Chapter 2

Theodore Abū Qurra (c. 750–c. 830)

Background

Biography

Of the three authors examined in this book, Theodore Abū Qurra is by far the most well known. Among a number of works written in Greek, Syriac and Arabic, there are twenty-four which are relevant to Christian-Muslim relations and which are extant today.1 Although a relatively good amount of information concerning Abū Qurra’s thinking can be gleaned from primary and secondary sources, surprisingly little is actually known about his life. For instance, his dates of birth and death can still only be imprecisely estimated from references to him in other sources. What is known almost certainly however, is that he was born in Edessa and was the Bishop of Ḥarrān for some part of his life. The latter of these two facts is attested to both in the titles of his own works and elsewhere. The Syrian Orthodox or ‘Jacobite’ theologian Abū Rā’iṭa al-Takrīṭī (c. 755–835) also names Abū Qurra, Bishop of Ḥarrān2 as his interlocutor in the ‘Refutation of the Melkites’ which he wrote against the Melkite theologian.3

Somewhere between 813 and 817, Abū Rā’iṭa sent his relative Nonnus of Nisibis to debate with Abū Qurra in the presence of the Armenian Prince Ashūt Msaker (d. 826);4 a debate which Nonnus is reported to have won.5 Abū Qurra also appears to have been known in Muslim sources. In Ibn al-Nadīm’s Fiḥrist, he is referred to as the ‘the Melkite Bishop of Ḥarrān’,6 and later on in the same work, he is mentioned in the title of a work attributed to the Baghdadī Muʿtazilite Abū Müsā ʿĪsā ibn Ṣubayḥ al-Murdār, ‘The book against Abū Qurra the Christian’.7 Around the year 812–13 it appears that Theodore was dismissed from his post as Bishop of Ḥarrān by Theodoret, the then Patriarch of

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1 Thomas and Roggema, CMR, pp. 440–491.
3 Ibid., pp. 105–30.
4 Ibid., p. 66.
6 Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Fihrist, 26.15. The name Abū ʿIzza (أبو ازّة) is generally accepted to be a scribal error which should read Abū Qurra (أبو قرة), based on the consequent statement about him being the Melkite Bishop of Ḥarrān, which is attested to in other sources.
7 Ibid., 207.6.
Antioch, though this information is based on a single source. He is thought to have died in the 830s, as the last known reference to him concerns a debate with the Caliph al-Ma’mūn in Ḥarrān in the year 829. From the more secure dates available, it would be reasonable to estimate that Theodore Abū Qurra was born in or shortly after the middle of the eighth century, as he was of an age to be appointed Bishop in the early ninth century and took part in the aforementioned debate in 829. It would therefore also be logical to assume that he died soon after this date, as he would have been of a mature age by this point.

Traditionally, Abū Qurra has been thought to have been a monk at Mar Saba monastery in Palestine for some portion of his life, but a recent study by John Lamoreaux has suggested that there is not enough evidence to justify such a claim. Lamoreaux asserts that the evidence that does exist is questionable in terms of reliability, and he also points to the absence of sources that explicitly name him a monk at Mar Saba, when many sources refer to him as the Bishop of Ḥarrān. Lamoreaux’s argument is a persuasive one. The major implication of this re-evaluation is that Abū Qurra would not have been a direct pupil of John of Damascus, as has been traditionally thought, though in any case this claim is troublesome chronologically, as John of Damascus is thought to have died in 749. Additionally, if Lamoreaux’s thesis is to be accepted, one has to root Abū Qurra more firmly in the historical and intellectual context of Ḥarrān than in Jerusalem. However, our perceptions of Abū Qurra need not change too dramatically. He was obviously acquainted with John of Damascus’ thought, and could well have been a student of his works and teachings, without being directly acquainted with him. Furthermore, in the introduction to a letter written to David the Monophysite, Abū Qurra himself explains that he spent some time in Jerusalem, where he met the aforementioned David.

Historical Context
Despite discrepancies concerning Abū Qurra’s biography, there is enough information to confidently locate him in the early ninth century, based in the city of Ḥarrān with probable links to Jerusalem.

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8 J.B. Chabot (ed. and trans.), *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche Jacobite d’Antioche, n66–n99, 1905*, p. 32.
11 Ibid., p. 34.