THE USE AND TRANSLATION OF SCRIPTURE IN THE
APOLOGETIC WRITINGS OF ABÙ RĀTṬA AL-TAKRĪTĪ

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Introduction

The Christian community living under Abbasid rule in the early ninth century witnessed a number of profound changes that were to have lasting effects on church life. Among the more significant of these was the establishment of Arabic as the official language of the empire, along with other policies encouraging conversion to Islam. This situation soon demanded of Christian theologians a careful response to Muslim questions, as well as clear formulations and explanations of Christian doctrines in light of the confrontation with Islamic assertions. It is also within this context that one finds the beginnings of systematic translation of the Bible into Arabic.

There has long been a debate among scholars over how early extensive Arabic translations of parts of the Bible existed and how widespread their usage was. Given the evidence available to date, however, it seems unlikely that, apart from a few scattered pre-Islamic sacred inscriptions in Arabic, any significant Christian writings were translated until after the rise of Islam.¹ The earliest known Arabic translations of biblical texts are those found in manuscripts predominantly from Mar Sabas and St Catherine’s monasteries that can be dated around the beginning of the ninth century. At this time, nearly all the New Testament, including the Gospels, was translated first in the Melkite church for liturgical and apologetic uses.² Yet, only a limited number of texts from the Old Testament, notably the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach and Psalm 79, are known to have

¹ Most of the manuscripts that were thought to have been earlier translations have now been positively dated much later; A. Võõbus, Early Versions of the New Testament: Manuscript Studies (Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 6), Stockholm, 1954, pp. 271-7.
been rendered into Arabic by the early ninth century. This may account for the fact that biblical citations found in Muslim writings in the early period are often taken completely out of context and appear with no reference to what immediately precedes or follows them. Arabic-speakers, it seems, did not have access to more complete translations of the Old Testament, apart from a few verses circulated in Christian apologetical texts.

The writings that probably provided the sources for such citations were those beginning to be produced by apologists such as Theodore Abū Qurra, the Melkite Bishop of Harrān, and the Jacobite Abū Rāʾīṭa al-Takrītī, along with numerous other lesser-known and anonymous authors. These writers had now found themselves confronting a new situation in which the faithful from their ancient churches were rapidly converting to a rival religion for what they regarded in many cases as dubious reasons. This was a result of social and economic pressure, as well as religious conviction. In both formal and informal settings, Muslims and Christians were apparently engaged in direct discussion and literary debate over the criteria for the ‘true religion’. For their part, Muslim interlocutors were motivated by the demand of the Qur’an that Christians produce a burhān (Q 2.111; 28.75), a ‘proof’ that their religion was truly from God and had not been altered or manipulated by human interference. In response, Christian theologians turned to traditional apologetic approaches involving rational arguments supported by biblical proof texts. However, as we shall see, the new context demanded that these methods be transformed to meet the unique challenge of Islam.

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