The early ninth century theologian and apologist ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī attempted the earliest known systematic theology in an Islamic context. His method was to develop a thorough response to questions raised by Muslims concerning their perceptions of Christian beliefs that arose from the interpretation of the Qur’an. ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī tackles the Muslim rejection of the authenticity of the Christian Scriptures, the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, and belief in God as one essence in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In two apologetic treatises, he offers justifications for these beliefs, not so much by referring directly to the teaching of the Qur’an, which he does rarely, but rather by appealing to Muslim assumptions based on their reading of Qur’anic texts. While his Book of Questions and Answers seems to have been written before his Book of the Proof concerning the Course of the Divine Economy, the latter is a fuller account of Christian theology. The former deals with God and the world, the authenticity of the Gospels, the Trinity and the Incarnation, and will be used here to provide additional evidence of ‘Ammār’s handling of Qur’anic presuppositions.2


Christianity is a True Religion Based on Signs from God

In the opening section of his systematic defense of Christian beliefs and practices entitled *Book of the Proof concerning the Course of the Divine Economy*, ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī presents a proof of the truth of Christianity based on the Qur’anic presupposition that a religion is truly from God if it is accompanied by signs from Him. He begins by noting that several communities claim to have the true religion revealed by God and that other religions are therefore not from God. ‘We see people in our time disagreeing about their religions, divided in their communities, with each of them saying that their religion is the religion of God, and that what contradicts it is not from God. Yet we know that there is one religion of God among all of them.’

Philosophers may have tried to use reason to determine the truth but this has not led to agreement among them. In such a situation how can the average person be any more certain than the intellectuals? Surely the answer lies in the conviction that ‘God is above commanding human beings what they cannot bear.’ This is the first reference to a Qur’anic text in the treatise, though ʿAmmār does not indicate chapter and verse to his reader. Q 22:78, ‘He has chosen you and has not imposed difficulties on you in religious duties,’ is the basis for ʿAmmār’s argument, which he seeks to build on revelation rather than on reason.

He proceeds to back up this reliance on Qur’anic teaching by announcing that the key to the solution of the search for the true religion is to be found in the principle that God has given signs to humanity of his reality and activity. ʿAmmār indicates that he has a Muslim audience in mind when he says, ‘According to what you stubborn people have stated, God sent his messengers and revealed his signs through them, signs that could not be copied.’ This is closer here to actual quotation from the Qur’an, which in at least four places supports his interpretation. Q 2: 23–4, 10:38, 11:13, and 52:33–4, repeat the challenge to the hearers of the message of the Prophet to come up with their own message from God since they reject his, calling Muhammad a fraudulent forger of sayings. Yet they can only bring false messages from gods that do not exist. ʿAmmār concludes that, ‘God wants to entrust to his people his signs that cannot be imitated.’

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