CHAPTER THREE

REFUTING THE CHARGE OF *TAḤRĪF*: ABŪ RĀ'IṬA (D. CA. 835) AND HIS "*FIRST* RISĀLA *ON THE HOLY TRINITY*"

Sandra Toenies Keating

The quranic allegation that significant portions of the Torah and Gospels have been falsified, commonly identified as *taḥrīf*, has played an important role in the relations between the Muslim *umma* and Christians and Jews throughout history. It is perhaps the most contentious theological issue between the communities, and arguably lies at the root of all other disagreements. Initially, the claim of *taḥrīf* was primarily employed by Muslims to defend the truth of the revelation to Muḥammad and the authenticity of his prophethood against those who contended they were not legitimate. Over the centuries, however, the argument was expanded and elaborated to explain a wide range of discrepancies between the Quran and the Bible.[1] The charge eventually provided the starting point for all other polemical themes in Islam, becoming one of the most common subjects found in apologetical texts.[2]

Many Christian apologists took up the task of defending Christian faith against the claim that it was founded on the sand of falsehood and lies. Among the first to do so was Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā'iṭa (ca. 153–ca. 220 A.H./ca. 770–ca. 835 C.E.), a Jacobite from the ancient city of Takrīt near Baghdad. Although Abū Rā'iṭa devotes only a very small portion of his writings explicitly to refuting the charge of *taḥrīf*, the problem is clearly at the forefront of his mind as he formulates many of his arguments. His efforts would lay the groundwork for later generations of apologists seeking to answer the accusation.

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[1] Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds* 19–35. The most extensive survey of the argument of *taḥrīf* found in the writings of important Muslim scholars continues to be Di Matteo: Il '*taḥrīf*' od alterazione della Bibbia (1922).

[2] Bouamama, La littérature polémique musulmane 43.

1 *The charge of falsification*

Traditionally, *taḥrīf* is the general term given to the teaching that any disparity between the Quran and the Jewish and Christian scriptures can be traced to the intentional or accidental corruption of the latter by deceitful people, most often the Jews.[3] This doctrine is based on explicit references in the Quran to the problem. According to the Quran, the revelation to Muḥammad is *parallel* to all previous revelations, repeating and confirming what already had been passed on through the recognized prophets from Adam to Jesus (see Q 2:41, 91, 97; 3:3; 4:47; 5:46–48; and passim).[4] All authentic scriptures are "copies" of the original "Mother of the Book," the *umm al-kitāb* (Q 3:7; 13:39; 43:4), identified by theologians as the Word of God. This Word is inscribed on the heavenly "Preserved Tablet" (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ*, Q 85:22), where it is protected from corruption and guarded from all distortion. Throughout the history of humanity, all or parts of it have been "sent down" many times and communicated through various prophets as an untainted revelation. Among others, the Quran mentions the revelation of the Torah to Moses and Aaron (Q 23:49; 25:35; 37:117), the Psalms to David (Q 21:105), the Gospel to Jesus (Q 19:30), and finally, the Quran to Muḥammad (Q 43:2–3), as examples of this perfect manifestation of the *umm al-kitāb*.

Because authentic revelations of the eternal Book are always copies of the original Preserved Tablet, their monotheistic content never varies.[5] Furthermore, the text descends directly and is literally transmitted through the person who receives it, eliminating any human involvement, and thus any possibility of error or deviation from the previous revelation.[6] As the last historical instance of God's sending down of the *umm al-kitāb*, the Quran serves as the criterion by which all other scriptures are to be judged for their fidelity to the original message, and as the corrective for those who are seeking the truth of God.[7]

Early on, Muḥammad and his followers became aware of significant discrepancies between the Quran and the Torah and Gospels, par-

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[3] See the art. "Taḥrīf," in *EI*² x, 111 (Hava Lazarus-Yafeh).
[4] Watt, Early Development 77–78.
[5] Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes* i, 11.
[6] Caspar and Gaudeul, Textes 63–64.
[7] Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes* i, 4–5.

ticularly concerning the authenticity of Muḥammad's prophethood. The unwillingness of both Jews and Christians to accept his claim to be a true, and even the final, prophet sent by God prompted arguments in his defence.[8] Based on the Quran, Muslims maintained that previous prophets, including Abraham and Jesus (Q 7:157; 2:129; 61:6), had predicted Muḥammad's coming, but that their followers had concealed this in various ways. They argued that many Christians and Jews had recognized his true identity based on the prophecies and became Muslims; others, however, had obscured the real meaning of the revelations and refused to acknowledge him.[9] Later, Muslim theologians pointed to changes in dietary laws, monastic practices and the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity as especially in need of correction, and claimed that points of disagreement between the scriptures are always to be reconciled in favor of the revelation to Muḥammad.[10]

The Quran places the blame for error in the scriptures of Christians and Jews on those who were entrusted with preserving the revelations. While numerous references do not make clear who is directly responsible—in several places it is simply stated that the Torah and Gospel have been changed—the Quran most often identifies the Jews as the source of the distortions in the scriptures. The fact that Christians based their teachings of Jesus as the Messiah on the Jewish scriptures, along with the Jewish rejection of Muḥammad, made the Jews the prime suspects as the origin of the corruption.[11] One of the most explicit statements in Q 5:13 says that the Jews have altered the scriptures in two ways: "They have altered (*yuḥarrifūna*) the words'

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[8] Watt, Early Development 77; Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds* 75–110.

[9] Caspar and Gaudeul, Textes 64, 93. One of the most well-known accounts of this phenomenon is that of Ibn Isḥāq (d. ca. 767), who argued in his *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* that Jesus' annunciation of the Paraclete found in the Gospel of John (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13) was in fact a clear reference to Muḥammad; cf. Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat al-nabī* i, 25; Caspar and Gaudeul, Textes 76, n. 35.

Although Christians countered the claim with evidence that Ibn Isḥāq had confused two Greek terms, his explanation was repeated by subsequent Muslim writers as proof of manipulation and corruption of the previous revelations, and became a standard item in later polemical works. See Guthrie and Bishop, Paraclete 251–256; and Watt, His Name is Aḥmad 113–117; and Early Development 79–80, 82.

[10] Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes* i, 6. Especially relevant here are the verses of the Quran that warn against belief in the Trinity (Q 4:171; 5:73), record Jesus' own denial of his divinity (Q 4:171–172; 5:17, 72), and disapprove of monasticism (Q 57:27).

[11] Caspar and Gaudeul, Textes 62, 93.

places and they have forgotten (*nasū*) a part of what was given to them by Him." Near parallels to this text are found in Q 5:41, 2:75 and 4:46, each of which places the guilt of alteration on the Jews after Moses.

But this did not allay suspicions that Christians were also responsible. Sometimes Christians are mentioned specifically or included together with the Jews under the epithet *ahl al-kitāb* in the Quran as having manipulated the texts. One finds a succinct summary of their complicity put in the mouth of a Muslim participant in a debate with a Christian reported to have taken place around the year 800 C.E. in Jerusalem:

> What you have said you report only from your Gospel and your new books; however, we have the first, true Gospel. We received it from our Prophet, and it contradicts that which is in your possession. For after the Ascension of Christ into heaven, John and his followers revised the Gospel and set down what is in your possession as they wished. This is what our Prophet has handed down to us.[12]

This charge apparently reflects the general opinion of the Muslim scholarly community. A contemporary of Abū Rāʾiṭa, ʿAlī Sahl Rabbān al-Ṭabarī (d. 240/855), uses the quranic references to falsification to expose the truth that he believes Christians have obscured. He is the author of two of the oldest surviving Muslim refutations of Christianity: *Radd ʿalā al-naṣārā* and *Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*.[13] In the latter, al-Ṭabarī states that he wants to uncover the truth in the scriptures, which the Christians are trying to hide and have altered (*ḥarrafū*). He does not dispute the general authenticity of the Christian scriptures, but rather argues specifically that the meaning of the text has been distorted, especially in what concerns the prophecy of Muḥammad, in order to conceal the veracity of the Quran.[14]

Eventually, a multitude of problematic discrepancies between the revelation to Muḥammad and other scriptures came to be identified as the result of tampering by human hands. In the centuries after Muḥammad's death, the argument of *taḥrīf* was developed until it became recognized as a legitimate and standard feature of Islamic

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[12] Vollers, Religionsgespräch 62; see also Griffith, Gospel in Arabic 142.

[13] Khalifé et Kutsch, Ar-Radd ʿalā-n-Naṣārā 115–148; and al-Ṭabarī, *K. al-Dīn wa-l-dawla*.

[14] See especially *K. al-Dīn wa-l-dawla* 7, 6, 20, 117.

apologetics. In keeping with the thesis that the Torah and Gospels had been corrupted, a number of attempts were made to rectify errors found in them by excising problematic passages and substituting words with others more consistent with the Quran.[15] These activities did not go unnoticed by the Christian community, and many felt that they warranted a response.

2 *Abū Rā'iṭa's "First* Risāla *on the Holy Trinity"*[16]

Naturally, the problem posed by *taḥrīf* had a significant impact on the manner in which Jews and Christians could formulate an effective rebuttal to Islamic claims about the status of their own teachings. Christian apologists recognized that many of the traditional arguments devised to defend Christianity against its early Jewish detractors could also be used to respond to Muslims. They were also well aware that any appeal to a common scripture base was severely limited by the allegation that the biblical texts had been falsified. This compelled them to find common ground in reason supplemented by examples and analogies that would be acceptable to their opponents and draw them into the argument.

Abū Rā'iṭa was one of the first to recognize the window that had been opened at the beginning of the third/ninth century with the growing interest of Muslim *mutakallimūn* in the Greek philosophical tradition. Drawing particularly on the tools offered by Aristotelian logic, he used reason to formulate his arguments and delineate both what was agreed upon and what was disputed between the two religions. Between the years 199/815 and 215/830, Abū Rā'iṭa produced at least five treatises (one of which is now lost) aimed at

[15] Ibn Isḥāq cited John 15:23–16:1 directly, but made "corrections" in order to bring it more closely in line with the quranic views of Jesus. For example, he replaces the three instances of "my Father" with "the Lord," following the Islamic rejection of Jesus' divinity. This passage has been carefully studied by two scholars, Baumstark, Eine altarabische Evangelienübersetzung 201–209; and Guillaume, Version of the Gospels 289–296. A summary of the two is found in Griffith, Gospel in Arabic 137–143. For specific examples of Muslim exegesis of the Bible passages in question, see Goldziher, Ueber muhammedanische Polemik 1–47. A further instance of this phenomenon can be seen in the later anonymous re-working of the psalms, edited and translated by Krarup, *Auswahl pseudo-davidischer Psalmen*.

[16] Because Abū Rā'iṭa's epistolary texts exemplify a particular type of letter-treatise found in Christian Arabic literature, I have chosen to retain the Arabic term *risāla* (pl. *rasā'il*) here.

defending Christianity against Muslim polemics.[17] Four of the texts are in letter format and addressed to unidentified fellow Jacobite Christians. These are intended to provide ready answers for those who are being questioned by their Muslim neighbors about Christian teachings. The fifth is a collection of proof texts taken from the Old Testament, the importance of which will be seen below.

In these treatises, Abū Rā'iṭa is attentive to two particular concerns. First, he hopes to supply evidence that can be used by Christians to convince Muslims of the viability of Christian doctrines (especially of the Incarnation and Trinity) and show that they are not contradictory or absurd. His secondary purpose is to assuage the doubts of Christians who are beginning to consider conversion to the new faith.[18] Both of these objectives are manifested in his use of Arabic as his literary medium. Abū Rā'iṭa's apologies are among the first whose author can be positively identified that are written in Arabic.[19]

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[17] A total of at least eleven texts authored by Abū Rā'iṭa can be identified, although only nine of these are extant. In addition to the responses to questions by Muslims, he wrote several treatises explaining monophysite teachings, including two defending the Jacobite version of the *Trishagion*. They have been collected together with two other texts containing excerpts from Abū Rā'iṭa's works in Georg Graf's edition: *Die Schriften des Jacobiten Ḥabīb Ibn Ḥidma Abū Rā'iṭa*. References to Abū Rā'iṭa's works here will follow the numbering assigned by Graf. Unfortunately, Abū Rā'iṭa's contribution to Arab Christian theology has been neglected. For example, "[n]ow the publication of the work of a Jacobite theologian of the beginning of the 3rd/9th century, Abū Rā'iṭa Ḥabīb b. Khidma, shows that, contrary to the opinion of Massignon, this distinction between the divine attributes dates from a period considerably before that of Yaḥyā b. 'Adī, since it is found in the work of Abū Rā'iṭa, from whom the author of the letter borrowed it, as well as the whole of the philosophical-theological section dealing with the unity of God (cf. G. Graf, *Die Schriften* 5–10). As for the fact of a Nestorian author borrowing from a Jacobite a discussion of the unity of God, this is not surprising, since there was no difference of opinion between them on this point." See the art. "al-Kindī, 'Abd al-Masīḥ," in: *EI*[2] v, 120 (G. Troupeau).

[18] The Christian community was just beginning to address this important issue. In the period spanning Abū Rā'iṭa's lifetime, the Muslim population in Iraq appears to have increased from approximately ten percent to nearly forty percent. This was due to several factors, the most significant of which was conversions to Islam. 'Abbāsid policies strongly favored Muslims, and increases in the *jizya*, or "poll-tax," which, in traditional Islamic law, is levied on non-Muslims in Muslim states, gave many strong incentives to convert to the new religion. Cf. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam* 81–83. Abū Rā'iṭa is apparently convinced that many had abandoned Christianity for political or economic gain, as well as religious reasons. He takes up these problems in his "Proof of the Christian Religion" (VIII), where he lays out both unacceptable and legitimate reasons to convert to another religion, followed by a defence of Christian doctrine and practices.

[19] Abū Rā'iṭa himself was probably a native Syriac-speaker, and is representa-

This suggests that, although the ostensible purpose of the texts is to provide assistance to Christians, he expected they would be read by Muslims as well.

In keeping with this expectation, he lays out the arguments in a manner deliberately intended to convince the readers of both religions. Certainly, Abū Rā'iṭa's contemporaries would have recognized his efforts as a response to the Quran's testimony that Christians will be called upon to produce their proof (*burhān*) for the truth of their religion on the Day of Judgment (Q 2:111; 28:75). In particular, they will be compelled to give a justification for their belief in the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. The *rasā'il* Abū Rā'iṭa offers his readers are a sort of compendium, a kind of *kitāb al-burhān*, of prepared responses to exactly these issues. The treatises are particularly notable for their use of a wide variety of resources, with a special emphasis on certain types of Old Testament examples and on the Hellenistic ideas that were gaining currency in the third/ninth century in Muslim scholarly circles.[20]

A close examination of the texts, however, reveals that Abū Rā'iṭa is not simply presenting arguments to be translated and applied to individual encounters with Muslims. He is advocating a particular approach for Christians to take in these exchanges that depends primarily on what can be proven by reason and commonly agreed-upon philosophical principles, supplemented by the occasional scriptural reference. The impetus for this move is taken up briefly at the end of one of his most significant writings, the "First *Risāla* on the Holy Trinity" (*al-Risāla al-ūlā fī l-thālūth al-muqaddas*) (I), where he turns to the Muslim charge that the scriptures have been falsified.

After a typical epistolary preface, the "First *Risāla*" (I) begins with a statement summarizing the appropriate attributes (*ṣifāt*) for God, put in the mouth of a Muslim opponent. Abū Rā'iṭa then proceeds with a demonstration of the logical necessity of a Trinitarian understanding of these attributes. His method is predominantly dialectical, by which he continually narrows the meanings of important concepts. This is followed by several common analogies proving that unicity and plurality are not by definition incompatible (e.g., one

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tive of the important period of transition to Arabic promoted by the policies of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs.

[20] Harald Suermann argues that Abū Rā'iṭa may be the first Christian to use Aristotle in engaging Muslims on these topics. See id., Trinität, esp. 221–223.

light, many lamps). Abū Rā'iṭa also includes a number of biblical references in support of his argument, concluding that both scripture and reason support the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Although several of Abū Rā'iṭa's apologetic treatises responding to Islam have been directly influenced by the problem posed by the accusation of *taḥrīf*, none reveals the concern more the "First *Risāla*" (I), where the overall structure is completely determined by the issue. Abū Rā'iṭa is acutely aware that the accusation of falsification undermines much of the primary evidence for Christian teaching. This leads him to adopt a two-pronged approach that utilizes both principles of logic and elements drawn from Greek thought, and traditional evidence employed previously by Christian apologists that does not contradict what is found in the Quran. Consequently, the greater part of the "First *Risāla*" is taken up with philosophical argumentation, concentrating especially on precise definitions of "one" and "unity," and on necessary attributes and their relationship to the Divine Being. Throughout the argument, he uses both dialectic and logic to draw appropriate distinctions and eliminate incorrect assumptions. In this manner, Abū Rā'iṭa apparently hopes to establish reason as common ground and lure Muslim intellectuals into the argument. Such an approach, he contends, will ultimately prove that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are not absurd, but rather philosophically necessary.

Abū Rā'iṭa believes that these proofs are sufficient to convince both Muslims and Christians of the truth of Christianity. However, he recognizes that *taḥrīf* remains an issue that cannot simply be avoided, for it is only through revelation that the specific identities of the three Persons of the Trinity are known. Furthermore, leaving the issue unaddressed might lend credence to the accusation of falsification. It is therefore incumbent on him to demonstrate the integrity of the Bible to his readers in a way that will counter the allegation of *taḥrīf*. In response, he takes up the problem near the end of the "First *Risāla*" (I) after he has drawn his opponent in with non-scriptural evidence, attacking the charge directly by exposing its lack of a logical foundation. The strong language and strategic placement of this rebuttal is striking, suggesting that Abū Rā'iṭa's own personal experience of such discussions lie behind the *Risāla*.

The issue of falsification is first raised in (§16) within the context of a defence of *qiyās* ("reasoning by analogy"), where Abū Rā'iṭa concludes with the assertion that his argument is reliable proof "even

if the ones who differ from us on it declare it to be false when they claim we have altered (*taḥrīfinā*) [the sacred books] by adding to them and taking away from them." His statement follows the general quranic descriptions of *taḥrīf* as the manipulation of the true revelation either by placing words in the mouths of the prophets or by concealing what was received (Q 2:42, 140, 146; 3:71, 78, 187; 4:46; 5:13, 41; and passim). More specifically, however, Abū Rāʾiṭa wants to discredit any suggestion of a particularly egregious type of *taḥrīf*, that of *tabdīl*, or "substitution."

The Quran contends that the reason Christians and Jews have strayed from the original message given to the prophets before Muḥammad is that the texts of their scriptures have been misinterpreted, poorly read, or intentionally manipulated.[21] The most serious form of corruption, *tabdīl*, is counted among the six different verbs and their derivatives (*kitmān, labs, taḥrīf, layy, nisyān, tabdīl*) employed in the Quran to describe these various types of falsification through human intervention.[22] According to Muslim scholars of the first few centuries after Muḥammad, these terms can be generally understood as belonging to one of two recognized categories: *taḥrīf al-naṣṣ* ("falsification of the actual *text* of the scriptures") and *taḥrīf al-maʿānī* ("falsification of the *meaning* of the scriptures"). A further distinction made within the latter category, *taʾwīl*, covers errors made in *interpreting* the meaning of a verse. *Tabdīl* falls under the first heading, and is usually considered to be the most grievous form of *taḥrīf* because it is a willful falsification of the text.[23]

"Substitution" is mentioned explicitly in the Quran twice in connection with the Israelites after Moses in Q 2:59 and 7:162 in which

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[21] Bouamama, *Littérature* 43; Watt, Early Development 78.

[22] The relevant terms are: *kitmān* ("hiding or concealing," Q 2:42, 140, 146, 159, 174; 3:71, 187), sometimes found in conjunction with *labs* ("disguising," Q 2:42; 3:71), which refers to the concealment of the true revelation, such as references to Muḥammad's prophethood. A third term, *layy* ("to twist"), suggests that during recitation of the scriptures the pronunciation was corrupted (either intentionally or unintentionally) so that the listener would not have a proper understanding of it (Q 3:78; 4:46). The Quran also implies that the false interpretation of the meaning of the scriptures stems from disregard for important passages or that some revelations were simply forgotten. The term *nisyān* ("forgetting, overlooking") is used both in reference to Jews (Q 7:53, 164; 5:13) and Christians (Q 5:14; 7:53). Finally, *tabdīl* ("substitution," Q 2:59; 7:162) points to the actual changing of the scriptural texts. Cf. Caspar and Gaudeul, Textes 62–63. Each of these terms seems to assume that the distortion occurred while the revelation was being passed on orally, and no written text was available for corrections.

[23] Caspar and Gaudeul, Textes 61–63.

it is clearly stated that the evildoers among them "substituted" (*baddala*) what was given to them by God with something else. Unlike the other forms of *taḥrīf* identified by Muslim scholars, *tabdīl* is unambiguously intentional. According to the Quran, this deliberate distortion of the scriptures was not limited to the substitution of words in previously revealed texts; those who heard the new message also tried to corrupt it. In Q 10:15, God instructs Muḥammad to resist those who ask him to substitute something else for the authentic revelations, apparently because they are too difficult or contradict the other scriptures. Muḥammad is commanded to say: "It is not for me to substitute it [with something else] of my own accord. . . ." The quranic account of *taḥrīf* implies that his experience is parallel to that of previous messengers: just as the unbelievers attempted to change the true revelations Muḥammad was receiving, the followers of other prophets who kept and interpreted the scriptures knowingly and deliberately altered what they had received. The seriousness of this accusation is obvious, and explains why Abū Rāʾiṭa felt the need to give some response to it.[24]

Abū Rāʾiṭa mentions *tabdīl* in (§19), emphasizing for his Christian readers that the Muslim assertion "that we have changed [the scriptures] and substituted [words for other words]" could be accepted, if it were not the case that Christians and Jews share their scriptures. The verbs *ghayyara* ("to change") and *baddala* ("to substitute one part for another") are evocative of the description the Quran gives of the type of distortion that has occurred in the Bible. Although the verb *ghayyara* is not used to refer to a specific category of *taḥrīf*, the term *ghayr* ("another" or "different") is commonly found with the verb *baddala*, as in Q 7:162: "But the evildoers among [the people of Moses] substituted (*fa-baddala*) the word with something different (*ghayr*) from that which had been said to them [by God]. . . ." The phraseology of this particular verse bears a striking resemblance to Abū Rāʾiṭa's summary, suggesting he was familiar with the quranic basis for the accusation.

The difficulty of responding to the charge of *tabdīl* posed a serious challenge for the Christians of Abū Rāʾiṭa's day—any scriptural

[24] This was a significant point in the debates surrounding the prediction of Muḥammad in the Bible. ". . . Ibn Saʿd, coinciding with al-Ṭabarī, declares that the monk knew Muḥammad because he had found the announcement of his coming in the unadulterated (*tabdīl*) Christian books, which he possessed. . . ." Cf. art. "Baḥīrā," in: *EI*², i, 921 (A. Abel).

evidence that might be put forward could simply be rejected on the grounds that it had been tampered with. Proving the integrity of the New Testament posed an especially complicated problem, given that its entire trajectory contradicts the Quran's very explicit rejection of Jesus' divinity (Q 4:157, 171; 5:17, 72–75, 116–118; 9:30), making nearly every verse suspect.

The problem was exacerbated by increasing Muslim interest in collecting and verifying the prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*s), which placed special emphasis on establishing the existence of an uninterrupted chain of verifiable transmitters, or *isnād*, from the origin of a text to prove its authenticity. Christians, however, were unable to provide a convincing *isnād* to confirm the soundness of the scriptures they had in their possession. Muslim scholars identified the failure of the *ahl al-kitāb* to produce complete *isnād*s as a lack of *tawātur*, or authenticated transmission.[25] This, along with the inability of Christians to furnish any other corroborating evidence for the Gospel, allowed the possibility of corruption.[26] These problems led Abū Rā'iṭa and his fellow Christians to turn instead to a defence of the Hebrew scriptures in the hope of constructing arguments against the very notion of *taḥrīf* that could be extrapolated to vindicate the New Testament.

In his brief comments on the problem, Abū Rā'iṭa builds his case for the authenticity of the Old Testament on two pieces of evidence. First, he argues that the teaching of divine plurality is found in the scriptures of the Jews and Muslims as well as those of the Christians; consequently the opponents cannot claim that Christians altered the text. He offers extensive examples in which God is identified with the plural by a respected figure, citing God's own references to a multiplicity in the Divinity reported through Moses (in *Genesis* 1:26; 2:18; 3:22; 11:7) and Daniel (in *Daniel* 4:31) (§16). Abū Rā'iṭa draws a comparison between these and the multitude of passages in the Quran where God speaks in the first person plural: "We said"

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[25] "*Tawātur* is a technical term in the science of *ḥadīth*, which means roughly 'broad authentication.' [. . .] It indicates that a historical report or a prophetic tradition is supported by such a large number of *isnād* strands, each beginning with a different Companion or other ancient authority, that its authenticity/truthfulness is thereby assumed to be guaranteed. The reasoning behind this was that a sizeable number of people engaged in transmitting one and the same text would never by sheer coincidence, or indeed collusion, all relate a falsehood. As far as historicity is concerned, something transmitted *tawāturan* is considered unassailable by mediaeval *ḥadīth* scholars." Cf. art. "Tawātur," in: *EI*[2] x, 381 (G.H.A. Juynboll).

[26] Caspar and Gaudeul, Textes 66, n. 14; Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds* 41–47.

(Q 2:34, 35, 37; and passim), "We created (Q 15:26, 85; and passim), "We commanded" (Q 10:24; 11:40; and passim), and so forth (§17). He concludes that this corroboration between the revelations proves that the Christian teaching of plurality in divine unity cannot be a fabrication.

Abū Rā'iṭa expects that his opponents will argue that this is just a manner of speech that is permitted in Arabic usage. He counters this with the observation that such plural references to God are found not only with the Arabs, but also the Hebrews, Greeks and Syrians before them. Furthermore, it is incumbent on the Arabs to give a justification other than "it is permitted" for allowing such plural speech about God. They may insist that it is possible for a single human being to say "We command" and "We have sent," etc., but this is not the same as a plural reference to God, since plurals in the former case can often be used for someone who is not deserving of honor and respect. In fact, Abū Rā'iṭa points out, God often speaks of Himself in scripture both in the singular and in the plural. This is a clear indication of the truth of the teaching on the Trinity, for God is both one in *ousia*, which is indicated when God says "I commanded" and "I created," and three in *hypostaseis*, as when God says "We commanded" and "We created" (§17).

Abū Rā'iṭa follows his evidence of God's unicity and plurality with illustrations from the Old Testament identifying the three *hypostaseis*. The first he gives is the well-known example of the three visitors to Abraham. This story is the perfect *mysterion* (or prefiguration, Arabic: *sirr*) for the Trinity, he says, because Abraham recognized that the three visitors are one single Lord, who is three *hypostaseis*, and addressed them accordingly. Abū Rā'iṭa emphasizes that Moses confirmed that the one *ousia* of God is the same Lord who had spoken to Abraham and who is identified in the *Shema'*: "Hear, O Israel, your God is one Lord" (§18).[27] He goes on to demonstrate that the "books" of David and Isaiah also contain numerous references to the individual *hypostaseis*, God, His Word, and His Spirit (§18).[28]

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[27] Abū Rā'iṭa gives a slight variation of the version given in Deut 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God."

[28] Abū Rā'iṭa provides explanations of Pss 33:6; 56:11; 107:20; 110:1; and Isa 48:16; 6:3. The last citation is a reference to the threefold praise of the angels, which is one of the most common examples in his treatises and the foundation for his arguments in support of the Jacobite addition to the *Trishagion*.

After presenting these examples from the Old Testament and the Quran, Abū Rā'iṭa comments that the Muslims will deny these witnesses, contending that "The prophets did not say this, rather, you have altered the word's place, and you have made [the prophets] say what is false and a lie. . . ."[29] This statement is a paraphrase of the charge against the Jews in Q 4:46 and 5:13: "they have altered the words' places."[30] Although the initial accusation is apparently directed at Christians, Abū Rā'iṭa's ensuing responses make it plain that the Muslims are claiming "those who are responsible for the alteration [of the books] are the Jews" who are trying to deceive them (§19). This brings him to the second part of his defence of the Christian scriptures: a logical demonstration of how any alteration by Christians or Jews would be exposed and evident to anyone searching for the truth.

He begins by pointing out that if Christians had in fact changed the revelation they had received, there would be conspicuous differences between their scriptures and those of the Jews. One would be able to identify the places in which Christians "have changed [the books] and substituted [words for other words]" (§19). However, since the writings that the Christians have in their possession are in complete agreement with the Torah of the Jews, it cannot be the case that Christians have altered theirs. This is especially convincing, he claims, for the Jews are "our enemies," implying that there is no obligation to be concerned with agreement otherwise and thus no potential for collusion.

Abū Rā'iṭa expects this rebuttal will prompt the Muslims to say that "those who are responsible for the alteration [of the books] are

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[29] The outright accusation that Christians are lying reveals a level of tension between the Christians and Muslims not apparent anywhere else in Abū Rā'iṭa's writings. Throughout his treatises, he continually insists that both sides observe agreed-upon rules of debate requiring that each listen and present its case with respect and openness. However, at this point it appears that Abū Rā'iṭa expects the introduction of evidence he does not recognize as legitimate, whereas his opponents view it as the decisive argument. He also implies that because they are so convinced by the claim of *taḥrīf* they are unwilling to listen to any but the most certain, indisputable evidence to the contrary. Yet, in spite of the open attack on Christianity, Abū Rā'iṭa does not respond with ways in which to discredit Islam. He continues to restrict the discussion to a defence of the soundness of Christian beliefs, seeking only to commend Christianity, not to condemn his opponents. This is in keeping with the general lack of polemics in the previous generations of Syriac disputational texts that provide the model for his letters. See Griffith, Disputes with Muslims 257.

[30] Similar descriptions are given in Q 5:41 and Q 2:75.

the Jews," the traditional view supported by the Quran. He turns this to his advantage, explaining that the proper reply is to insist that if the Jews intended only to deceive the Christians, they would have preserved unaltered "genuine" (*ṣaḥīḥa*) copies of the original Hebrew texts for their own use and, once again, the differences between the two sets of scriptures would be apparent to all.[31] This is obvious, "because the one who seeks the destruction of another does not seek his own destruction" (§19). Since this is not the case, no one can accept the Muslim claim of *taḥrīf*.[32]

With these arguments, Abū Rā'iṭa believes that he has offered sufficient evidence that biblical texts can be trusted sources for Christian faith and doctrine. Of course, his defence of the scriptures is only pertinent to the Old Testament writings commonly held by Christians and Jews, a significant limitation of his refutation of *taḥrīf* of which he seems to be conscious. This is indicated by the fact that although he includes many passages from the New Testament throughout his writings, these are always intended as evidence and support primarily for his Christian readers. In his responses to Muslim questioners, he consistently makes references only to Old Testament figures and writings that will pass the scrutiny of those suspicious of *taḥrīf*. In this manner, he believes that the argument of falsification can be circumvented successfully, allowing Christians to use scripture passages effectively in their own defence. Abū Rā'iṭa even went as far in his "Witnesses from the Words of the Torah, the Prophets and the Saints" (VI) as to assemble and translate into Arabic a collection of passages taken solely from the Old Testament that can be used in debates with Muslims.

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[31] Abū Rā'iṭa is assuming a desire within the Jewish community for fidelity to the original revelation, even if they might attempt to mislead others. As mentioned above, however, the Quran suggests that the revelation was distorted almost immediately after its revelation to Moses, and that no authentic copy was preserved; cf. Q 5:13, 41; 2:75–76; 4:46.

[32] This response was fairly common among Christians, and used for centuries after Abū Rā'iṭa. The Muslim scholar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) replies to a similar defence in his *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb aw al-tafsīr al-kabīr*: "If it is said: 'How is this [alteration] possible in the scripture when each one of the letters and words has been passed on with the utmost care in the East and in the West?' We answer him, saying: 'The people [of Israel] were few [in number], and the scholars [in possession of] the scripture were [also] very few, so they had the power to commit this falsification.'" Cf. ibid. ii, 149–150; as cited in Gaudeul ii: *Texts*, 273. The translation is my own.

3 *Conclusions*

Although Abū Rā'iṭa devotes relatively little space in his treatises to addressing the Muslim charge that the scriptures have been falsified, concern for avoiding dismissal on the grounds of *taḥrīf* fully informs his project of explaining and defending Christian doctrine. Knowing that much of the traditional evidence employed by Christian apologists will be rejected because it contradicts the Quran, he turns instead to principles of logic and elements drawn from Greek thought to build his argument, setting a precedent for those who would respond to Islam in the future. But this does not mean he is willing to abandon the Christian scriptures to the claim of *taḥrīf*.

Abū Rā'iṭa constructs a careful defence of the integrity of the scriptures for the following two reasons; he wants to assure Christians they are reliable for faith, and he does not want to concede to any part of the Muslim accusation of *taḥrīf*. He places this argument near the end of the "First *Risāla* on The Holy Trinity," conceivably because he is well aware that the debate will eventually turn to falsification and that left unanswered, the claim will feed doubt in the Christian community. In response, he proceeds to demonstrate the consistency of plural speech about God in the scriptures of Jews, Christians and Muslims, concluding that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not baseless, but rather the necessary outcome of an honest reading of the sacred texts. Abū Rā'iṭa then turns to the problem of the source of falsification, arguing that if either the Christians or the Jews had altered the books, the differences between the scriptures they hold in common would be clear to all. Furthermore, there is no incentive for the two communities to conspire together to hide the truth, since they are enemies, and yet their scriptures are the same. His reasoning is cautious and limited, but it enables him to add certain Old Testament passages to his arsenal to be used in defence of Christianity.

In the end, while Abū Rā'iṭa believes it is necessary to defend the integrity of the scriptures against the charge of *taḥrīf*, he views such arguments as having limited apologetic value. He submits that a more fruitful strategy is to take advantage of the rising interest of Muslim scholars in the Greek philosophical heritage and establish common ground through reason. Consequently, he builds most of his case on non-scriptural evidence, encouraging his fellow Christians

to turn to shared logical principles to make effective arguments in favor of Christian doctrine. This approach was apparently successful. Abū Rā'iṭa became widely known as a Christian apologist in his day and remained influential in the Eastern Churches until the modern period.

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