

Abu Qurrah, Al-Ma'mun and Yahya Ibn Aktam / Fr. Wafik Nasry. — Extrait de : Parole de l'Orient : revue semestrielle des études syriaques et arabes chrétiennes : recherches orientales : revue d'études et de recherches sur les églises de langue syriaque. — vol. 32 (2007), pp. 285-290.

Titre de couverture : Actes du 7^e congrès international des études arabes chrétiennes (Sayyidat al-Bir, septembre 2004)

I. Théologie dogmatique. II. Abu Qurrah, Thawdhurus, ca 750-825 — Biographies. III. Ibn Aktam, Yahya, ca 775-857 — Biographies.

PER L1183 / FT216076P

ABŪ QURRAH, AL-MA'MŪN AND YAḤYĀ IBN AKṬAM

BY

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The focus of my doctoral dissertation¹ was a Christian-Muslim inter-religious dialogue that is believed to have taken place in 829² of the Common Era. Therein, bishop Abū Qurrah³ of Ḥarrān⁴ debated the Muslim elites of Qurayš, as well as other scholars from different centers of Islam⁵. This debate boasted the presence and participation of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn⁶.

A preliminary reading of the manuscripts recording this debate shows it to be rich in content with over thirty theological issues. Most of the topics explored in the debate are still in need of further discussion, such as the differences between the commandments of Jesus and the mandates in the Law

1) This article is based on the research done for the doctoral dissertation *Abū Qurrah and al-Ma'mūn: al-Muḡāḍalah*, under the direction of Fr Samir Khalil Samir; for the most part, it is extracted from "Chapter Four, the Arguments in favor of authenticity section, numbers 15 and 16". The dissertation was defended at the *Pontificium Istitutum Studiorum Arabicorum et Islamologiae* (P.I.S.A.I.), Rome, on Monday, the 11th, December 2006, and was approved *Summa cum Laude*.

2) The Critical Edition of the debate, its English translation and a study will be published shortly by the CEDRAC "*Centre de documentation et de recherches arabes chrétiennes*", Université Saint-Joseph.

3) For biographies of Abū Qurrah see Ignace DICK, "Un continuateur arabe de saint Jean Damascène: Théodore Abu Qurrah, évêque melkite de Ḥarrān", in *POC* 12 (1961) 209-223, 319-332 ; 13 (1961) 114-129; Joseph NASRALLAH, HMLEM, II 2 (1988) 104 ff.; Sydney GRIFFITH, "Reflections on the Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah", in *ParOr* 18 (1993) 143-170; Samir Khalil SAMIR, "al-Ġadīd fī Sirat Abū Qurrah wa-Āṭārihi", in *Al-Mašriq* 73 (1999) 417-449; Samir Khalil SAMIR, *Abū Qurrah, Al-Sīrah wa-l-Marāġi*, coll. "Mawṣū'at al-Ma'rifa al-Mašīhiyyah", vol. 1 (Dār al-Mašriq, Beirut, 2000) 46 pp.; Samir Khalil SAMIR, *Abū Qurrah. Vida, bibliografía y obras*, trad. Juan Pedro MONFERRER SALA, coll. "Studia Semitica. Series Minor", 1 (Cordoba, 2005), 120 pp.

4) Ḥarrān was located on the major caravan routes to and from Asia Minor, Syria and Mesopotamia. It was first occupied by the Arabs in 640, during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph 'Umar. Marwān II made it the capital of the Umayyad Empire. The city was enhanced during the time of Hārūn al-Rašīd, who constructed a canal to ensure the city's water supply. Cf. FEHÉERVARI, G., "Harran", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, WebCD edition (Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden: 2003). The city is not to be confused with one of the villages of Ḥalab or another two cities in *Bahrayn* or one in *al-Ġūṭah* of Damascus. Cf. Yāqūt AL-ḤAMAWĪ, *Mu'ġam al-Buldān*, vol. 2 (Dār Ṣādir, Beirut, 1993) 235-236. Ḥarrān is now part of modern Turkey.

5) There exists a publication by Fr. Ignace DICK, *La discussion d'Abū Qurrah avec les ulémas musulmans devant le calife al-Ma'mūn* (No Publisher, No City, 1999).

6) He is al-Ma'mūn, 'Abd Allāh b. Hārūn al-Rašīd b. al-Mahdī b. al-Manšūr, b. Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. 'Abd Allāh b. al-'Abbās b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib (786-833). He is the eldest son of Hārūn al-Rašīd and a Persian concubine, Marāġil. Al-Ma'mūn is the seventh Abbasid Caliph.

of Moses; the unity of Divinity and humanity in Jesus; God's omniscience and human freedom, the impassibility and immutability of God, and Jesus' freedom in giving up His life on the cross. Other religious-social issues emerging in the 829 debate include freedom of speech, human and angelic freedom of choice, the Qur'ān's view of Christians, *takfīr* (declaring another to be an infidel, a non-Muslim), the image of paradise, and *ḡihād* (holy war)⁷ as a way to heaven. A close study of the debate manifests over 40 important issues of discussion⁸.

It is clear, even from the short list just presented, that the topics and issues debated by Christians and Muslims over eleven hundred years ago remain current in the contemporary world.

Discoveries

In the course of the research many discoveries, some big and others small, came to the fore. Among the most interesting ones made in this study is the important discovery with regard to one of the authenticity of the debate items, namely the historical reading of one of the interlocutors. Until the present day, scholars have asserted that all the interlocutors are fictitious, with the exception of one, namely al-Ma'mūn. Now, however, we have established that this assertion is not entirely true. In fact, our discovered evidence has further situated *al-Muḡāḍalah* where it is claimed to have taken place, namely in the time of al-Ma'mūn. Further, this historical reading made more sense of part of the content of the debate.

In *al-Muḡāḍalah*, Abū Qurrah's last interlocutor is reported in one manuscript to be named Yaḥyā b. Akīm. He is also identified as *the judge*.

The section in question corresponds to 861-865 *WN*⁹. It is mentioned in six manuscripts and is missing from only two others. In four manuscripts,

7) «The word *jihād* derives from the root *j-h-d* that in Arabic evokes an effort, normally the effort related to war. In the Qur'ān, the word *ḡihād* is always used to mean 'fight for God,' according to the complete expression *ḡihād fī sabīl Allāh*, 'fight for the way to God', therefore it is translated into the European languages by Muslims as 'holy war'». Samir Khalil SAMIR, *Cento domande sull'islam* (Marietti, Genova, 2002) 34.

8) For a fuller list of the topics discussed in *al-Muḡāḍalah*, see "Abū Qurrah and the central issue of *al-Muḡāḍalah*: Who do you say that I am?", section of the "General Conclusion" chapter in the up coming publication of the Critical Edition.

9) The italicized capital letters *WN* refer to our numbering system in the Critical Edition; hence, 735 *WN* refers the reader to the verse that reads, «Al-Ma'mūn said: 'You told the truth (By God!), O Abū Qurrah'».

the scribes fail to mention a name for the judge; they identify him only as *the* judge.

One cannot help wonder whether this is in fact the famous judge, Yaḥyā b. Akṭam, who was indeed a contemporary of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn. The difference between the two names is a matter of the placement of the dots: Akīm (أَكِيم) and Akṭam (أَكْتَم).

The original manuscript from which others have been copied might have lacked the dots and the scribes made a mistake in placing them or it might have been a simple scribal error in copying. Either way, the fact that the majority of the manuscripts do not even mention the name of the judge supports the fact that the title refers to a famous person, known as the judge; hence, the most famous judge in the time of al-Ma'mūn, namely Yaḥyā b. Akṭam. This is not an unknown practice in Arabic culture, as well as many others. In the Arabic culture, the title of many, known as al-laḡab, suffices for recognizing the individual. Examples include al-Ma'mūn himself. It is our opinion that this is in fact the famous judge Yaḥyā b. Akṭam.

A controversial issue regarding al-Ma'mūn and Yaḥyā b. Akṭam

The person in question is the well-known judge Abū Muḥammad, Yaḥyā b. Akṭam b. Muḥammad b. Qaṭan b. Sam'ān b. Mušnağ al-Tamīmī, al-Asayyidī, al-Marwaḏī. He was born in Marw (مرو) and died in al-Rabḏah (الربذة). His contemporaries describe him as a scholar of jurisprudence, a renowned member of al-Mu'tazilah¹⁰, disguised as a Sunnī. They praised his books in fiqh (jurisprudence) and Uṣūl al-Dīn (the principles of religion), but they also observed that people did not read them due to their length¹¹.

Al-Ma'mūn, himself a scholar, loved Yaḥyā b. Akṭam and appointed him the judge over al-Baṣrah at a very young age¹². Yaḥyā b. Akṭam is de-

10) *Al-Mu'tazilah* were a group of *Mutakallimūn* that depended on logic and syllogism in discussing religious issues. The name goes back to the fact that their *Imām*, Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā' has retreated from *Mağlis* al-Ḥasan. Their most important teachings are with regard to Human Freedom of Choice, the Creation of the *Qur'ān*, the Oneness of God, Justice and Divine Attributes. Al-Ma'mūn supported this group, and they tested people with regard to the creation of the *Qur'ān*, and that test was called "المحنة" (crisis).

11) Cf. Ḥallikān (b.), Abū al-'Abbās Šams al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Abū Bakr (Īhsān 'Abbās, ed.), *Wafayāt al-A'yān wa-Anbā' Abnā' al-Zamān*, vol. VI (Dār Šādir, Beirut, N. D.) 151.

12) Ibn Ḥallikān asserts it was during his twenties. See Cf. Ḥallikān (b.), *Wafayāt...*, vol. I (Dār Šādir, Beirut, N. D.) 84; *Ibid*, vol. VI, 149. Ṭalḥah al-Šāhid asserts that he was

cidedly one of al-Ma'mūn's favorite scholars. In fact, it is reported that al-Ma'mūn's ministers always consulted Yaḥyā b. Aqtam in the affairs of the kingdom, knowing that he was shrewd and well informed¹³. According to Alī Sāmī al-Naššār and 'Iṣām al-Dīn Muḥammad Alī, Yaḥyā b. Aqtam died in the year 857¹⁴. Ibn Kaṭīr¹⁵ and al-Āṣfahānī¹⁶ agree while Ibn Ḥallikān wavers between 857 and 858. Nevertheless, Ibn Ḥallikān adds that Yaḥyā b. Aqtam was 83 years when he died; hence giving us a birth date 774/775¹⁷.

Curious in al-Muḡādalāh is the fact that Abū Qurrah mentions sodomy to be honored by the Muslims. Whether our hypothesis with regard to Yaḥyā b. Aqtam is correct or not (and we maintain it is correct), the fact remains that the issue was present in the time of al-Ma'mūn, especially with regard to the famous judge. Ibn Ḥallikān, in his *Wafayāt al-A'yān wa-Anbā' Abnā' al-Zamān*, recounts several incidences in which Yaḥyā b. Aqtam's homosexual tendencies as well as that of his son are evident. For example, Ibn Ḥallikān mentions that it was said that Yaḥyā b. Aqtam was deposed from his post as a result of the verses he recited to the handsome sons of Mas'adah. These verses are the following:

يَا زَائِرِينَا مِنَ الْخِيَامِ	حَيَّاكُمْ اللهُ بِالسَّلَامِ
إِلَى حَلَالٍ وَلَا حَرَامِ	لَمْ تَأْتِيَانِي وَبِي نُهُوضٌ
وَلَيْسَ عِنْدِي سِوَى الْكَلَامِ ¹⁸	يُحْزِنُنِي أَنْ وَقَفْتُمَا بِي

Other incidences are mentioned as well, the most notable of them involved al-Ma'mūn himself. Ibn Ḥallikān recounts that al-Ma'mūn asked Yaḥyā b. Aqtam to identify the author of the following verse:

eighteen years old when he was appointed a judge over al-Baṣrah. Cf. Al-Naššār, Alī Sāmī & Alī, 'Iṣām al-Dīn Muḥammad (eds.), *Firaq wa-Tabaqāt al-Mu'tazilah* (1972) 72, fn. 1.

13) Cf. Ḥallikān (b.), *Wafayāt...*, vol. VI, 143-165.

14) Al-Naššār, Alī Sāmī. *Firaq...*, 72, fn. 1.

15) Ibn Kaṭīr, al-Ḥāfiẓ abī al-Fidā' Ismā'īl, *Al-Bidāyah wa-l-Nihāyah*, vol. V (Dār al-Taqwā, Cairo, Egypt, 1999) 385.

16) ĀSFAHĀNĪ (al), Abī al-Farağ, *Al-Āğānī*, vol. VI (Dār al-kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 2002) 297, fn. 1. For more information with regard to Yaḥyā b. Aqtam, see vol. XIII, pp. 128-129 & 275; vol. XIV, p. 99; vol. XV, p. 244; vol. XX, pp. 171, 272-273 & 278; vol. XXV, pp. 205, 288.

17) Cf. ḤALLIKĀN (b.), *Wafayāt...*, vol. VI, 163.

18) *Ibid*, 152.

قَاضٍ يَرَى الْحَدَّ فِي الزَّتَاءِ وَلَا يَرَى عَلَى مَنْ يُلُوطُ مِنْ بَاسٍ¹⁹

“Al-Fāḡir Aḥmad b. Abū Na‘īm,” answers Yaḥyā b. Akṭam, adding that the poet is the one who also said,

لَا أَحْسَبُ الْجُورَ يَنْقِضِي وَعَلَى أُمَّةٍ وَإِلٍ مِنْ آلِ عَبَّاسٍ²⁰

These statements as well as similar accounts give credibility to the fact that the issue of homosexuality was in fact a subject of discussion during the time of Abū Qurrah and al-Ma'mūn especially among the Muslims. Hence, the fact that sodomy is one of the issues considered in al-Muḡādalāh is not as strange as it seems at first glance. On the contrary, it gives more credibility to the account as taking place with the Muslims of the time of al-Ma'mūn. The presence of such a discussion does in fact situate al-Muḡādalāh where it is claimed to have taken place. The mosaic formed through these collected evidence images the court of al-Ma'mūn and places the judge as a key interlocutor not only in the debates among Muslims of the same period but also with Christians, as noted in the debate with Abū Qurrah, the bishop of Ḥarrān.

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19) *Ibid*, 153.

20) *Ibid*, 153.