INTRODUCTION

A NINTH-CENTURY DEFENSE OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE: ABŪ RĀʾĪṬAH AL-TAKRĪTĪ’S RESPONSE TO HIS MUSLIM CRITICS

Christians and the Rise of Islam

It is likely that Christians and Jews living in Mesopotamia at the beginning of the seventh century could not have imagined the magnitude of the change that was about to descend upon their world. Life was continuing much as it had for centuries, albeit under the exhausting burden of the warring Byzantine and Persian empires. Yet, from an obscure place in Arabia, a military and religious leader stepped on to the stage of history, bringing a religion that would change the face of the world in less than two hundred years. The man who came to be known as the Prophet Muhammad was believed by his followers to have received revelations from God for twenty-two years until his death in 632 A.D. In the last decade of his life he gathered around himself a small community and set in motion one of the most breath-taking conquests in history.

Initially the Arab conquerors essentially left the existing bureaucratic and legal structures they encountered in place, insisting only that their subjects pay taxes and refrain from slandering Muhammad or their religion. However, by the middle of the eighth century the Muslim community had developed a self-confidence that manifested itself in the desire to transform society according to the demands of the Qur’ān. The result was the appearance of a new dynasty, the ‘Abbāsids, and a new capital, Baghdad, founded near the ancient Christian city of Takrīt. Under these new rulers, Arab-Islamic civilization flourished and for five centuries relative peace and prosperity prevailed throughout the lands they dominated. Although the ‘Abbāsids never had direct authority over the entire territory controlled by Muslim rulers, their presence and influence was widely felt in every aspect of life. Through their leadership, Islamic civilization entered its Golden Age and was able to attain exceptional achievements in science, medicine, law, astronomy, poetry, literature and art. While the ‘Abbāsids remained in power in Baghdad,
Muslim society flourished until the Mongol invasions in 656/1258.  

As the Islamic empire grew in power and stability, the Christians living within its confines were confronted with dramatic changes in their daily lives. Those living in North Africa and east of Byzantium who had been divided by their acceptance or rejection of various ecumenical church councils were now united under an alien rule that was having increasing influence over every area of their existence. Many of those who had supported Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople (428-431), as well as the champions of Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria (412-444) who subsequently rejected Chalcedon, had formed communities in the East. Before the rise of Islam, they had generally been able to maintain a degree of autonomy through political and territorial separation. Now, all Christians, Nestorians, Jacobites (Cyrillian Monophysites), Melkite Chalcedonians, Maronites and others, were faced with the challenges brought by Islam.

The turn of the ninth century saw a rapid cultural transformation that deeply touched both the Christian and Islamic communities. The first ‘Abbāsid century was a formative period for all aspects of Islamic thought, as well as a time during which relations between Muslims and Christians were solidified into patterns that were to last for a millennium. The stabilization of the Islamic community had established a more regulated and uniform society, creating the conditions for an intellectual and cultural flowering. For Christians and Jews, increased religious and social restrictions were accompanied by unique opportunities to participate in the nacent stages of what would become an explosion of scholarly activity. And so it was that the commencement of the ‘Abbāsid reign found the Syrian Jacobite community of Iraq in transition: as a new civilization grew out of the meeting of cultural streams from Persia, Byzantium, Arabia and Mesopotamia, a new language and legal system prevailed, and many were choosing to convert to the young religion of Islam. At this time, theological exchange between Muslims and Christians emerged in a form which had not occurred earlier and was to become rare in the following centuries. It was in this unique milieu that the Jacobite Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rā’ītah made his contribution as a Christian apologist.

---