tawḥīd*), cannot posit an '*illah*' existing in God which can ground a judgment that he is to be described as a "single one". For them to do so would be to compromise their own understanding of God's absolute unity. Abū Rā'īṭah knows that this is their dilemma. It is for this reason that he offers to answer their question to the Christians in the same terms that they should logically have to answer the question put to them by the one who denies the "single one" whom they worship. He says,

You should inform us of your answer to him about the single one (*al-wāḥid al-fard*), so that we may follow your example in replying to what you are asking us about the three [hypostases]¹⁰⁰.

It remains to say that Abū Rā'īṭah believed that all of God's essential attributes (*ṣifāt*) may be interpreted in some way to designate his three divine hypostases. He argues that the three hypostases are the entities

⁹⁷ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 18.

⁹⁸ Cf. R. M. Frank, "*Ḥāl*", *EP*², to appear.

⁹⁹ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 12. Cf. Prestige, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-253.

¹⁰⁰ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 18.

implied by standard Arabic usage, when one affirms the several descriptive predicates that are usually discussed by Muslim *mutakallimūn*. He lists them as 'living', 'knowing', 'wise', 'seeing', and 'hearing'¹⁰¹. He makes little of the latter two adjectives, as is also the case among the Muslims. They are included because of their prominence in the *Qur'ān*. The lists of predicates, coming from different Muslim scholars, differed in the adjectives which were included as expressing the essential divine attributes. But this difference does not affect the course of Abū Rā'īṭah's argument. As far as he is concerned, all of God's essential or "natural" predicates are indicative of the three divine *aqānīm*. He can easily find in Christian tradition ways to construe 'life', 'knowledge', 'wisdom', etc., with the divine hypostases. We must highlight this point because an influential recently published study of the relationship between Christian and Muslim *mutakallimūn* seriously misinterprets the purposes and influences of such Arabic writing Christian apologists as Abū Rā'īṭah. Missing the point that these Christian apologists are taking their cue from the Muslim *mutakallimūn*, and not *vice versa*, Harry Austryn Wolfson in his erudite study of the philosophical roots of *ʿilm al-kalām* in Islam, launches himself on a fruitless search for varying Neoplatonic triads to explain the variations in Muslim lists of God's essential attributes¹⁰². His mistaken initial assumption is that the Muslims have borrowed these lists from Christians.

Before concluding his argument that it is the existence of the three divine hypostases that prompts Christians to describe God in terms of these hypostases, Abū Rā'īṭah returns to the quotation from the *Qur'ān* he had employed earlier in his treatise on the Trinity, viz., "Like him there is aught" (*aṣ-Ṣurā* (42), 11). He now argues that only that religion which describes God in accord with the terms of this verse can be considered truly to worship and acknowledge him. Any other religion, which describes God in terms of anthropomorphism (*at-taṣbīh*) or comparison with creatures (*at-tamthīl*), must be considered wrong or unknowing. Once again, in the enunciation of this principle, Abū Rā'īṭah is attempting to establish a common ground with his Muslim contemporaries. Their *mutakallimūn* regularly rejected anthropomorphism and comparisons drawn between God and creatures, using the same terms for them that Abū Rā'īṭah employs here¹⁰³. As a matter of fact, Muslims accused Christians of *at-taṣbīh* because of their

¹⁰¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰² Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 112-132.

¹⁰³ Cf. W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period ...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-249; R. Strothmann, "Tashbih," *ET*, vol. 4, pp. 719-722.

doctrine that God has a son¹⁰⁴. Abū Rā'īṭah sets out to answer this charge, and to claim that Christianity alone preserves God's uniqueness. He returns to the numerology we have described above.

Most monotheists (*muwahḥidūn*), Abū Rā'īṭah explains, describe God as a "single one in number" (*wāḥidan fardan mā'dūdan*). However, as he pointed out earlier, and as he now recalls, such a description as this is also applicable to creatures. Any one of them can be described as a single one in number. Furthermore, the application of this description to God actually lowers God's numerical value in comparison to creatures. The latter are composed of two principles, matter and form. So the Christian description of God as one being in three hypostases transcends all anthropomorphism or comparison with creatures. There are three hypostases, no more and no less, because 'three' is the single perfect number. As a single number it expresses the unity of God's being. As 'three' it is the perfect number, allowing for the individuation (*infirād*) of the subsistence (*qiwām*) of the essence (*dhāt*) of each one of the modes (*anḥā'*) of the divine being. Since 'three' is the perfect number, comprising both even and odd numbers as explained earlier, no reasonable person should admit any other number, higher or lower, in the description of God¹⁰⁵.

At the end of the treatise on the Trinity Abū Rā'īṭah takes up one last objection to this teaching. It is actually the basic objection which has been lurking beneath the surface all along the way. The Muslims propose that something may be said to be 'of' or 'from' something else in only two ways. It is either a part (*ba'd*) of that something else, or its action (*fī'l*). Here the reader should recall that this disjunction reflects the division among God's descriptive predicates (*ṣifāt*) which was discussed above. They are either predicates of his essence (*dhāt*) or predicates of his action (*fī'l*). In either case, by reason of the conventions of Arabic usage, they imply, as we have already explained several times, the affirmation of distinct entities in God. This is a completely unacceptable conclusion for the Muslims since parts (*ab'ad*) are thereby implied in God's essence. Abū Rā'īṭah's answer to this final objection is that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates that the disjunction in terms of which the Muslims state their dilemma is not complete. In the first place, Abū Rā'īṭah proposes, parts (*ab'ad*) may be ascribed to something in at least two ways. One may speak of individuals, such as Aaron and Moses, for example, as parts of the number of men, each one of which is perfect (*kāmil*) in essence. Or one may speak of hands

¹⁰⁴ Cf., e.g., the charge of al-Ġāḥiẓ in his "Refutation of Christians". He says that in part their errors are due to trust in anthropomorphism (*i'tiqād at-taṣbīh*). Finkel, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁵ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, pp. 18 and 19.

and feet as parts or components (*ağzā*) of a man, which are not the whole (*kamāl*) of that of which they are the parts, and they may not carry the name (*ism*) of the whole. The disjunction proposed by the Muslims is not complete, Abū Rāʾiṭah contends, because a thing may be 'from' another thing, not only as its part (*baʿd*), or even as its action (*fiʿl*), but in the sense of a perfect or whole being 'of' or 'from' a perfect, whole being (*kāmil min kāmilin*). One has only to think of a son (*walad*) from his father (*wālid*). One should also remember Eve as a person who processes or emanates (*hāriğ, munbathiq*) from Adam. It is in these two ways that Christians, leaving behind the materiality that distinguishes the three human beings, Adam, Abel, and Eve, speak of the Son and the Spirit as 'of' or 'from' the Father. "Each one of the two of them is part (*baʿd*) of the number [i.e., three], not part of the essence (*dhāt*) of the Father. Rather, they are two perfect essences from a perfect essence"¹⁰⁶.

The fact remains, Abū Rāʾiṭah says in closing, even with the Trinitarian formula, "God transcends every prediction (*ṣifah*), and no statement [about him] of this sort is comprehensive"¹⁰⁷.

ii. *Comparison*. This is not the place to give an elaborate analysis of the examples Abū Rāʾiṭah uses in his apology for the doctrine of the Trinity. They do, as a matter of fact, take up much of the space in his treatise. They are an essential part of his attempt to demonstrate that the doctrine he is defending is not simply a contradiction. He proposes analogies which can be drawn between various aspects of the doctrine and observable facts of created nature. Just as the Greek philosophico-theological terms that he attempts to render into the Arabic idiom of the Muslim *mutakallimūn* are the traditional ones to be found in the Trinitarian formulae, so too his examples or analogies are the traditional ones found in earlier phases of Christian apologetics. He uses the example of three lights from three lamps, which he says are similar to the three divine hypostases in being able to be described as three and one at the same time¹⁰⁸. He mentions the sun, its light, and its heat; the five bodily senses; the human soul, its mind, its power of speech. These are entities which he says may be simultaneously described, without contradiction, as united and yet distinguishable, like the three divine hypostases¹⁰⁹.

What is important to notice about Abū Rāʾiṭah's use of these examples or similitudes in his apologetics is his designation of the process of reasoning

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 26.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

in which they play a role by the Arabic term *qiyās*. Among the contemporary Muslim *mutakallimūn*, this term is used to indicate the general process of arriving at a conclusion on the basis of reasoning. It is opposed to the practice of arriving at a conclusion on the basis of an authoritative testimony¹¹⁰. But the Christian Arabic writers of Abū Rā'īṭah's time use the term in the more specific sense of reasoning by analogy. Furthermore, they often do not mean by it a syllogistic or other inferential form of analogical reasoning. Their analogies are examples or comparisons, and their purpose is clarification. They serve as precedents, almost in a legal sense, in which some known fact is called upon to elucidate and explain what otherwise seems obscure and even contradictory. More than once, as his adversary attacks his analogy because he does not push it far enough, Abū Rā'īṭah must respond, "What is comparable in some ways, the difference overcomes"¹¹¹. He points out that if a comparison could be made in all respects between two things there would be no similarity between them at all but identity.

This use of examples, and the discussion of the range of their applicability in theological reasoning in general, can be found in earlier Christian literature. Its appearance in Arabic under the name *qiyās* demonstrates once again the attempt on the part of the Christian Arabic apologists to put their traditional methods of reasoning into an Arabic dress that is familiar to Muslims. The method of reasoning designated by the term *qiyās* in Arabic was for a long time a major feature of the Muslim legal tradition¹¹². By utilizing the term in the present context Abū Rā'īṭah is once again following the usages of the *mutakallimūn*.

3. The Incarnation

Abū Rā'īṭah states and defends the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, following the same basic methodology he employs in his defense of the doctrine of the Trinity. That is to say, he attempts to make contact with the conceptual and lexical 'common ground' that Christians may share with Muslims in Arabic. This 'common ground', however, is more scriptural in the area of the doctrine of the Incarnation than it is in the discussion of the Trinity. In the latter instance the Muslim concern for a proper understanding of the *ṣifāt Allāh* supplies a philosophical context in which the Christian

¹¹⁰ Cf. Josef van Ess, "The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology," in G. E. von Grunebaum (ed.), *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture* (Wiesbaden, 1970), pp. 34-35.

¹¹¹ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 12.

¹¹² Cf. Josef van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des 'Abudaddīn al-Īcī* (Wiesbaden, 1966), pp. 380-394.

can defend himself against the charge of tritheism. In regard to the doctrine of the Incarnation, not only is there the explicit rejection in the *Qur'ān* of the notion that God generates or is generated (*al-Ihlās*, 112), there are particular statements in the *Qur'ān* about the Messiah, 'Isā ibn Maryam, to the effect that he is only a messenger of God, and his word, which God has delivered to Maryam, and a spirit from Him, as it says in *an-Nisā'* (4), 171. "They have disbelieved", *al-Mā'idah* (5), 72 insists, "who say that God is the Messiah, son of Maryam". There is no philosophical controversy among the Muslim *mutakallimūn* during the first Abbasid century which offers the Christian apologist an opportunity to utilize Muslim theoretical developments in favor of his incarnation faith. The most important point at issue here between Muslims and Christians is the proposed divinity of Jesus Christ, and the very possibility of a divine incarnation. As is evident from the passages quoted from the *Qur'ān*, both groups agree on some of the epithets to be applied to Jesus, including his humanity and that he is Word of God. There is a difference of doctrine over the crucifixion of Jesus, but that subject will be the concern of a subsequent section of this paper.

As for Abū Rā'īṭah's belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ and that he is one of the three divine hypostases, viz., the divine son who has become incarnate (*al-mutaḡassad*), he depends upon what he considers to be the obvious witness of the New Testament. Contemporary Muslim, anti-Christian polemicists were familiar with this argument, and they responded by citing biblical passages which they considered to be obvious references to Jesus' full humanity¹¹³. This practice can already be found in the *Qur'ān*. "The Messiah, son of Maryam, was only a messenger His mother was just a woman. They both ate food" (*al-Mā'idah* (5), 75). There is not much to be learned for our present purposes by a review of these scriptural passages, as cited by either side. What we must observe here is the way in which Abū Rā'īṭah appeals to certain Muslim beliefs and Arabic expressions, as often as not phrases from the *Qur'ān*, in order to support what he regards as the reasonableness or the non-contradictory nature of the Christian doctrine.

a. Monophysite Formulae

The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation that is orthodox for Abū Rā'īṭah is the monophysite doctrine. He is quite anxious to state it clearly and unambiguously so that he can demonstrate its resiliency against the objections of the Muslims. As he expresses it, their basic objection is that the Christian

¹¹³ Cf. especially the refutations of 'Alī Rabbān aṭ-Ṭabarī, in Khalifé and Kutsch, *art. cit.*; and al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm, in Di Matteo, *art. cit.*

formula is self-contradictory. It describes God's incarnation (*taḡassud*) and his becoming human (*ta'annus*) as taking place without change or alteration in God. It characterizes him as both mortal and immortal, passible and impassible. On the other hand, the doctrine clearly stated, Abū Rā'īṭah presumes, demonstrates that there is no contradiction here. We can do no better than to quote his summary of the monophysite position from his general apology for Christianity.

We say that Christ, be he praised, the eternal, unceasing word of God, became incarnate from the pure virgin Mary, in a body possessed of a rational soul, which is originated, created, mortal, passible. And he became one with it in a [hypostatic], natural, substantial union, like the union of the spiritual soul with the body of man ... without change to either one of the two of them, i.e., the Word or the body. And so the consequence is that the computation of the two beings comes down to the result of the existence (*wuḡūd*) of a single being It is true God and true man. In itself it is not two, but it carries two [sets] of descriptive predicates¹¹⁴.

Abū Rā'īṭah explains that these two sets of descriptive predicates are those which are proper to the Word God, and those which are proper to the ensouled human body, which the Word has put on as a garment (*sirbāl*). The incarnation (*taḡassud*), therefore, is to be thought of as an action of the Word. Consequently, there is no contradiction in the Christian formula, he argues, when one is careful to specify the aspect (*ḡihah*) from which each element of the formula describes the Word incarnate. The closest analogy (*qiyās*) to this situation, Abū Rā'īṭah proposes, is the one substance man, who is composed of two different substances, a rational soul and a body. Man too can be described by two sets of predicates, without contradiction. Yet man is in himself one being. This is the traditional Monophysite example, elaborated upon by Severus of Antioch¹¹⁵. Abū Rā'īṭah puts it into Arabic.

One should notice that Abū Rā'īṭah is not trying to prove the doctrine of the incarnation from reason. This may have been the case at least in part with his handling of the doctrine of the Trinity, where the Muslim controversy concerning the *ṣifāt Allāh* gave him an opening. In the instance of the doctrine of the Incarnation, he contents himself with the attempt to

¹¹⁴ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 151. The adjective 'hypostatic' was added in the margin of the MS. Cf. *ibid.*, vol. 131, p. 183, n. 1.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Joseph Lebon, *Le monophysitisme sévérien; étude historique littéraire et théologique sur la résistance monophysite au concile de Chalcédoine jusqu'à la constitution de l'église jacobite* (Louvain, 1909); *idem.*, "La christologie du monophysitisme syrien", in A. Grillmeier and H. Bacht (eds.), *Das Konzil von Chalkedon* (3 vols.; Würzburg, 1951), vol. I, pp. 425-580.

prove, with the help of some concepts already explained in connection with his discussion of the Trinity, that a careful statement of the Christian incarnational formula avoids contradiction.

b. Renewal of Creation

According to Abū Rā'īṭah, the Muslims' first question to the Christians about their doctrine of the Incarnation is, "What prompted God, praised be he, to the incarnation (*tağassud*), and to becoming human (*ta'annus*)? Would he not have been able to bring about the salvation of man (*ḥalāṣ al-bašar*) without this?"¹¹⁶ As Abū Qurrah, Abū Rā'īṭah's Melkite contemporary, points out, and as the *Qur'ān* itself assures the reader, in regard to man's sinful condition the Muslim believes, "Who so repents, after his evil-doing, and makes amends, God will turn towards him; God is all-forgiving, all-compassionate" (*al-Mā'idah* (5), 39, Arberry)¹¹⁷. *At-tawbah*, therefore, or the turning of man to God after his sinfulness, is what God accepts from his servants for forgiveness, as the *sūrah* of this name in the *Qur'ān* insists (i.e., 9, 104). There is no need, in the Muslim view, for a general redemption of mankind in the Christian sense of the word. Moreover, the Muslim also knows from the *Qur'ān* that God has sent messengers, including Jesus and Muḥammad, to prompt men to the saving act of repentance. Against this background, Abū Rā'īṭah attempts to answer both parts of the question he has posed for himself, adhering as closely as possible to the thought and language of the *Qur'ān*.

"What prompted God to the incarnation?" Abū Rā'īṭah answers that, as we learn from the Scriptures, when men fell into perdition and death because of their sinfulness, in his compassion and kindness in the face of their need, God announced a renewal of creation, or a new creation (*tağdīd al-ḥalq*). This promise is what prompted him to the incarnation. Who is more fitting to be entrusted with this renewal, Abū Rā'īṭah asks, than the one who created men in the first place? If the idea of God's stooping down for mankind's salvation and his deliverance in these latter times should be considered a frivolity (*abathan*), his argument continues, then it should also follow that what prompted God to create man in the first place was not praiseworthy.

On the face of it Abū Rā'īṭah's argument thus far is clear enough and even familiar to us in terms of Christian categories of thought. What is striking, however, is his use of several phrases which have the ring of the *Qur'ān*

¹¹⁶ Graf, CSCO, vol. 130, p. 148.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Abū Qurrah's presentation of this Muslim allegation in Bacha, 1904, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

about them. His use of the phrase *tag̃dīd al-ḥalq*, for example, seems to owe its presence here more to the occurrence of the expression *ḥalq ḡadīd* (i.e., new creation), as found six times in the *Qur'ān*, than it does to any specifically Christian usage. In the *Qur'ān*, of course, the expression does not mean what it would mean in a Christian context. Rather, in four instances in the *Qur'ān* it means the raising of the dead for judgment (cf. *ar-Ra'd* (13), 15; *as-Saḡdah* (32), 10; *as-Sabā'* (34), 7; *Qāf* (50), 15). Twice it refers to God's power to put away the present generation and to bring a new creation (cf. *Ibrāhīm* (14), 19; *Fāṭir* (35), 16). An apologist like Abū Rā'īṭah, however, uses phrases from the *Qur'ān* because they are familiar to Muslims, not because they convey a peculiarly Christian message. He puts his own Christian meaning onto it. The conclusion that such is his intention here, namely to compare Christian redemption to God's new creation of man as referred to in the *Qur'ān*, is supported when we note that he also argues that if God's deliverance of men in these latter times is a frivolity (*abathan*), then what prompted him to create them in the first place was not praiseworthy. This phraseology also echoes a sentence from the *Qur'ān*. In *al-Mu'minūn* (23), 115, God says to people at the final judgment, "Do you think that we created you as a frivolity (*abathan*), and that you would not return to us?" It is with this sentence in mind that we perceive the course of Abū Rā'īṭah's argument. He is maintaining that without salvation or a new creation of man brought about by God incarnate, the first creation would have to be considered a frivolity, given the factual preponderance of sin and man's consequent perdition according to the Law. In regard to the Law's promise of perdition for sin and God's consequent promise of salvation for his people, Abū Rā'īṭah doubtless has in mind the *Qur'ān*'s assurance that, "God never breaks his promise, though most men do not know it" (*ar-Rūm* (30), 6). The necessity of God's fulfillment of his promise is the backbone of his argument. By way of contrast, it is important to note that Abū Rā'īṭah does not attempt to answer the Muslims' question in more traditional Christian theological terms. We find here no mention of man's basic, almost ontological, need for redemption if he is to achieve salvation. The emphasis is on what God promised in the scriptures, and what finds an echo in the *Qur'ān*.

"Would he not have been able to bring about the salvation of man without this?" Abū Rā'īṭah's answer to this part of his question is twofold. In the first place he reminds the reader that God is omnipotent. To ask such a question as the one posed here, he maintains, is tantamount to the disavowal of God's action in the determination (*taqdīr*) of affairs, and in their origination (*takwīn*); as well as a disavowal of his power (*qudrah*), and his will (*irādah*), which is logically consequent upon his prior knowledge. Self

contradiction is what God cannot do. He in fact does what he knows will be for the benefit of his creatures, in the way in which they can best accept it. "For everything that he wills, for that he is able (*qādir*), because nothing that he wills is too difficult for him, and anything that he empowers cannot be prevented from coming to be"¹¹⁸. In this response, Abū Rā'īṭah is arguing that the incarnation is actually the best way that God can bring about the new creation of man which he has promised. By putting this argument in the context of God's power of efficient causality (*qudrah*), and his divine will (*irādah*), Abū Rā'īṭah is once again using terms which were prominent in the discussions of the contemporary Muslim *mutakallimūn*. He is also calling to mind the many verses of the *Qur'ān* in which the divine epithet *qādir* occurs, as well as such verses as, "God does what he wills" (*al-Ḥaḡḡ* (22), 14, and "God wills ease for you, and wills not hardship for you" (*al-Baqarah* (2), 185). This is not a direct answer to the question. It is designed to make it difficult for a Muslim to maintain that God's incarnation is impossible.

The second part of Abū Rā'īṭah's response to the Muslims' question is an attempt to turn their own challenge back on themselves. He asks, "What would they answer if someone should ask them about God's policy, praise be to him, in regard to mankind, and his sending messengers to them? Why did the Compassionate One do that when he could have done something else, as well as sending them [i.e., the messengers] to them?"¹¹⁹ Doubtless, Abū Rā'īṭah says, the Muslims would answer that God sent messengers so that they could be a conclusive argument (*ḥuḡḡah bālighah*, cf. *al-An'ām* (6), 149) against men, to bid them to do what he wills, and to warn them of what he finds odious and detestable. Those who obey, being uncompelled, would deserve the fairest reward (*ḥusnu th-thawābi*, cf. *Āl-Imrān* (3), 195) for their preference of obedience to God, rather than to their own desires. Their drawing near to God with a good intention (*husni niyyah*) would make for a noble reward. Their drawing far off from God would make for a dire punishment because they would be following their own lusts, and choosing present pleasure over the blessings to come. This response fairly represents the *Qur'ān*'s attitude. Abū Rā'īṭah knows that it expresses what the Muslims have in mind when they ask, "Would God not have been able to bring about the salvation of man without incarnation?" Now there arises the issue of sending messengers *versus* incarnation as the most likely means for God to provide for the salvation of man. The Muslims, as we have seen, are committed to the *Qur'ān*'s insistence, "The Messiah, son of Maryam,

¹¹⁸ Graf, 1951, vol. 130, p. 149.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

was only a messenger, before whom messengers have passed away" (*al-Mā'idah* (5), 75). This is the very heart of the argument.

c. Messenger or God Incarnate?

As Abū Rā'īṭah reports it, the Muslims object to the Christian doctrine by maintaining that the sending of messengers from God is not at all on the same plane as maintaining God's own involvement in human affairs, i.e., his incarnation, or becoming human, according to the Christian way of describing things. Therefore, the Muslims argue, it is not fair for Abū Rā'īṭah to represent the two actions as equivalent when he challenges the Muslims. He had asked them earlier, as we have seen, the same question about God's sending of messengers, as they had asked him about the possibility of God becoming incarnate, viz., could God have done something else? The implication of the Christian answer to this question is that God's mercy and generosity make both actions appropriate in their own spheres, i.e., sending messengers and becoming incarnate. But the point of the present Muslim claim that the two actions ascribed to God are in no way equivalent or comparable, is to argue that the doctrine of the Incarnation is simply incredible because it is absurd to ascribe such an action to God.

Abū Rā'īṭah rebuts this argument by answering that the doctrine of the Incarnation can only be considered to be incredible, or absurd, if we are thinking of God as comparable to ourselves in being and in power. On this basis, he agrees, the sending of messengers is easier to maintain. But if we differ from God in regard to being and power, as well as in regard to his other predicates, as we obviously do, then God's permission (*idhn*), his command (*amr*), and his sending of messengers (*irsāl ar-rusul*) are no easier to believe than his becoming incarnate and his becoming human for the sake of the salvation of his servants. God's actions cannot be measured by the actions of men. What prompts God to all of these actions, Abū Rā'īṭah argues, is his compassion and mercy. God's permission, his command, and his sending of messengers are divine actions which are often mentioned in the *Qur'ān*. His incarnation and the actions by which he achieved the redemption are recounted in the Gospel.

On this point the Muslim has one more objection. He asks, how can the Christians maintain with logical consistency that God is unchangeable and unalterable if they also maintain that he has assumed a composite being (i.e., a humanity composed of body and soul), that is itself receptive to change alteration? Abū Rā'īṭah's answer is that it is no different than saying that God acts and creates by means of permission (*idhn*) and speech (*qawl*), without instrument or tool, and with no precaution against mistake or

error. This too we cannot understand. And so, "We accept the doctrine about his incarnation and his becoming human, without change or alteration, even though the comprehension of it exceeds the mind"¹²⁰.

d. Crucifixion and Death

In his epistle on the Incarnation, Abū Rā'īṭah discusses many more details of the Muslim objections to this doctrine than those we have mentioned. We have included in our review, the main topics of his discussion, as he himself outlined them in his general apology for the Christian faith. Before bringing our analysis of his treatment of this topic to a close, however, we must say something about his response to the well-known Muslim claim that Jesus was not, in fact, crucified by the Jews. The claim is based on a statement about the Jews to be found in the *Qur'ān*, *an-Nisā'* (4), 157. Under general discussion here is the punishment God is said to have visited upon the Jews for their alleged breaking of their covenant with him, "And for their saying, 'We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God'—yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them (*šubbiha lahum*)."¹²¹ Abū Rā'īṭah does not quote this verse, nor does he refer to it directly. Rather, he deals with the Muslim objection to the actuality of the crucifixion of Jesus by citing a long string of testimonies from the Gospel which report the event. He does, however, discuss the crucifixion and death of Jesus in terms of what he regards as the evil intention of the Jews in the affair. This, after all, is also the context of the quotation from the *Qur'ān*. It alleges that the Jews were not successful in slaying or crucifying Jesus, according to their boast. The emphasis seems to be more on their supposed malicious intent than it is on what factually happened to Jesus.

The presumed malicious intent of the Jews in the matter of the crucifixion of Christ provides the context for one of the regular challenges which Muslims posed to Christians during the first Abbasid century. Abū Rā'īṭah phrases it as follows. "Was his killing and his crucifixion with his consent, or by force?"¹²¹ The question poses a dilemma. If the Christian says that Jesus consented to his own death, the Muslim answers that in that case not only is there no blame that can be placed on the Jews, but they should be rewarded for following Christ's will. This is clearly an unacceptable option to the Christians of Abū Rā'īṭah's day. On the other hand, if the Christian

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60. Cf. the patriarch Timothy's response to this same question in A. Mingana, "Timothy's Apology for Christianity", in *Woodbrooke Studies* (vol. 2; Cambridge, 1928), p. 43; and Abū Qurrah in *PG*, 97, col. 1529.

says that Jesus was forcibly killed, then the Muslim asks, "What kind of a God is forced?"¹²² In this fashion, by an appeal to what he considers to be an erroneous Christian doctrine in the first place, i.e., the Incarnation, the Muslim hopes to argue against the Christians' acceptance of the actuality of Christ's crucifixion at the hands of the Jews. Abū Rāʾīṭah escapes from the dilemma, as do the other Christian apologists who mention it, by arguing that a distinction must be made between what was done, Christ's acquiescence in the event, and the intention of the Jews. The latter, he maintains, was clearly malevolent. He poses a similar dilemma in response to the Muslim. He mentions the *Qurʾān*'s strictures against those who contrive falsehoods against God (cf. e.g., *an-Nisā* (4), 50). He asks if such falsehoods are propounded with or without God's compliance. The same range of options, of course, are open to the respondent as in the instance of Christ's crucifixion. Abū Rāʾīṭah concludes,

The Jews are punishable for his crucifixion and his slaying, because they intended his destruction, even though he, praise be to him, is exalted beyond that, because of the transcendence of his 'being' beyond slaying and death. Just as someone is punishable for slander against God, even though God is high indeed beyond that¹²³.

So a dilemma is met with a dilemma, and the Christian and Muslim views of the facts remain as they were.

4. Christian Life and Practice

In his general apology for Christianity Abū Rāʾīṭah responds to a number of Muslim questions about Christian practices. The questions are the standard ones which are found in most of the popular apologetic literature of the first Abbasid century. A curious fact about these questions is that their subject matter conforms to a list of unscriptural but apostolic customs mentioned ready by Basil in his treatise on the Holy Spirit¹²⁴. We are reminded that even the Muslims required an explanation from Christians for their non-scriptural behavior. It was not just that the Muslims found these usages strange. They could not find them in the Bible. Here we shall not record Abū Rāʾīṭah's replies in detail. Rather, we shall note the general defense he proposes in each instance.

¹²² Graf, 1951, vol. 130, p. 60.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹²⁴ Cf. the discussion in Prestige, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

a. Veneration of the Cross

Muslims commonly objected to the Christian veneration of the cross, and to the installation of the cross in a place of honor in Christian churches. They considered it to be a species of idol worship (*ibādat al-ʿawthān*), or the veneration of images (*saġdat al-ʿaṣnām*)¹²⁵. Abū Rāʾiṭah's answer to the objection is that the cross is not an object of Christian worship. Rather, he says, in their churches the cross marks the *qiblah* for Christians. Therefore, it deserves honor and respect more than other things¹²⁶. Abū Rāʾiṭah was surely aware of the fact that in the *Qurʾān* it was reported that God instructed Moses and Aaron to set up certain houses, "And make your houses a direction for men to pray to; and perform the prayer; and so thou give good tidings to the believers" (*Yūnas* (10), 87). He argues accordingly, that in Christian churches the cross simply points out the direction one should face when praying.

b. Facing East in Prayer

Another standard question which Muslims posed for Christians during their encounters in the first Abbasid century concerns the Christian practice of facing east at times of prayer. Abū Rāʾiṭah explains that they face the east because it is the traditional location of the Garden of Eden, and because that is the direction from which Christ will first appear at his second coming according to Mt. 24:27¹²⁷. The *Qurʾān*, of course, has it that, "To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn, there is the face of God" (*al-Baqarah* (2), 115).

c. Eucharist

To the Muslim query about the Christian belief concerning the presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, Abū Rāʾiṭah answers by reciting Christ's charge to his disciples at the last supper, as contained in "His book, the Gospel"¹²⁸. The latter phrase recalls the *Qurʾān*'s statement that God brought the Gospel to Christ (*al-Mā'idah* (5), 46). This question about the Eucharist was also a common one on the lips of Muslims in the religious controversies of Abū Rāʾiṭah's time¹²⁹.

¹²⁵ Cf., e.g., D. Sourdel, "Un pamphlet musulman anonyme d'époque ʿAbbāsīde contre les chrétiens", *Revue des Études Islamiques* 34 (1966), pp. 17 and 29; and ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī in Hayek, *op. cit.*, pp. 87 and 88.

¹²⁶ Graf, 1951, vol. 130, pp. 153 and 154.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 155 and 156.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹²⁹ Cf., e.g., ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī's response, in Hayek, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-87.

d. Circumcision and the Sacrifices of the Old Testament

Muslims often asked the Christians by what authority they abandoned such Old Testament practices as circumcision and the sacrifices mandated by the Law¹³⁰. Abū Rā'īṭah's answer to this question is that the original purpose of these observances was to win the Israelite people back to God after they had become infected with heathen religious practices in Egypt. The old dispensation was temporary, he argues, and designed merely to mark out the chosen people. It was destined to be replaced by the new covenant as Jeremiah (31:31) and Ezekiel (16:60) had foretold. Abū Rā'īṭah also reminds his readers that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were a *mysterium* (*širr*), or type, of the sacrifice of Christ to be offered for all men under the new covenant¹³¹.

As for the new covenant itself, Abū Rā'īṭah explains that it is the Gospel. It transcribes into its own laws (*šarā'ī'*) the laws and sanctions of the Torah which are agreeable to it and suitable, concerning true belief in God and the profession of his oneness (*at-tawḥīd*). Further, he maintains, the Gospel explains and interprets the monotheism of the Torah, by naming the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Whatsoever in the Old Testament is not in accord with this new awareness is not binding, he argues. As for the difference between the old and new sets of prescriptions (*farā'id*), it amounts to the difference between force and justice, in Abū Rā'īṭah's view. This is the reason, he says, for abandoning the prescriptions of the Torah without claiming that they are wrong or false¹³².

e. The Forty Day Fast

At the very end of what we have left of Abū Rā'īṭah's general apology for Christianity, he explains that Christians fast for forty days at a time because of the examples of Moses, the prophets, and Christ himself¹³³. Muslims, of course, are commanded by the *Qur'ān* to fast during the month of *Ramaḍān*, when the revelation was said to have come down from God (cf. *al-Baqarah* (2), 183-185). But the fast is required only during the daylight hours and not at night (cf. vs. 187). It lasts only for the thirty days of the month. The latter fact is presumably what provides the occasion for Abū Rā'īṭah's explanation of the Christian practice.

¹³⁰ Cf. Theodore bar Kōnī's long response to this objection in Scher, *op. cit.*, vol. 69, pp. 213ff.

¹³¹ Graf, 1951, vol. 130, pp. 156-157.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 159.