



'AMR B. 'OBAYD

'AMR B. 'OBAYD B. BĀB, early Mu'tazilite theologian and traditionist (d. probably 144/761, in Marrān near Mecca, on his way back from the pilgrimage). His grandfather had been captured when the Muslims conquered Kabul under 'Abdallāh b. Samora in 43/663 and again in 45/665; probably he was among those who were mobilized by 'Abdallāh b. Samora in order to build a mosque at Baṣra "in Kabulian style." 'Amr's father had served as a sergeant under Ḥajjāj, but by profession was a weaver; 'Amr had learned the same craft and thus may early have made the acquaintance of Wāṣel b. 'Aṭā', a cloth merchant at Baṣra with whom 'Amr is normally considered one of the founders of the Mu'tazilite movement. Their close personal relations are attested by the fact that Wāṣel married his sister. Doctrinally, they had disagreements at the beginning; Wāṣel is said to have converted 'Amr to his own "Mu'tazilite" opinion in a long discussion. More than Wāṣel, 'Amr had belonged to the circle of close disciples around Ḥasan Baṣrī (d. 110/729), whose *Tafsīr* he transmitted. After his master's death he seems to have contended with Qatāda b. De'āma (d. 117/735) for the leadership of the school. The fact that he lost this competition may explain, to a certain degree, why he became a Mu'tazilite and created a circle of his own. But the date of his conversion remains obscure, and it seems almost certain that he did not start playing a role in the Mu'tazilite movement until after Wāṣel's death in 131/749. In about 142/759 he had to negotiate, as the doyen of the Mu'tazilites, with the caliph Maṣūm concerning the attitude of his adherents towards al-Nafs al-Zakīya, who had begun propaganda for the cause of the 'Alids in Iraq. Although there were strong sympathies for al-Nafs al-Zakīya among the Mu'tazilites (probably



not so much because the members of the movement believed in the ‘Alid pretendent as the true Mahdī, but because of their frustration with ‘Abbasid rule), ‘Amr b. ‘Obayd managed to remain neutral. He died before the outbreak of the rebellion. When his authority no longer retained his adherents, some of them, perhaps the majority, joined the ranks of al-Nafs al-Zakīya and his brother Ebrāhīm who, in 145/762, led the insurrection in Iraq. After the rather ignominious end of the enterprise ‘Amr’s cautiousness was fully rehabilitated, though there remained the urge to take away the blemish of his submission to the will of the government. Therefore his visit to Manṣūr, which he had undertaken only because he had been summoned, was glorified by legendary stories which present him as a preacher and a critic of governmental mismanagement who successfully offered his exhortations to the sovereign.

These embellishments correspond to the image he had left to posterity. He was mainly an ascetic who hated all signs of luxury and who disapproved of too deep an involvement with the state. He was famous for his nightly prayers, and he declared himself against the admissibility of music. But as a theologian, he remains a rather pale figure. His publications were small in number and are, in any case, not preserved (with the exception of a few fragments from his *Tafsīr*, i.e., the *Tafsīr* he handed down from his teacher Ḥasan Baṣrī). He lacked the presence of mind and, obviously, also the experience necessary for dialectical discussions. Even the Mu‘tazilite sources are not able to conceal the fact that he was frequently defeated by his theological opponents: By Abū Ḥanīfa who confronted him with Murji‘ite ideas about faith, by Heṣām b. Ḥakam, the much younger representative of Shi‘ite thinking, and even by the philologist Abū ‘Amr b. al-‘Alā’, who bested him in a disputation about free will and predestination. When, in a few rare cases, the heresiographers trace some theological opinion back to him, they normally bring him together with Wāṣel b. ‘Aṭā’ or with Ḥasan Baṣrī, from whom he seems to have taken over his opinions (cf. Naṣwān Ḥemyarī, *al-Ḥūr al-‘īn*, ed. K. Moṣṭafā, repr. Tehran, 1972, p. 256.10ff. for his doctrine about the status of children of unbelievers; Aṣ‘arī, *Maqālāt*, p. 222.13ff. on the definition of *moḥkam* and *motašābeh*). A certain difference with Wāṣel appears in his political ideas: Wāṣel disliked ‘Oṭmān, and ‘Amr ‘Alī (cf. J. van Ess, *Das Kitāb an-Nakṭ des Naẓẓām*, Göttingen, 1972, pp. 82ff., 124-25). The sources, however, do not quite agree (cf. W. Madelung, *Der Imām al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm*, Berlin, 1965, pp. 25-26; add to the sources mentioned there al-Nāṣe’ al-Akbar, *Oṣūl al-neḥal*, ed. van Ess in *Frühe mu‘tazilitische Häresiographie*, Beirut, 1971, par. 85-86, 90).



‘Amr’s forte lay obviously in Hadith and jurisprudence. In both domains he depended strongly on Ḥasan Baṣrī. He transmitted Ḥasan’s *fatwās* (e.g., on the law of divorce; cf. Qāzī ‘Abd-al-Jabbār, *Faḥṣ al-e’tezāl*, ed. F. Sayyed, Tunis, 1974, p. 242.4ff.), and he stressed the *qadarī* character of Ḥasan’s Hadith. But he seems to have brought some progress in juridical theory (e.g., his definition of the category of *ḥarām*, in Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā’er wa’l-dakā’er*, ed. E. Kaylānī, Damascus, 1964-66, II, p. 742.1ff., and his speculations about analogy in connection with the problem of the admissibility of *nabīd*, *ibid.*, p. 741.4ff.). In Hadith, he seems to have reacted violently against traditions which were used in support of predestinarian views (cf. *Ta’rīḳ Baḡdād* XII, p. 172.1ff.), but he also rejected other prophetic logia on the basis of their contents. In this he met the resistance of some colleagues who had also been disciples of Ḥasan Baṣrī, but who understood the heritage of their master in a different way and who especially advocated a strongly predestinarian outlook; these included Ayyūb Saḳṭiānī (d. 131/748-49), Yūnos b. ‘Obayd ‘Abdī (d. 139/756 or 140/757), ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Awn (d. 151/768), and others. Political disagreements may have come in: ‘Amr had supported the cause of Yazīd III in 126/744; ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Awn was blamed by certain Mu’tazilites for having restrained people from joining Ebrāhīm b. ‘Abdallāh in 145 (cf. Ebn Sa’d, VII², p. 27.5-6). The standpoints were polarized in the following generation; ‘Amr b. ‘Obayd was accused of having suppressed Qur’ān 74:11 and the beginning of Qur’ān 111 because they seemed to predict and therefore predestine the damnation of people whose free decision about their destiny in the hereafter had to be saved for the sake of Qadarī/Mu’tazilite doctrine (cf. van Ess, *Traditionistische Polemik gegen ‘Amr b. ‘Ubaid*, Beirut, 1967, pp. 16-17, nr. 3 and, for the broader doctrinal context, *idem*, *Zwischen Ḥadīṯ und Theologie*, Berlin, 1975, pp. 167-68 and before). In the field of Hadith, the future belonged to the predestinarians. ‘Amr b. ‘Obayd, who still enjoyed considerable prestige among Basrian *moḥaddetūn* up to the late 2nd/8th century, was finally rejected as authority, while the Mu’tazilites lost almost all interest in Hadith. Thus ‘Amr became what he has remained up to now for the historians of Islamic thought: one of the founding fathers of the Mu’tazilite movement. He seems to have contributed to it mainly its strong emphasis on divine justice and human free will.



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