Introduction

During the eighth and ninth centuries, in the Islamic empire governed from 'Abbāsid Baghdad, three great cultural and social forces converged to produce a new body of Christian literature: theological treatises written in Arabic rather than in Syriac or Greek, and composed with the express purpose of articulating Christian doctrine in conscious dialogue with the religious discourse of the surrounding Islamic milieu. The first of these cultural forces was the new character of the expansive Islamic empire, which brought with it Arabic as the new lingua franca, new incentives for conversion to Islam, and to some degree greater freedom for Christian communities that lay outside the orbit of Constantinopolitan Orthodoxy. The second was the ascendancy of Greek philosophical concepts within the Arab world as a result of the great translation movement. This movement to bring the great works of Greek philosophy, medicine, and science into the heart of Arab culture created a situation in which Aristotelian translators and commentators were in demand in the most fashionable intellectual circles and in the courts of political power of 'Abbāsid Baghdad. The fervent desire for the works of Greek antiquity, and especially, for Aristotelian philosophy, brought Christians and Muslims into near proximity and frequent collaboration with each other. The third force was the emerging debate within Islam about how to understand the divine attributes in light of both the implications of Arabic grammar and the Muslim doctrine of āl-taūḥīd, or a conception of monotheism so absolute as to preclude any kind of multiplicity in the divinity.

A New Social Reality in the Islamic Empire

The rise of the empire, followed by the removal of its seat of government from Harran to Damascus, and then from Damascus to Baghdad, brought sweeping social changes for large populations of people stretched over enormous swaths of territory. These changes were hardly limited to religious considerations,

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instead involving virtually every facet of daily life. As Dimitri Gutas puts it in his book *Greek Thought, Arab Culture*,

> Egypt and the Fertile Crescent were reunited with Persia and India politically, administratively, and most important, economically, for the first time since Alexander the Great. . . . The great economic and cultural divide that separated the civilized world for a thousand years prior to the rise of Islam, the frontier between the East and the West formed by the two great rivers that created antagonistic powers on either side, ceased to exist. This allowed for the free flow of raw materials and manufactured goods, agricultural products and luxury items, people and services, techniques and skills, and ideas, methods, and modes of thought.[1]

This means that in a relatively short time the Arabophone Muslim community changed from being a demographically small and somewhat geographically isolated people to being the masters of a vast, cosmopolitan, and culturally diverse empire with a wide range of ethnic, linguistic, and confessional identities. Significant numbers of Christians were included among the inhabitants of the newly polyglot caliphate, as Sidney Griffith notes:

> [A]fter the consolidation of the Islamic conquest . . . perhaps fifty percent of the world's confessing Christians . . . found themselves living under Muslim rule. Conversely, during . . . the very centuries during which the classical Islamic culture was coming into its own, the Muslims themselves still did not make up the absolute majority of the population everywhere in the caliphate, not even in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, where by the end of the ninth century the largest populations of the speakers of Arabic lived.[2]

Thus the stage was set for the creation of a cultural milieu in which the presence of each major faith community, Christian and Muslim, would be a significant factor in the development of the other's religious discourse. For the Muslims this meant, in part, the appropriation of a rich heritage of philosophical tools already long established in Christian usage for the propagation of Islam, as well as the administration of an empire in which many subjects of the professional and intellectual classes did not share the caliph's religion. For the Christians, the task set before them consisted of preserving a faith tradition

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1. Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arab Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 11–12.

2. Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 11.

in wholly new political circumstances as well as articulating and defending the intellectual integrity of that faith in a world shaped by the increasing cultural hegemony of the Arabic language to the detriment of Greek and Syriac.

Richard Frank points out that the Arabic language itself was not a mundane or purely pragmatic factor in the cultural interchange and mutual influence that was to take place over the next few centuries, but instead was a key factor due in large part to its status in Islam:

> In no culture, perhaps, has speech and the eloquent use of language been so praised and admired or the language itself more cherished and studied. . . . Common Islamic dogma, founded in the Koran itself, has it that while the miracle of Moses—the signs and wonders worked through him by God to confirm his mission—had the form and character of magic and that of Jesus the form and character of medicine and healing, that of Muhammad was language.[3]

Indeed, so profound was the influence of the Arabic language in which the Qur'ān was given, and so directly was its language associated with the action of God to reveal his will and his design of true religion, that the individual verses of the text were given the name āīāt, the Arabic term for "signs," which also applied to the miracles that would confirm the legitimacy of a true prophet's ministry.

Thus Christians in the empire faced a double linguistic challenge. On the one hand, there was the practical need, if their communities were not to become linguistic relics, to accommodate the new quotidian reality by being able to express Christian doctrine in Arabic. As far as is known, this was a largely new project, because no extant pre-Islamic Christian literature exists. This fact includes the absence of any Arabic translation of the Bible or liturgical text. Arabic-speaking Christian communities, then, needed quite badly what might be called an "indigenous theological vocabulary" in order to engage with Islam in a way that was terminologically accessible. This was not always an easy task, since the use of Greek terminology had been so formative in the early development of Christian doctrine. The translation of such terms always introduces the possibility of "conceptual shifts" as terms lose some of their original resonance or take on differing nuances.

On the other hand, the cultural and religious milieu in which such a task would be taken up was hardly linguistically neutral. As Griffith puts it, by the time Christians were seriously engaged in the work of creating an apologetical literature in Arabic,

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3. Richard Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Muʿtazila in the Classical Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), 9.

> . . . the religious lexicon in Arabic had already been co-opted by Islam, and unlike the earlier situation in pre-Islamic Arabia, the newly Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians outside of Arabia in the ninth and tenth centuries in the conquered territories were faced with the imperative of translating their teachings into and commending their faith in a religious vocabulary that had now become suffused with explicitly Islamic connotations.[4]

As will be shown hereafter, one of the more ingenious aspects of the early Christian Arabic apologetical literature was to turn this distinct disadvantage into a rich mine of source material. Rather than shrinking from the task of articulating and defending Christian doctrine in a language that already had such religious significance for a different faith, the first generation of Arabophone Christian controversialists often drew upon Islamic materials, including Qur'ānic "proof-texts," Qur'ānic terminology, Islamic theological emphases, and internal Muslim debates about the divine attributes and their relationship to the divine oneness, in order to build their case for Trinitarian doctrine.

Another important factor in Christian-Muslim interaction during this period was the enhanced incentive to convert to Islam that developed in the eighth century. The Umayyad caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd āl-Āziz, who reigned from 717 to 720, had actively promoted the equality of converts to Islam with native Arab Muslims, in terms of both social standing and opportunity for political advancement. Following the ʿAbbāsid revolution and the shift of power first to Damascus and then to Baghdad, large numbers of well-established scholarly and professional families found themselves in the position of having a different religion than the ruling elite at the very time that upward mobility began to be linked with conversion to Islam. Gutas cites as typical examples of the period the Wahb and āl-Jarrāḥ families, both of whom produced numerous scholars and state officials during the ninth century, and whose rise to prominence coincided roughly with their conversion to Islam.[5] Given this social dynamic, leaders of the Christian communities must have felt tremendous pressure to produce arguments for Christian doctrine that were intellectually attractive enough to prevent the defection of their best and brightest to the religion of the caliph.

Another new circumstance that contributed to the development of the Christian Arabic apologetical literature was the social standing of the non-Chalcedonian Christian communities. These Syriac-speaking Christians, conversant in the achievements of Greek philosophy but entrenched in a strong tradition of theological scholarship quite apart from the world of Constantinopolitan Orthodoxy, had been politically and socially marginalized

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4. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 19–20.
5. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arab Culture*, 131–32.

while their communities were under Byzantine rule. With the advent of the Muslim empire, a sphere of scholarly enterprise and interaction with broader geographic parameters and greater political neutrality was created. Gutas describes the situation in this way:

> With the advent of Islam, all these centers [i.e., the centers of eastern Christian scholarship] were united politically and administratively, and, most important, scholars from all of them could pursue their studies and interact with each other without the need to pay heed to any official version of "orthodoxy," whatever the religion. We thus see throughout the region and through the seventh and eighth centuries numerous "international" scholars active in their respective fields and working with different languages.[6]

As will be shown hereafter, this is an apt description of some of the authors who contributed significantly to the nascent Christian Arabic literature about the Trinity. Since one of these authors, ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī, was an adherent of the Church of the East, and another, Ḥabīb ibn Ḫidmah Abū Rāʾiṭah, was a Jacobite Christian, a brief examination of these communities is in order.

The Church of the East and the Jacobite Community

The Church of the East has traditionally but erroneously been referred to in Western literature as the "Nestorian" church, and in modern times has adopted the appellation Assyrian Church of the East. The precise origins of this ecclesial community lie hidden in the mists of primitive ecclesiastical history. By the third century, there was a sufficiently large Persian Christian population that Persian historians recount some persecutions, mainly of those who had converted from Zoroastrianism to Christianity. By and large, though, Persian Christians fared rather better than their Roman brethren until the Emperor Constantine first legalized Christianity and then established it as the state religion. Ironically, the improved situation of Roman Christians proved ill for those in Persia, mainly because Constantine imprudently wrote to the Persian king requesting that he treat the Christians within his domain well, but doing so in terms that suggested that Constantine considered himself the ruler of all those who belonged to the Christian faith. This in turn led to a suspicion that perhaps the Persian Christians were not loyal citizens, a fearful suspicion at a time when Persia had been struggling with Rome for control of its border territories for over three hundred years.

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6. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arab Culture*, 15.

This political reality led to significant difficulties in keeping up any kind of regular communication between the Christian communities of Persia and those of the Roman Empire. Still, it is recorded that one "Bishop John of the Church of Greater Persia and the Churches of the East" attended the Council of Nicea and signed its creed. The Church of the East has always affirmed the second ecumenical council, that of Constantinople, as well, but by the time of the Council of Ephesus, significant differences of theological expression had emerged. In contrast to the Alexandrian theological tradition, with its strong emphasis upon the unity of Christ, the Persian tradition emphasized the reality of the two natures of Christ, human and divine. This emphasis led to the Church of the East's refusal to accept the title bestowed on the Blessed Virgin Mary by the Council of Ephesus—theotokos, or "Mother of God." While it must be emphasized that the Persian church certainly did not deny the divinity of Christ—the essential reason for the title bestowed by the council—the title seemed to Persian Christians to blur the reality of the two natures of Christ in a way that was almost Eutychian, and therefore unacceptable. Persian Christians also saw the council as something of a Roman imposition. The next blow to unity between the West and the Church of the East came in 449, when the metropolitan of Persia adopted the title, "patriarch of the East," in clear contradistinction to the title used by the Roman bishop. The final blow to unity came with the Chalcedonian Christological definition of hypostatic union. The term *hypostasis* was typically rendered in Syriac as qnome, but Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler argue in their comprehensive study of the Church of the East that this community's use of qnome could be understood as the particular "individuation" or "concretization" of a nature, rather than as the nature itself.[7] Understood this way, the Chalcedonian definition was incomprehensible from the Persian point of view.

This rejection of the Chalcedonian definition brings up the important question: Is the Church of the East truly "Nestorian"? In their own histories, members of this church have always objected to the title, noting that Nestorius was Greek-speaking, and therefore outside the orbit of Syriac Christianity. They also insist that it makes no sense to call their church by the name of a person who belonged to the church of Constantinople, rather than being the Persian patriarch. More to the point, the Christology of the Church of the East was put in its final form by Babai the Great in the early sixth century. Babai's teaching clearly affirms both the single personhood and the two natures of Christ; by any reasonable standard, it is an orthodox definition that is not substantively at odds with the Chalcedonian definition. For this reason, it must be affirmed that the Church of the East is not, in fact, Nestorian.

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7. Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 38–40.

The history of the Jacobite church can also be traced to the disagreement over the Chalcedonian definition. Unlike the Church of the East, which held that the definition failed sufficiently to emphasize the distinction in the two natures of Christ, some Syriac-speaking Christian communities objected that the definition, with its reference to two *hypostaseis*, was in fact Nestorian, and therefore heterodox. Again, it must be remembered that the Greek term *hypostasis* was typically rendered in Syriac as qnome, which has a slightly different connotation than the Greek. It seems to indicate two different individuations or concretizations, and therefore it is quite understandable that some Syriac-speaking Christians would find it Nestorian. Those who objected to the Chalcedonian definition on these grounds came to be called "monophysite" Christians, for their alleged insistence upon the "one nature" of Christ.

For some time after the council, this theological (or perhaps terminological) controversy did not formally divide the Christian communities that lay within the Roman sphere of influence. Eventually, however, the efforts of the emperor Justinian to enforce the Chalcedonian definition during the early sixth century caused the theological controversy to become a political one as well. The "monophysite" patriarch of Antioch ordained Jacob Baradaeus as the first "monophysite" bishop in a territory where there was already a Chalcedonian bishop. This was the first appearance in Christian history of a double-hierarchy based on differing confessions, and it is this "Jacob" for whom the Jacobite church is named. Jacob made great efforts to establish a strong "monophysite" presence within his territory. Throughout a long reign, he traveled constantly, ordaining priests and deacons loyal to himself and the "monophysite" confession. It should be noted as well that the Jacobite church is certainly not the only Christian community with a "monophysite" confession; the Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopian churches are "monophysite" as well.

As with the "Nestorian" church, it is important to ask whether the Jacobite church is truly "monophysite" in the sense that it departs from orthodox Christological doctrine. An examination of the writings of such Jacobite figures as Severus of Antioch and Philoxenus of Mabbug shows that they in fact affirm both the human and divine natures of Christ, but seek to emphasize that in the person of Jesus Christ there is but one conscious subject and one actor, the Incarnate Word. In fact, Philoxenus in particular, in spite of the monophysite tendency to avoid usages of the communicatio idiomatum, is fond of making paradoxical statements emphasizing the two natures of Christ, such as saying that "the Immortal One died." The Jacobite tradition, then, clearly holds to a different Christological doctrine than the Eutychian form of monophysitism, which held that the divine nature of Christ was so great that it swallowed up the human nature, "as a drop of water is swallowed up in the ocean."

The other Arabophone Christian "denomination" that must be taken into account for its importance in the development of the Christian Arab

apologetical literature to be considered here is the ecclesial community tradi-
tionally known as "Melkites." The name itself is of Arabic origin, meaning
"royalists" and intended to signify those Christians who during the Christo-
logical controversies maintained the same doctrinal expressions as the "king,"
i.e., the Byzantine emperor. Although better known in the West than the
Jacobite church or the Church of the East because of its adherence to the
Chalcedonian Christological definition, the Melkite church is in a some-
what different category than the other two "denominations" with regard to its
origin and formation. Griffith notes that

> while the Nestorian and Jacobite churches were already in the pro-
> cess of formation prior to the rise of Islam . . . the Melkite com-
> munity as a sociologically distinct community of Christians came
> into existence only in Islamic times and in the world of Islam. They
> professed the faith of Byzantine orthodoxy, but very much in the
> Arabic-speaking milieu of the Islamic challenge to Christian faith.[8]

Thus, among the Christian communities here considered, the Melkites
are perhaps the best example of the complex cultural dynamic described above,
in which the Christian community in some sense owed its cultural identity
and its linguistic expression to the rise of Islam, while at the same time influ-
encing the direction of Muslim doctrinal expression by its participation in the
formation of a Christian Arabic apologetical literature.

THE TRANSLATION MOVEMENT AND THE RISE OF ARAB ARISTOTELIANISM

Perhaps no intellectual current during the 'Abbāsid period was more sustained
or more pervasive than the translation movement that brought the philosophi-
cal and scientific texts of classical Greece into the mainstream of Arab cul-
tural life. Gutas notes that, so complete was this movement in both its origins
and its aims, that it lasted over two centuries, claimed as its proponents and
participants virtually every part of the professional and ruling classes of the
'Abbāsid empire, and achieved the translation into Arabic of "almost all non-
literary and non-historical secular Greek books that were available throughout
the Eastern Byzantine Empire and the Near East."[9] This great intellectual
achievement would become a formative influence on the development of the
Christian Arabic apologetical literature in three distinct ways.

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8. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 137–38.
9. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arab Culture*, 1–2.

First, because a great deal of Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelian dialectic and metaphysics, had already been assimilated by the Syriac-speaking Christian communities, the materials being translated into Arabic formed a significant portion of the intellectual apparatus with which Christians would begin their Arabic response to Islam. Gutas argues that the degree to which the translation movement began as a Syriac enterprise has been significantly exaggerated, but the historical record is clear that the Christian communities in what would become the 'Abbāsid empire were engaged in mastering the Greek disciplines even before the rise of Islam. As Griffith puts it,

> Over that long period of time [from the sixth to the tenth centuries], in the careers of an impressive number of mostly . . . Jacobite scholars from the environs of Edessa, some with direct ties to the philosophical school in Alexandria, the fortunes of Aristotle and Greek philosophy and science more generally, grew steadily in the Syriac-speaking world.[10]

Thus the terminological and conceptual range of the Greek texts formed a significant part of the worldview and intellectual heritage of those who would first take pen in hand to respond to Islam in the Arabic language. Furthermore, because of this background, philosophical investigations would serve as intellectual common ground for Muslims and Christians, who once the translation movement was in full swing, worked cheek-by-jowl in the translation enterprise.

Second, some of the texts translated from the Greek became highly influential sources in the development of the art of public disputation, which in turn greatly influenced the nascent Christian Arabic literature, both in format and in content. Gutas traces this series of developments to a single critical decision made by the caliph āl-Mahdī late in the eighth century:

> It is reported on quite unimpeachable authority that the caliph āl-Mahdī (d. 785) . . . commissioned the translation into Arabic of Aristotle's *Topics*. . . . The *Topics* is hardly light reading, so the question why it attracted such attention at the initial stages of the translation movement is significant. . . . There can be little doubt that the selection of the book was because of its contents and their relevance to the needs generated with Islamic society . . .[11]

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10. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 112–13.
11. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arab Culture*, 61–62.

Gutas then goes on to describe how this project turned out to be the first of three such translations of the Topics over a period of a century and a half, the last of them being done by none other than Yaḥya ibn ʿAdi, a prominent Jacobite Christian controversialist. The early interest and perennial prominence of this particular text suggests how important it was in the formation of what in fact became an important feature of Arab cultural life, the public disputation about questions of a religious nature. In fact, the same caliph who played such a crucial role in the translation movement by having the Topics translated the first time is on record as having used theological dialecticians as state propagandists for the suppression of non-Islamic Persian religion. With the Christians having honed their skills at disputation and polemic over centuries of Christological controversy, the caliph seems to have felt the need to draw on the same classical sources in order to create a cadre of well-trained apologists for Islam. The resulting tradition of formal theological debate had a direct influence on the shaping of the apologetical literature in Arabic to be considered here.

A third way that the translation movement influenced the Christian Arabic theological enterprise was in creating a kind of secular, intellectual criterion against which Muslims and non-Muslims alike could be measured. Just as in the religious sphere, the Qurʾān made a claim for Islam as the authentic heir of all true prophets throughout history, so now in the philosophical sphere Muslim controversialists attempted to arrogate to themselves the role of authentic heir to the intellectual heritage of ancient Greece:

> The Byzantines were portrayed as deserving of Muslim attacks not only because they were infidels . . . but because they were also culturally benighted and inferior not only to Muslims but also to their own ancestors, the ancient Greeks. The Muslims by contradistinction, in addition to being superior because of Islam, were also superior because they appreciated ancient Greek science and wisdom and had translated their books into Arabic.[12]

As will be demonstrated hereafter, the first generation of Arabophone Christian apologists take up the challenge thus presented. They seek to show that Trinitarian doctrine is authentic to God's revelation because it is supported by the prophets and even by the language of the Qurʾān itself, but it is also authentic to the philosophical heritage in that it is coherent and consistent in the context of Aristotelian metaphysics.

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12. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arab Culture*, 84–85.

The Divine Attributes and the Oneness of God

A final cultural force that was of great importance in its contribution to the creation of the Christian literature to be examined here was the burgeoning debate within Islam about how the divine attributes were to be considered in light of God's absolute oneness, which in the Islamic tradition would preclude any kind of multiplicity within the divinity. The way in which the question was formulated and investigated depended largely on the rules of theoretical Arabic grammar. Frank points out that Arabic grammar, in turn, held a particularly prominent place in the development of the Islamic religious discourse:

> . . . [G]rammar is the first science to reach maturity in Islam—before the end of the second/eighth century—and it does so, almost completely apart from earlier and alien traditions, as a peculiarly Islamic science. This attention to language, most particularly to the language of the Koran and to the grammatical and lexical structures and the characteristics of literary Arabic, had a profound influence on the formation and development of the kalām [Muslim theological discourse] . . . not simply in their terminology but also in the manner in which many fundamental problems of ontology and ethics—concerning, thus, God's Unity and His Justice (at-tawḥīd wal-ʿadl) were conceived, formulated, and analysed.[13]

The chief problem for the Muslim grammarian and theologian of the period is that the rules of Arabic grammar indicate that any attribute (ṣifah) applied to an entity being described implies the existence of a noun, which in turn indicates what Frank calls "a kind of entitative reality"[14] within the subject described. Thus to make predications of God is, at least potentially, to affirm within the divinity multiple entitative realities that are in some way distinct from Him, which in turn could undermine the doctrine of God's unicity. Yet both the language of the Qurʾān and Islamic piety, such as devotion to the "beautiful names of God," affirmed many divine attributes. The early Arabophone Christian apologists considered here were eager to take advantage of this very real theological problem and use it to demonstrate that only Trinitarian doctrine could satisfy the demands of Arabic grammar, just as only Trinitarian doctrine could make the language of the Qurʾān fully intelligible or satisfy the requirements of a rigorous philosophical investigation.

In the following pages, some important examples of the literature produced by this convergence of social forces will be considered, with particular

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13. Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*, 10.
14. Ibid., 13.

reference to the emerging theological method of Arabophone Christian theologians. The first of these texts, which also happens to be the earliest extant Christian Arab theological treatise, is known by the title Fī taṯlīṯ Āllah āl-wāḥid and dates from the middle of the eighth century. Produced by an anonymous author with an impressive knowledge of the Qurʾān, this treatise undertakes a rigorous though unstructured argument that only a Trinitarian understanding of God satisfies the requirements of Qurʾānic language, particularly the relationships among God, God's "word," and God's "spirit." The second portion of the literature to be examined are the various Arabic treatises of Theodore Abū Qurrah, a Melkite bishop and apologist who was active during the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Theodore represents an important transitional stage in Christian–Muslim encounter, drawing upon scriptural sources but also introducing purely philosophical tools and concepts, particularly in his treatment of the divine attributes. Next, the relevant writings of Ḥabīb ibn Ḫidmah Abū Rāʾiṭah will be considered. A near contemporary but somewhat younger than Theodore Abū Qurrah, Abū Rāʾiṭah was a member of the Jacobite Christian community in Takrīt during the late eighth and early ninth centuries. His writings are marked by a careful and thorough appropriation of Qurʾānic terminology as well as a highly developed usage of Greek philosophical concepts, particularly those of Aristotelian metaphysics. Finally, the two known treatises of ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī will be analyzed. ʿAmmār was an approximate contemporary of Abū Rāʾiṭah and an adherent of the Church of the East. His work is characterized by an almost exclusively philosophical (as opposed to scriptural) approach, using a highly developed Aristotelian metaphysical apparatus, and by the most highly developed treatment of the divine attributes among the authors here considered.