From Theodore Abū Qurra to Abed Azrié:
The Arabic Bible in Context

Alexander Treiger

The field of “Biblia Arabica” – academic inquiry into the Arabic translations and interpretations of biblical books among Christians, Jews, Samaritans, and Muslims – has experienced an exponential growth in recent years.1 Building on this welcome trend, the present article offers a survey of how and for what purposes Arabic biblical translations have been used in Christian literature in Arabic and, more broadly, in Arab Christian culture from ca. 800 to the present. Some of the examples provided below are quite famous, though considered from fresh angles; others are virtually unknown, yet deserving attention. The article is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on theology and society; the second discusses art, material culture, and music. It also includes several excursuses, which explore particular points arising from the discussion.

1 Theology and Society

1.1 The Arabic Bible and Communal Boundaries: Theodore Abū Qurra

The Arab Orthodox (Melkite) theologian Theodore Abū Qurra (d. ca. 830), a native of Edessa (the present-day Şanlıurfa in southeastern Turkey) and a one-time bishop of the nearby town of Ḥarrān, is the earliest Arab Christian author known by name.2 In the early years of the ninth century he wrote a tract entitled A Treatise ... Proving That Prostration to the Icon of Christ Our God ... and to the Icons of the Saints is Mandatory for Every Christian (conventionally called:

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1 The most significant recent contributions include: Thomas, Bible in Arab Christianity; Saleh, In Defense of the Bible; Kashouh, Arabic Versions; Binay and Leder, Translating the Bible; Griffith, Bible in Arabic; Adang, Polliack, and Schmidtke, Bible in Arabic; Moawad, Arabische Übersetzung; Grafton, Contested Origins; Vollandt, Arabic Versions; and other textual editions and studies published in Brill’s “Biblia Arabica” series. The following abbreviations are used in this study: cmr = Thomas, Christian-Muslim Relations; gcal = Graf, Geschichte; hmlém = Nasrallah, Histoire; pg = Patrologia Graeca; pmbZ = Lilie, Prosopographie. All the translations cited in this study are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2 On Theodore Abū Qurra, see Lamoreaux, “Theodore Abū Qurra”; Treiger, “New Works.” For an English translation of many of Abū Qurra’s works, see Lamoreaux, Theodore Abū Qurrah.
On the Veneration of Icons). This treatise was written at the request of a certain Anbā Yannah, i.e., Abba John, a fellow-bishop whose episcopal see, however, remained unspecified.

According to Anbā Yannah, many Christians in his locality had abandoned the practice of venerating (making a prostration to) icons of Christ and the saints. This was due to pressure from non-Christians – “opponents of Christianity” (muḥālifū al-naṣrāniyya) or “outsiders” (al-barrāniyyūn), as Theodore Abū Qurra calls them – i.e., Muslims and Jews. These “outsiders” regarded icon veneration as idolatrous and ridiculed their Christian neighbours for following this practice. Consequently, many local Christians adopted the same stance. They were thus caught betwixt and between Christianity and Islam: nominally still Christians, they aligned themselves with the Muslim view of the impermissibility of icon veneration.

Theodore Abū Qurra’s hometown Edessa was, at the time, a stronghold of icon veneration. Until 944, it held a famous Christian relic: the icon of Christ “not made by human hands,” i.e., the imprint of Jesus Christ’s face on a towel (mandylion) that Christ – so the Church tradition goes – had sent to the king of Edessa Abgar V (r. 4 BCE–7 CE and 13–50 CE) healing him from an incurable illness. According to Abū Qurra, this icon was duly “venerated with prostration … especially during [festal] seasons, holidays, and pilgrimages in its honour.” It is therefore not accidental that it is an Arab Christian theologian from Edessa, Theodore Abū Qurra, that Anbā Yannah approached asking to write a treatise in defense of the icons.

Archaeology provides further evidence to some Middle Eastern Christians’ rejection of icon veneration. Several figural mosaics in Jordan and, to a lesser degree, Palestine suffered iconoclastic damage in the second half of the eighth

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3 Edition: Dick, Théodore; English translation: Griffith, Treatise.
4 On the identity of Anbā Yannah and a possible location of his episcopal see, see Excursus A below.
5 A hitherto unpublished Arab Christian text of great importance, the Compilation of the Aspects of the Faith (al-Jāmi` wujūh al-īmān, conventionally called: Summa Theologiae Arabica; datable to 833) – calls such renegade Christians “hypocrites” (munāfiqūn) and “wa- verers” (muḏabḏabūn) (though without reference to veneration of icons). See Ms London, British Library, Or. 4950 (copied by Stephen of Ramla at the Palestinian monastery of Mār Chariton in 877), fol. 7v (interestingly, this manuscript also contains Theodore Abū Qurra’s On the Veneration of Icons); cf. Griffith, “View of Islam,” 18–19. On the date of the Summa Theologiae Arabica, see Treiger, “New Works.”
6 Guscin, Image of Edessa; idem, Tradition.
7 Theodore Abū Qurra, On the Veneration of Icons, chapter 23, §2 – see Dick, Théodore, 208; Griffith, Treatise, 91.