Introduction

1 The Famous Unknown

Abū Maṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) is among the few Islamic theologians whose significance needs no emphasis nor special reminder. His reputation as a groundbreaking mutakallim is long undisputed; his influence on later generations, which manifested in its own school of theology, is acknowledged by all. This legacy has raised him to the rank of a leading teacher of the Islamic faith, and al-Māturīdī is still referred to as such to this day in nearly every handbook and survey on Islam.

Yet, despite this high estimation and ubiquitous accolade, a certain uncertainty is to be found. With all due respect to the oft-cited mutakallim, one still feels at a loss to describe his theology with precision, and to explain the means by which he distinguished himself from the other representatives of his discipline. Up to this point, what has been said about al-Māturīdī describes his aforementioned historical status considerably more than it does his actual work or personage. We hear, for instance, that he was, next to al-Jubbāʾī (d. 303/915–6), Abū Hāshim (d. 321/933), al-Kaʿbī (d. 319/931), and al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935–6), one of the greatest thinkers of the early classical era of kalām.1

Most prominently emphasized after this point is that the second Sunnī school of kalām, the influence of which has lasted over hundreds of years, can be traced back to him.2 Yet, the very basis of this latter achievement, i.e., al-Māturīdī’s specific doctrine itself, is still not known in all of its specifics. One does find publications on his doctrine that are somewhat informative, but the overall picture remains irritatingly vague. Indeed, its contours are so lacking

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in focus that even in the more recent literature one can still come across such articles as “The Obscurity of al-Māturīdī” or “The Problem of al-Māturīdī.”

Modern research is not to be blamed for this strange divide between the fame of our theologian and our knowledge of his work. The problem begins much earlier, in the medieval Arabic sources themselves. There we encounter the surprising phenomenon that in a large number of classical representations of the divisions in Islamic theology where one would most expect to see al-Māturīdī prominently mentioned, his name is strikingly absent. The reason for this was not a conscious disregard, but a certain historical or geographical configuration, so to speak. Al-Māturīdī did not live in Iraq or another central region of the Islamic world, but carried out his scholarly activity in Samarqand, i.e., at the far eastern border of the Oecumene. Ideas from other regions reached that area, but local intellectual developments did not interest anyone further to the west, even in Baghdad. As a consequence, al-Māturīdī was initially unknown, and his influence was restricted for a long time to Samarqand and his Transoxanian homeland.

This changed only in the middle of the fifth/eleventh century, as the Seljuks, coming from the northeast, expanded their rule successfully into the core dominions of Islam. As they advanced, they brought with themselves the theology that they had become familiar with in Transoxania, and made sure as well, though not always through the most judicious means, to make this theology known in these central Islamic territories as well. At first this led to turbulence, especially in Iran, and opened old wounds between the Ḥanafites and Shāfiʿites who consequently faced off anew—this time as followers of al-Māturīdī and al-Ashʿarī, respectively. Later however, they came to a reconciliation that, significantly, was initiated in Syria. The Zangid ruler Nūr al-Dīn (r. 541–68/1146–74) paved a way by which he would advocate the strengthening of Sunnism as a whole, which meant toleration of the differences between the

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4 On the following, compare Madelung’s foundational work, which is extraordinarily rich in material, Wilferd Madelung, “The Spread of Māturidism and the Turks,” in Actas do iv Congresso de Estudos Árabes e Islâmicos, Coimbra-Lisboa 1968 (Leiden, 1971), 109–168, esp. 124ff.