

# *The Disputation between a monk of Bēt Ḥālē and an Arab notable*

Unknown author

DATE OF BIRTH Unknown  
PLACE OF BIRTH Unknown  
DATE OF DEATH Unknown, probably 8<sup>th</sup> c.  
PLACE OF DEATH Unknown, probably Iraq

BIOGRAPHY —

## MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

*Primary* —

*Secondary* —

## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Drāshā da-hwā l-ḥad men Ṭayyāyē ‘am iḥidāyā ḥad b-‘umrā d-Bēt Ḥālē* ‘The disputation that took place between one of the Arabs and a certain monk from the monastery of Bēt Ḥālē’. Modern title: ‘The Disputation between a monk of Bēt Ḥālē and an Arab notable’ (with slight variants)

DATE Probably 720s

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Syriac

## DESCRIPTION

This East-Syrian religious disputation between a monk and an Arab, which covers only 8 folios in the accessible manuscript, is one of the oldest surviving examples of the disputation genre of Christian apologetics vis-à-vis Islam. It is presented as a report of a live encounter and cast in the format of ‘question-and-answer’.

The monk’s Arab interlocutor is referred to as a notable from the entourage of ‘governor Maslama’. The reference to a governor with this

name in all likelihood means that the disputation was set in the 720s when Maslama, son of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik, was governor of Iraq. There were two monasteries with the name Bēt Ḥālē, one close to Mosul, also known as Dayr al-Ṭīn, and the other close to al-Ḥīra, also known as Dayr Mār 'Abdā. If the disputation took place in the former, it could have been as early as 710 when Maslama became governor of Mesopotamia. If, on the other hand, it was the monastery in southern Iraq, then it is more likely that the debate was situated in the 720s, after Maslama had been appointed there as well.

Although the name of the monk is not mentioned in the text, 'Abdīshō bar Brikā (d. 1318) mentions a treatise of Abraham of Bēt Ḥālē against the Arabs (Assemani, *BO* iii/1, p. 205). Following the theory of Baumstark that this is a reference to this disputation, Reinink ('Lamb', p. 110) has suggested the author could be the Abraham who is mentioned as a pupil of John Azraq, bishop of al-Ḥīra in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century (J.-B. Chabot, *Le livre de la chasteté composé par Jésusdenah, évêque de Basrah*, Rome, 1896, pp. 40, 47, 51, 61). It is perhaps strange, however, that his name does not appear in the disputation itself. If the work mentioned by 'Abdīshō is indeed our text, then it is just as likely that 'Abdīshō or someone before him attributed it to Abraham.

Obviously, issues concerning the precise location and time of the disputation are only worth discussing if one assumes that there is a historical reality behind this carefully polished disputation in its literary form. This cannot be known for certain. Nevertheless, it needs to be determined whether the text goes back to the time which the setting reflects. As Reinink has claimed, there are no real reasons to suspect that the work was written much later. On the contrary, the urge to deal with the pressing question of why God supports the Muslims by giving them lasting political and military might may well have arisen in response to the political success and propaganda of the Marwānids at that time. Hoyland and Szilágyi are somewhat more hesitant on account of the reference in the *Disputation* to Sergius Baḥīrā, whose double name does not feature in other texts until later. But it is difficult to imagine why after the 'Abbasid revolution an author would want to create a historical framework for his debate that features an Umayyad. The early Muslim period would have been a more obvious choice for an archaized setting, and moreover one would expect better known protagonists to enhance the historical verisimilitude.

A number of scholars who do not doubt the early 8<sup>th</sup> century date have drawn attention to the *Disputation* as the oldest non-Muslim

text to mention the Qur'ān. This is interesting not only in and of itself, but also because the author seems to think that *Sūrat al-baqara*, 'The Cow', is a separate scripture from the Qur'ān. He also mentions a scripture with the name *ghīghī* (?), which could be a reference to *Sūrat al-'ankabūt* ('The spider', in Syriac *ghwāghī*) or to *Injīl*, the Arabic Gospel. Either way, the relevant passage (fol. 6r) could refer to a pre-canonical stage of the Qur'ān, which is why it has received attention from scholars researching the early history of the Qur'ān. It has to be noted, however, that another passage in the *Disputation* shows the author's awareness of the Qur'ān as the principal scriptural source of Islam (fol. 1r).

The *Disputation* shares many of its themes with other texts of this genre. Among the classic points of contention between Muslims and Christians that feature in it are the worship of icons and relics, the direction of prayer, the validity of the laws of the Torah, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the crucifixion of Christ, and the authority of scriptural proofs.

The answers of the monk to the Muslim's questions are well-crafted. Reinink has shown that the author draws on Syriac biblical exegesis to construct his arguments, for example in his typological explanation of Genesis 22, which he uses as a defense against the Muslim charge that Christians disobey the commandment of Abrahamic sacrifice. A striking example of this is the monk's assertion that the Qur'ān's concept of Christ as 'the Word of God and His Spirit' can be traced back to Muḥammad's knowledge of the Gospel of Luke. According to the author, the qur'ānic understanding of Christ reflects the annunciation to Mary: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you' (Luke 1:35). His argument is only comprehensible in the light of the exegesis of Ephrem the Syrian, who understood 'the power of the most High' as 'the Word'.

When the Muslim is confronted with this alleged echo of Luke in the Qur'ān, he tacitly acknowledges that the Qur'ān does not dismiss belief in Christ as Son of God, but proceeds to ask why Muḥammad did not preach this belief in clear terms. The monk answers that Muḥammad received a simplified religious instruction in monotheism from Sergius Baḥīrā, which was more fitting for a pagan nation than a full-blown Christian catechesis. In other words, the Christian apologetic argument of the spiritual 'immaturity' of the Jews is re-used here to explain the monotheism of Islam.

This idea that Muḥammad brought the Arabs half-way to the truth also forms the background of the final passage of the debate in which the Muslim asks whether the sons of Hagar will go to heaven. The monk asserts that Christ promised grace in the afterlife, far removed from the torment of hell, to those who do good works. Yet the kingdom of heaven is a place reserved for the sons of Baptism. Here, and elsewhere in the text, one notices the tendency of the apologist to make the differences between Islam and Christianity look minimal and at the same time to maintain the idea that the whole truth is found only through Christian teachings.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

From a historical point of view the text is significant because, if it is indeed a product of the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, it is one of the oldest Christian apologetic works vis-à-vis Islam, and the earliest Christian text to show familiarity with the existence of the Qur'an, its contents and its importance as a source of law for Muslims. The debate would also be the earliest Christian text to make mention of Sergius Baḥīrā, the alleged religious teacher of Muḥammad.

Another interesting aspect of the debate is the similarity between its apologetic arguments and those found in texts from the other eastern Christian communities. Several of its arguments are also found in John of Damascus (Roggema, *Sergius Baḥīrā*, pp. 110-12) and Theodore Abū Qurra (Griffith, 'Disputes with Muslims', p. 260). Given the fact that these two Melkite thinkers belonged to another Christian community and lived in other areas, one can deduce that apologetic arguments were already circulating widely among Christians in the Muslim world in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Other noteworthy elements of the text, on the other hand, are exclusive to the East-Syrian response to Islam, notably the rather positive appraisal of Muḥammad as a pious man who tried to convert his people to monotheism.

#### MANUSCRIPTS

MS Diyarbakr, Chaldean Archbishopric – 95 (early 18<sup>th</sup> c.?) (this is the conventional reference; in 1969, however, it was present in the Chaldean Episcopal Library of Mardin; see Reinink, 'Political power', p. 158. – this is the only MS that has been accessed by Western scholars)

MS Mardin, Chaldean Bishopric 82 (1890) (inaccessible)

MS Seert, Chaldean Bishopric – 112 (seen by A. Scher and dated by him to the 15<sup>th</sup> c.; probably lost)

(A fourth witness is/was probably MS Alqosh, Notre-Dame des Semances – 144; undated, 19th c. hand. The 6<sup>th</sup> text in this MS is described by A. Scher, 'Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques conservés dans la bibliothèque du convent des chaldéens de Notre Dame des Semences', *Journal asiatique* 8 (1906) 55-82, p. 76, as 'controverse entre un arabe et un moine'.)

#### EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

There is no published edition or translation. Lengthy sections in translation can be found in the secondary literature cited below.

#### STUDIES

- G.J. Reinink, 'The veneration of icons, the cross, and the bones of the martyrs in an early East-Syrian apology against Islam', (forthcoming)
- K. Szilágyi, 'Muḥammad and the monk. The making of the Christian Bahīrā legend', *JSAI* 34 (2008) (in press)
- B.H. Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā. Eastern Christian apologetics and apocalyptic in response to Islam*, Leiden, 2008
- S.H. Griffith, 'Christians, Muslims, and the image of the One God. Iconophilia and iconophobia in the world of Islam in Umayyad and early Abbasid times', in B. Groneberg and H. Spiekermann (eds), *Die Welt der Götterbilder*, Berlin 2007, 347-80
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- G.J. Reinink, 'Political power and right religion in the East-Syrian Disputation between a monk of Bēt Ḥālē and an Arab notable', in E. Grypeou, D.R. Thomas and M. Swanson (eds), *The encounter of Eastern Christianity with early Islam*, Leiden, 2006, 153-69
- G.J. Reinink, 'Following the doctrines of the demons. Early Christian fear of conversion to Islam', in J.N. Bremmer, W.J. van Bekkum and A.L. Molendijk (eds), *Cultures of conversion*, Leuven, 2006, 127-38, pp. 135-37
- A.-L. de Prémare, 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān et le processus de constitution du Coran', in K.-H. Ohlig and G.-R. Puin, *Die dunklen Anfängen. Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, Berlin, 2005, 179-210, pp. 184-85, 201-2
- G.J. Reinink, 'The lamb on the tree. Syriac exegesis and anti-Islamic apologetics', in E. Noort and E. Tichelaar (eds), *The sacrifice of Isaac. The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its interpretations*, Leiden, 2002, 109-24

- R.G. Hoyland, 'The earliest Christian writings on Muḥammad. An appraisal', in H. Motzki (ed.), *The Biography of Muḥammad. The issue of the sources*, Leiden, 2000, pp. 276-97
- S.H. Griffith, 'Disputing with Islam in Syriac. The case of the Monk of Bêt Hâlê and a Muslim Emir', *Hugoye* 3 (2000) [article 10]
- Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 465-72
- S.H. Griffith, *Syriac writers on Muslims and the religious challenge of Islam*, Kottayam, 1995
- G.J. Reinink, 'The beginnings of Syriac apologetic literature in response to Islam', *OC* 77 (1993) 165-87, pp. 186-87
- S.H. Griffith, 'Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian texts. From Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)', in B. Lewis and F. Niewöhner (eds), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, Wiesbaden, 1992, 251-73, pp. 259-61 (repr. in Griffith, *The beginnings of Christian theology in Arabic*, Aldershot, 2002)
- P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. The making of the Islamic world*, Cambridge, 1977, pp. 12-13, 17-18, 163, 167
- P. Jager, 'Intended edition of a disputation between a monk of the monastery of Bet Hale and one of the Ṭayoye', in H.J.W. Drijvers (ed.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, Rome 1987, 401-2
- Baumstark, *GSL*, p. 211

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