THE SECOND RISĀLAH OF ABŪ RĀ‘ĪTĀH AL-TAKRĪTĪ ON THE INCARNATION

Introduction

As was outlined above, Abū Rā‘ītāh’s Second Risālah on the Incarnation was written in conjunction with the previous risālah on the Trinity to an unnamed Jacobite with the purpose of answering questions raised by Muslims about these two Christian doctrines. The style and internal evidence further substantiate the suggestion that it was written later in Abū Rā‘ītāh’s career after he had had considerable experience as a controversialist and become known beyond his home of Takrīt.

Essentially the aim of this text is the same as that of On the Trinity: to establish common ground with the Muslim mutakallimūn with whom he was in conversation in order to show first that the Jacobite teaching on the Incarnation is not contradictory, and second, that Christianity is in fact the true religion. In the risālah on the Incarnation, the opponents in the debate have challenged Abū Rā‘ītāh to explain how God can have become human (بُنَاؤُ) and incarnated (تَجْسِيدُ) without change or alteration. Muslims point out that Christian teaching on the Incarnation demands that Christians hold opposite statements about God as true: God is mortal and immortal, passible and impassible, eternal and born in time, etc. This, they insist, is impossible and must be rejected. As in the On the Trinity, Abū Rā‘ītāh proceeds in this risālah with a response clarifying the doctrine and providing examples to demonstrate that what appears incompatible with what is known by human beings about God can be demonstrated to be a logical truth.

In the risālah on the Incarnation, Abū Rā‘ītāh treats some of the most troubling problems for Muslims about Christianity using both those concepts and strategies developed in the previous risālah on the Trinity and additional material taken from the Muslim and Christian Scriptures. On the Incarnation begins with a short transition from the previous risālah (§1) and moves directly into the issues at hand, addressing first the question of the relationship between the three divine hypostaseis and the one incarnated in a body (§§2-7), turning
Eventually to the difficulty of how God can enter into the limitations of creation (§§8-18). The interlocutors raise the inevitable problem of whether it was necessary for God to bring about salvation through incarnation (§§19-23). The underlying issue is the true nature of Jesus and his mission: is he God incarnated to redeem creation as Christians believe, or is he a Messenger sent to announce God’s commands as the Qur’an claims? But at the heart of the conflict lies a question that is ultimately unanswerable by human beings: why did God choose this particular means to reconcile creation to Himself? Abū Rā’īṭah gives his Muslim questioners a standard Christian response, and turns the question to back to them, asking for a justification for their teaching that God sent messengers (§§24-35). The problem returns to the question of God becoming what has the definable properties of a creature (§§36-62) and concludes with an examination of the Messiah’s knowledge of the future (§§63-77) and His willing the crucifixion (§§78-85). More details, Abū Rā’īṭah concludes, can be found in his letter written to the Christians of Baḥrīn (§85).

One notices some important differences between the approach found in the previous treatise and this much longer one. First, Abū Rā’īṭah’s knowledge of Islam is revealed to a much greater extent in this risālah than anywhere else. Not only does he mention Islamic beliefs explicitly, he even offers passages from the Qur’an to make his point. The reason for this candid approach is doubtless to be found in the precise references to Jesus and Christian beliefs about him in the Qur’an. Its unambiguous rejection of the possibility that God generates or is generated (Sura 112) and an emphasis on Jesus’ humanity (Sura 5:75) could not be easily manipulated or reinterpreted so as to admit the Incarnation. In addition, contemporary issues being debated in Muslim scholarly circles did not readily lend themselves to exploitation in support of the Incarnation. Although Abū Rā’īṭah is able to credibly demonstrate the plausibility of three hypostaseis in the Divine Being through philosophical principles, it is more difficult to show how and why one of those hypostaseis became human. Consequently he must take up the counter-claims to the doctrine of the Incarnation asserted in the Qur’an directly.

This leads to the second difference in this risālah: whereas the emphasis in On the Trinity is on redefining certain terminology so as to

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