CHAPTER 3

Abū Rāʾiṭa Al-Takrīṭī (c. 755–c. 835)

Background

Biography

‘Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rāʾiṭa al-Takrīṭī the Jacobite’, as he refers to himself in the title of his ‘Refutation of the Melkites’,1 is a man about whom little is known. From his name we can infer that he came from the Christian town of Takrīt, situated around 140 kilometres north-west of Baghdad on the Tigris River. Abū Rāʾiṭa’s dates can be established through two recorded events which make reference to him. The first is found in the prefatory comments of his ‘Refutation’ mentioned above, in which we are told that he was called to the court of the Armenian Prince Ashūt Msaker around 815 to argue against the Melkite, Theodore Abū Qurra, on behalf of the Jacobite (Syrian Orthodox) Church.2 Abū Rāʾiṭa responded by sending Nonnus, deacon of Nisibis and his relative, in his place. The second reference is found in a text by Michael the Syrian, who refers to both Abū Rāʾiṭa and Nonnus of Nisibis in connection with a synod held in 828.3 These two dates therefore put his period of activity in the early ninth century, along with Abū Qurra and ‘Ammār al-baughri. There is no mention of his activities after 828.

Abū Rāʾiṭa’s role within the Jacobite church remains a matter of dispute. Having been referred to as both Bishop of Takrīt4 and Bishop of Nisibis in different places, it is actually now thought that he was probably neither.5 What can be ascertained, however, is that Abū Rāʾiṭa was a respected theologian, a ‘teacher’ or ‘apologist’ (malpōnō in Syriac, vardapet in the Armenian texts which refer to him), who was invited on at least two occasions to represent the Jacobite church and defend its beliefs in official settings.

1 Graf, Die Schriften des Jacobiten.
3 Ibid., p. 56.
4 Rachid Haddad feels that Abū Rāʾiṭa was probably the Bishop of Takrīt but explains his doubts. Haddad, La Trinité divine, p. 55.
Historical Context

During Abū Rāʾiṭa’s life, the city of Takrīt and the surrounding area had very much become a Syrian Orthodox region, the “Jacobite” centre in Mesopotamia. The Jacobite Church, so called after the sixth-century Bishop of Edessa Jacob Baradaeus (d. 578), who is noted for his reorganisation of the Syrian Orthodox Monophysite community, appears to have flourished there during the early ninth century, though Christians are said to have been in the area from the first Christian century. Cyriaque, the Patriarch of Antioch (793–817), reportedly went to Takrīt during his office to establish a strong metropolitan in the region, which lay to the south-east of Antioch and the important theological schools of Nisibis and Edessa.

Following the cession of a number of provinces to the Sassanid Empire by the Roman Emperor Flavius Iovianus (Jovian) in 363, the Syriac-speaking Christian communities found themselves cut off from the Byzantine Empire. Although they remained Christian and continued to be theologically influenced by the Greek Fathers, the Church developed its own distinctive cultural identity through the use of the Syriac language as the language of liturgy. Just over a century later, the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) would lead to the theological divorce of the Syriac Christian communities from the Melkite Church, which advocated the official Byzantine doctrine.

Shortly after Abū Rāʾiṭa’s birth, the nearby city of Baghdad was established as the new capital of the Islamic Empire under the Abbāsid ruler al-Manṣūr. As a result of this move, the Syriac Christian communities of the region suddenly found themselves living side by side with their Muslim rulers, at the heart of the Islamic Empire.

Abū Rāʾiṭa, therefore, would have found himself in close contact with Islamic thought and may well have been involved in munāẓarāt, debates held at the Caliph’s Court, where Christians were often invited to defend and discuss their beliefs with a Muslim scholar in the presence of the Caliph. Certainly, from his written works it is clear that he had substantial knowledge of Islam, as will be seen in due course.

10 See: Keating, Defending the “People of truth”.