

John of Damascus and Theodore Abū Qurrah: Icons, Christ, and Sacred Texts

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Abstract

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Increasingly scholars dispute the idea that the rise of Islam in the sixth and following centuries contributed to the rise of iconoclasm in the Byzantine east in the seventh-ninth centuries. Two significant figures living under Islamic domination, John of Damascus and Theodore Abū Qurrah, both dealt with the permissibility and theology of images by appeals to Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures. Both stressed the importance of differentiating worship of God from veneration of icons in order to guard against the charge of idolatry. But they diverged in the audiences to whom they aimed these arguments, John aiming at a Christian audience, and Theodore at a Jewish and Islamic one. Both, however, claimed not merely to be reiterating the inherited tradition, but actively developing it to face new challenges. The author reviews their respective development of tradition in their diverse contexts to reveal overlapping defenses of icons.



Introduction

For many Eastern Christians iconography is a facet of their spiritual and liturgical lives that is sometimes taken for granted. Their churches, homes and many places of culture are adorned with various icons from their inherited Eastern Christian traditions. In these ecclesial traditions nowadays none of these people would openly wage war or persecute those who

venerate icons. Icons are a part of the liturgical and socio-religious fabric of these traditions and cultures, and are as such generally accepted without question. However, this was not the case in the seventh to eighth centuries, which witnessed two major periods of iconoclasm (literally, “icon-smashing”) in c.725–787 and then in c.814–842. Sandwiched between these two periods of the destruction of icons and persecution of icon-lovers (icono-dules, or -philes) was the penultimate victory in defence of the theology of icons at the second council of Nicea (787). The final lasting victory, though, occurred after the empire, its emperor and bishops received the teachings of Nicea II, and incorporated them into the liturgical cycle of the Orthodox Church. The Sunday of Orthodoxy, celebrated as the first Sunday of Lent, was thus introduced in c.843 to commemorate not only the vindication of the veneration of icons, but also the orthodox teachings of the preceding ecumenical councils.

In the early phases of the iconoclastic periods one can single out two significant authors who wrote treatises in defence of icons. They are John of Damascus (c.675–749) and Theodore Abû Qurrah (c.750–820). There are many parallels between them in their interpretation of the Old Testament – a sacred text revered by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They have virtually identical understandings of the distinction between the “worship” of God and the “veneration” of icons, distinctions which they emphatically affirmed protected iconophiles from accusations of idolatry. There are also a number of John of Damascus’ ideas that Abû Qurrah did not elaborate upon or adopt, which are very revealing of the socio-religious milieu in which each was writing. One of these areas deals with the degree to which they did or did not use Christology as part of their defence of icons. The other area deals with their intended audiences. John’s apology was directed mostly towards Christian iconoclasts. Abû Qurrah, however, made a much more explicit and pointed apology towards Judaic and Islamic iconoclasm, though he shied away from direct references to Islam, apart from using some Islamic expressions and a number of citations from the Qur’an. All sides appealed to Tradition – be it Islamic, Jewish, or Christian – and claimed

their faithfulness to it, and hence trumpeted their orthodoxy. What emerged out of the traditions that the Damascene and Abū Qurrah inherited was a further unfolding of theological and liturgical traditions for subsequent generations. In what follows, I will compare the above-mentioned multifaceted dimensions of each author's theology of icons in their debates with the iconoclasts through an analysis of their respective treatises in defence of icons, while locating each figure in the context of recent scholarship about each of them.

The Socio-Religious Contexts of the Damascene and Abū Qurrah

In studying the lives of St. John of Damascus and St. Theodore Abū Qurrah, one notices a few things the two had in common. In addition to their both writing treatises in support of icons, both wrote in the period in which Syria and parts of modern Turkey were under the tutelage of Islamic caliphs.¹ John of Damascus' three treatises, which are united in his *On the Holy Icons* (or *On the Divine Images*), were written in Greek and eventually made their way into the rest of the Greek speaking Byzantine world.² As will become apparent through this essay, one can conjecture with reasonable certainty that Abū Qurrah would have read John of Damascus' defence of

¹ One of the first major studies to make a link between the two is Ignace Dick, "Un continuateur arabe de saint Jean Damascène: Théodore Abuqurra, évêque melkite de Harran, la personne et son milieu," *Proche Orient Chrétien* 12 (1962): 209–223, 319–332; and vol. 13 (1963): 114–129. For the historical context of the two see: Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford, 2002); Sidney H. Griffith, "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985): 53–56; and Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), I:340–361.

² For English translations of these works, see: John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1980) [PG 94.1227–1421]. Hereafter cited as Jn.Dam. *Images*. For a comparison of the development and similarities among the tracts, see Louth, cited in the note above, 199–208.

icons.³ Abū Qurrah's *Treatise on the Veneration of Holy Icons*⁴ was most likely written between c.800–812 while he was the Melkite bishop of Harrân (modern Altınbaşak, south-east Turkey). Since he wrote principally in Arabic, and was largely unknown outside of the Arab-speaking world, he is a significant source of information about Christianity's life under Islam.⁵ Being outside the bounds of the Byzantine Empire, both writers were similarly free from the immediate persecutions of the Byzantine iconoclastic emperors and bishops, though as mentioned, they had to deal with the iconoclasm of not only their own fellow Christians, but also that of Judaism and Islam.

John of Damascus's father and grandfather, despite being Byzantine Christians, held very senior positions in the Islamic

³ Scholars initially held that Abū Qurrah was a direct disciple of John of Damascus, but that has been shown not to be the case. See, e.g., the evidence synthesized in John C. Lamoreaux, "Theodore Abū Qurrah and John the Deacon," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 42 (2001): 362ff. Lamoreaux, however, would nevertheless accept the notion that Abū Qurrah transmitted "the teachings or the theological legacy of the Damascene," in Idem, "The Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah Revisited," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 56 (2006): 33. John of Damascus was traditionally held to be a monk of the well-known Mar Sabbas monastery in Palestine, though some scholars have cast some doubt on this, as in Marie-France Auzépy, "Les Sabaïtes et l'iconoclasme," in *The Sabbaitic Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 305ff; see also Lamoreaux, "The Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah Revisited," 40, who downplays this as a significant indicator that Abū Qurrah was a disciple of the Damascene. Vassa Kontouma-Conticello believes that John Damasene was not at St. Sabbas, but was instead a hiermonk of the Anastasis church in Jerusalem: Jean Damascène, *La foi orthodoxe*, Sources Chrétiennes 535, trans. P. Ledrux (Paris: Cerf, 2010), I:16–17.

⁴ Theodore Abū Qurrah, *Treatise on the Veneration of Holy Icons: Written in Arabic by Theodore Abū Qurrah, Bishop of Harrân (c.735–830AD)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, trans. Sidney H. Griffith (Leuven: Peeters, 1997). Hereafter cited as Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. For a history of the treatise's composition and manuscriptural tradition, see the introduction to Griffith's translation, 26–27; as well as Griffith, "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract," 54–56. For other translations, see: *Théodore Abuqurra, Traité du culte des icônes*, trans. Ignace Dick (Jounieh-Rome, 1986); or Teodoro Abū Qurrah, *La difesa delle icone: Trattato sulla venerazione delle immagini*, trans. Paolo Pizzo (Milan: Jaco Book, 1995).

⁵ Dick, "Un continateur arabe," 13 (1963) 213.

caliphates, with the Damascene even being appointed a secretary to a caliph (c.695).⁶ John grew up in an Arab-speaking milieu, but he eventually pursued studies in Greek culture, philosophy, and theology. In his time there was little pressure by the Islamic rulers on Christians to abandon their faith. And although he denounced the Byzantine emperors for their iconoclasm, John never explicitly denounced the Muslim caliphs for their increasingly stricter limits on Christians. During John's lifetime, while he was writing his *Fount of Knowledge*, which contained a chapter against Islam, there were examples of Christians being executed for their preaching against Islam.⁷ He even wrote a work against Islam, which he boldly called the "Ishmaelite Heresy."⁸ John lived during the Umayyad Caliphate, a polity and period which had established its centre of government in what had been traditionally Christian territories, namely Damascus, Syria. This caliphate lasted between c.661–750, and its religious policies towards Christians progressed from an initial general tolerance to a later period of much stricter limits. These later restrictions eventually included "ghettoising," a system where religious minorities were isolated from other parts of society. Other restrictions included prohibitions against converting Muslims to Christianity (a very serious crime) and the public display of Christianity in predominantly Muslim areas, though Christians were still permitted limited worship in churches and their ghettos (*dhimmi*s in Arabic). Increasingly heavy taxation levied against non-Muslims often enough was incentive for Christian conversion to Islam. There were also a number of accretions to the treatment of Christians, most serving to publicly debase them, like special haircuts, riding horses side-saddled, and taking the outside lanes of roads. Eventually, some Christians were also required to wear distinctive belt-like girdles in public, which

⁶ Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, I:341–342.

⁷ Ibid.; and Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 54.

⁸ Jean Damascène, *Écrits sur l'Islam*, trans. Raymond Le Coz (Paris: Cerf, 1992).

were later replaced by the requirement to wear yellow patches on chests and backs.⁹

Following this period, Abū Qurrah's life coincided with the shift from the Umayyad to the Abbasid dynasty (the latter being named after an uncle of Mohammad). This dynasty lasted from c.750–1258, and its rulers claimed “to be more strictly orthodox than their predecessors and proved to be more aggressively Muslim in their treatment of religious minorities.”¹⁰ They moved their capital out of Damascus, and back into ancient Iraq, building a new capital at Baghdad. Unlike the earlier period, this period saw even more stringent prohibitions on the public display of Christian symbols on buildings and churches. Interestingly though, the period in which Abū Qurrah wrote his treatise came almost immediately after a famous exchange (c.781) between the Assyrian Christian Patriarch Timothy I (c.779–823) and the caliph Mahdi.¹¹ The cordial and open debate was a high point of Christian-Muslim relations. This period, roughly between c.750–850, saw Islamic scholars studying Greek philosophy and science (translated initially by Christian scholars into Syriac then Arabic) which Islam preserved and assimilated, and which Christianity later rediscovered in the later middle ages.¹²

A couple of other important facets about Abū Qurrah are worth noting. Between c.795 and c.812, he was the Melkite bishop of Harrân, a suffragan see of Edessa (modern Urfa). Around 812, Abū Qurrah was removed from his post by the

⁹ Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, I:345–346. Sydney Griffiths, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton, 2007), 15–17, 147–55, provides an overview of some of the persecution and martyrdoms of Christians under Islamic rule.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I:348.

¹¹ After the fact, Timothy I recorded the proceedings in his *The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch Before the Caliph Mahdi* [alternate title *Apology for Christianity*], trans. A. Mingana, *Woodbrooke Studies (Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, Manchester)* 12 (1928): 137–298.

¹² See Philip K. Hitti, *A History of the Arabs From the Earliest Times to the Present* (NY: Macmillan, 1951), 107. And Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, I:354ff., though there is no mention at all of Theodore Abū Qurrah in his work. Sydney Griffiths's, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the 'People of the Book' in the Language of Islam* (Princeton, 2013) documents the history of translations of the Scriptures into Arabic.

patriarch of Antioch, Theodoret, and seems to have travelled to Armenia to preach against monophysitism.¹³ Since Abū Qurrah did not mention the second council of Nicea (787) at all in any of his writings, some scholars have dated his defence of icons to c.787. There are, however, good grounds to support a dating roughly twenty years later, and even after 799, because he alludes to the story of the martyrdom of St. Anthony of Ruwah (†c.799), a Muslim who had converted to Christianity.¹⁴ And since Abū Qurrah wrote another major work defending the first six ecumenical councils, *On the Law, The Gospel and the Orthodox Faith*,¹⁵ (and since there was almost no knowledge of Nicea II in the oriental patriarchates during Abū Qurrah's life), it seems reasonable that he would have mentioned the council had he known about it. Griffith believes that Abū Qurrah probably knew something of the iconoclasm in Byzantium and Emperor Leo III's policies, and possibly those of Constantine V (741–775), or the iconoclastic council of Hieria (754) but said nothing about them.¹⁶ The Church in the East was effectively cut-off from Byzantium, and hence would have had little or no news from Byzantium. In an earlier study, Ignace Dick stated that that the seventh ecumenical council did not yet achieve the "same prestige" as the other councils did, and it is only after Abū Qurrah's writings that one is able to find references to it in Melkite sources. He also added that an appeal to the authority of an ecumenical council would have carried little weight in debates with Jewish and Muslim iconoclasts.¹⁷

Abū Qurrah wrote his tract to a certain Yannah, bishop of Edessa, stating somewhat redundantly, "You have asked us to compose a tract on this subject. In it we should return the re-

¹³ See Griffith, "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract," 54, 58; and "Theodore Abu-Qurrah," *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander P. Kazhdan et al (New York: Oxford University, 1991) III:2041.

¹⁴ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*, 16.74; Dick, "Un continuateur arabe," 13 (1963): 116–118. Cf. Griffith, "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract," 57.

¹⁵ See the full list of Abū Qurrah's works in Griffith, "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract," 54, n.4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁷ Dick, "Un continuateur arabe," 13 (1963): 117, which is a position shared by Lamoreaux, "The Biography Theodore Abū Qurrah," 34.

proach to those who reproach us for something in which there is no reproach.”¹⁸ Abū Qurrah was facing iconoclasm from a number of different groups. First and foremost were some Christians who were turning away from icons, being swayed by the iconoclasm of non-Christians. Among this group were some Christians with strict monophysite leanings (about which more later). Abū Qurrah made it clear that if Christians rejected icons because non-Christians said they were absurd, then Christians must also reject other aspects of the Christian faith that would also seem equally absurd to non-Christians, like the doctrine of the Trinity, the virginal conception, baptism or the Eucharist.¹⁹ Whereas for the Damascene, iconophobia had its primary origins in Christian iconoclasts, for Abū Qurrah iconoclasm’s primary origins were in Islamic and Jewish groups who subsequently had an influence on Christians. Griffith characterizes Islamic iconoclasm as part of a process of socio-religious transformation – of the elimination of the public display of Christian images and symbols – by successive caliphs.²⁰ Abū Qurrah was thus responding to a pastoral problem amongst his own faithful, of those Christians engaging in a form of accommodation in order to either not offend non-Christians or to seek their favour. These other non-Christians Abū Qurrah called the “outsiders,” “anti-Christians,” and the “people of perdition, error and rudeness” to variously describe Jews and Muslims.²¹ And although he cited the Jews as the chief iconoclastic protagonists in his treatise, it is clear that he implicitly also included Islam.²² While rebu-

¹⁸ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 1.29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 2.30–32.

²⁰ Sidney H. Griffith, “Crosses, Icons and the Image of Christ in Edessa: The Place of Iconophobia in the Christian-Muslim Controversies of Early Islamic Times,” in Philip Rousseau and Manolis Papoutsakis, ed. *Transformations in Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 66–67.

²¹ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 1.29–30. I am indebted to Griffith for the critical annotations about Islam in his translation of Abū Qurrah’s treatise. See also Griffith’s note, in “Theodore Abū Qurrah’s Arabic Tract,” 66, n.77. Pizzo identifies twenty-five references or allusions to Qur’an, in *La difesa delle icone*, 180.

²² Lamoreaux comments that “Although Abū Qurrah often engages Islam in his Arabic works, he does so in a delicate manner, usually without specifying

king a Jew, for example, in his defence Abū Qurrah cited not the Hebrew Scriptures, but the Qur'an.²³ Abū Qurrah clearly quoted it some seven times in his work, and used a number of Islamic expressions or terms which would be easily understood in an Arabic setting. For example, he spoke of Scriptures being "sent down from God,"²⁴ or saints being like the *imâm*, or Islamic spiritual leaders.²⁵ He also described the "proclamation of Christianity" using the parallel Muslim terminology for "proclaiming Islam."²⁶ Abū Qurrah even reported a saying of Mohammed, in which the prophet said that image makers will eventually be called to "blow the spirit" into their images, that is, to give life to these images, which would be impossible for a human, and would lead to their condemnation as idolaters.²⁷ The Qur'an was not the only sacred text to which Abū Qurrah appealed. Like John of Damascus, he also had to contend with the Old Testament's prohibitions against images.

The Appeal to the Hebrew Scriptures

The Scriptural justification for iconoclastic attitudes basically came from the decalogue in Exodus. There God proclaimed:

I am the Lord your God, ... you shall have no other gods besides me. You shall *not make for yourself an idol*, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall *not bow down to them or worship them*.²⁸

A similar passage is found in Exodus 32:1ff. where, after Moses' failure to return from atop the mountain, the people

the identity of his opponents": "Theodore Abū Qurrah and John the Deacon," 365.

²³ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 1.38.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 4.35 and 1.29 (and n.77), respectively.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 1.29.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 3.33, n.79.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 10.55, (and see n.92).

²⁸ Ex. 20:2–5; emphasis mine.

melted their jewellery, cast a golden calf, and worshipped it. God then instructed Moses to descend from the mountain, and told him of the judgement that should be inflicted upon the idolaters. A similar prohibition is found in Deuteronomy 5.6–9.²⁹ The interpretation that John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah gave was that these prohibitions were directed to the people of Israel due to their proclivity to idolatry and to the pagan abuse of idols.³⁰ Both authors concurred that the prohibition of idolatry was meant to affirm a monotheistic faith, and was thus a rejection of polytheism, though for Christianity this monotheism was obviously expressed in terms of a trinitarian God.³¹ What is more, both argued that the iconoclasts purposefully neglected to mention other parts of their inherited traditions that permitted the making and use of images. The tacit recognition that each also assumed was that the Old Testament period, where no one could possibly make an image of the “immeasurable, uncircumscribed, invisible God” because no one had seen God,³² had been fulfilled in the New Testament through the incarnation of Christ. Again, we shall later look more closely at this christological justification for icons.

Despite these prohibitions against making images of things “living on earth or in the heavens,” John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah noted that there were numerous examples of God permitting, even commanding, that images of such “living things” be made. The major examples they cited were from Exodus 25:9–22 (40ff.), which described God’s command to make an ark for the tablets of the law, and to decorate the ark with two cherubim (angels) of gold.³³ In the introductory sentence to this pericope God said, “In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it” (Deut. 25:10). Abū Qurrah even added that these law tablets were “the most famous icon[s].”³⁴ Both

²⁹ For examples see, Jn.Dam. *Images*. 1.6, 2.7; and Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 9.49, 10.56, 18.77.

³⁰ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 2.17.

³¹ Ibid. 2.4, 2.7; Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 18.78–80.

³² Quote from Jn.Dam. *Images*. 1.7, cf. 2.5.

³³ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 2.22, cf. 1.15, 1.20, 2.9; Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 10.53–54.

³⁴ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 15.69.

writers also cited Solomon's making of the temple, and adorning it with cherubim in imitation of the tent of meeting, as also being seen as permissible image-making.³⁵ Other "likenesses of things on the earth" also include a scriptural justification from 1 Kings 6:27ff. (or 1 Kings 7:19ff. in Abū Qurrah), where Solomon covered "the walls of the house all around about with carved engravings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms," and made likenesses of an oxen and lion.³⁶ Abū Qurrah recalled a vision of Ezekiel (41:15–20) in which God instructed the prophet to put two faces on the cherubim, a human face and a young lion's face, and to intersperse images of angels with images of palm trees. What is very significant about this last unique reference is that Abū Qurrah would most likely have had occasion to visit some mosques that, in his time, would have been adorned with lilies and palm trees,³⁷ despite the strict Islamic prohibition of imaging any living realities. But again, he does not directly address this particular example to Islam to illustrate a contradiction in its own practices.³⁸

Worship and Veneration

Another important point of contact between the two, which could again show the influence of the Damascene on Abū Qurrah, are their distinction between veneration as worship (*latreia*, Gk.) and veneration (*proskynêsis*, Gk.) as a showing of respect or honour. In short, both wrote that worship is due to God alone, while veneration (or prostration) is directed to objects of faith, people, or places. While John utilized a distinction between degrees of veneration,³⁹ Abū Qurrah

³⁵ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 1.20; Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 10.54

³⁶ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 1.20; Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 10.54–55.

³⁷ See Griffith's note in Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 10.55, n.93. Griffith also holds that Abū Qurrah's reference to the Islamic prohibition against figural art is one of the earliest such examples recorded: "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract," 65.

³⁸ Griffiths, "Crosses, Icons and the Image of Christ," 78–79.

³⁹ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 3.28–32. For an extended discussion of how John Damascus develops this notion between his three treatises see Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 200–208.

preferred to speak of types of prostrations, though still maintaining the same distinctions as John of Damascus.⁴⁰ For both there is no doubt that, in whatever way one expresses it, the ultimate object of worship is God. John of Damascus spoke to great extent of an “absolute worship” or “absolute adoration” which is directed only to God: “I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for me, taking up his abode in matter, and accomplishing my salvation through matter.”⁴¹ This worship includes an awe of God, a thanksgiving to God, prayers of petition to and blessing of God, and a turning to God in repentance and communion. Abū Qurrah similarly explained that “prostration is by way of worship, and sometimes by way of something other than worship,” implying the distinction that one worships God, but that one may venerate, honour, or respect an icon.⁴² The type of prostration to icons is thus to be distinguished from a type of prostration due to God alone.

John of Damascus further refined his argument by mentioning that one may make prostrations to icons in terms of “relative worship.” Such relative worship may take many forms, such as the veneration or honouring of places where God, in his words, “has rested,” namely in the Theotokos and saints.⁴³ This relative worship also encompassed holy places, such as churches or tombs. And of course, such “relative worship” included objects – the icons, relics of saints, the Bible, candles, and the cross. Added to this list was also a respect for each other, for those who have authority over us, and to those over whom we have authority. Ideas similar to these were also expressed by Abū Qurrah,⁴⁴ though he added his own particular contributions in light of his predominantly Muslim milieu.

Abū Qurrah quite noticeably, and more frequently than John Damascus, cited the Old Testament. He provided numerous examples of prostration from the Old Testament in order to bolster his argument, and his approach comes closer to the

⁴⁰ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 9.52.

⁴¹ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 2.14.

⁴² Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 9.52; 8.44.

⁴³ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 3.33–39.

⁴⁴ For examples, see Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 7.41–42, 8.45, 21.89.

appeal to the Old Testament employed by John of Damascus in his second treatise. Abū Qurrah specifically referred to the prostration made by Jacob to Joseph's staff (Genesis 47:31 LXX, Peshitta); of the people to the law and cherubim in the ark; of Abraham to the sons of Seth (Genesis 23:7); of Jacob to his brother Essau (Genesis 33:7); or Joseph's sons to their grandfather (Genesis 48.12 LXX, Peshitta); and, the examples of David and the prophets making prostrations.⁴⁵ He produced these examples to prove that these people did not make prostrations because they worshipped the ones or things to which they bowed, but rather that they showed an honour and reverence to these things, which was ultimately directed to God.⁴⁶

As for Abū Qurrah, the discrete rhetorical ploy that he adopted in his apology was often to direct his comments towards the Jews, seeing as they were also criticizing the use and veneration of icons, though also indirectly including Muslims. Avoiding a direct confrontation with Islam, in these and other places, he also often referred to people "other than" the Jews.⁴⁷ As a scriptural justification for the distinction between "prostration as worship" and "prostration as honour," again he cited not the Hebrew Torah but the Qur'an. Abū Qurrah listed the Qur'an's *al-Baqarah* (2.34) where the angels prostrated themselves to Adam, not "worshipping" him, but honouring him. Also, from *Yūsuf* (12.100) there he gave the example of Jacob and his sons bowing down and making "prostration" to Joseph.⁴⁸

A Theology of Images: Types and Prototypes

In this distinction between worship and veneration, what both authors were expounding was a specific theology of images and symbols not shared by their opponents. John of Damascus spoke of a distinction between "the image" and "what/who is imaged" in terms of a relationship between a "type" and its "prototype" (or archetype). He wrote, "an image is of

⁴⁵ Various in *Ibid.* 8.44, 9.50–51.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 9.52ff.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

like character with its prototype, but with certain difference. It is not like its archetype in every way.”⁴⁹ Images are likenesses, models or figures of what they depict, since the image is one thing and what is depicted is another thing.⁵⁰ John of Damascus used the analogy of a child being an image of a parent, though the two are different realities. Interspersed within the analysis of images used in the Hebrew Scriptures, John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah interpreted the ark, the law, the temple in typological terms as illustrations of the distinction between type and prototype. These Old Testament “types” are seen as images which are fulfilled, or pre-eminently manifested, in their archetypes. For example, the Law in the Ark is a type for the “New Law,” or Christ; or, the Ark itself is a type for Mary, in whom the New Law indwelt.⁵¹

Abū Qurrah made similar distinctions in his treatment of the Old Testament examples, noting that the things were not worshipped in and of themselves, but that there was a distinction between the one being worshipped and the object to which one gave honour or prostration. The Christians are not idolaters (or polytheists) because they recognize that God is not the ark nor the tablets. God is related to these images, but “is not” these images.⁵² For Abū Qurrah, no image shares the nature of what it images, despite the fact that one still makes prostrations of honour to such images.⁵³ Again, in such contexts, Abū Qurrah shied away from referring directly to Islam, only remarking that “some may say.” As an example of the distinction between the image and its prototype, he referred to Islamic prayer-rugs on which Muslims prostrated themselves in prayer to God. God is the object of worship through the prostration made on the prayer rugs. The rug is thus never an object of worship or idolatry. So Abū Qurrah wrote, “it is inevitable that the act of prostration goes to what the intention has in mind in the flexing of the knees, putting down the

⁴⁹ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 1.9; cf. 3.16.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 3.16.

⁵¹ Ibid. 2.20–23; Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 15.71.

⁵² See, e.g., Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 8.44.

⁵³ Ibid. 12.62.

forehead, and the direction one faces.”⁵⁴ Christians thus worship only God, though they venerate images of Christ or the saints. In the same quote, the “direction” to which one prays was also another example which Abū Qurrah developed to reveal this internal contradiction of Islamic iconoclasm. The narrative of prostration made in the direction of the cloud at the entrance to the tent (in Exodus 37:7–10) dealt with the direction Israel, Muslims and Christians would face (i.e. the East) in praying to God. The saints (that is, the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs) made prostration to God in the “direction of the place from which [God] would come to be known, although they knew no place would confine [God].”⁵⁵

Abū Qurrah was quite preoccupied in his tract on this distinction between worship and honour. He used the analogy of paper on which one could write one’s father’s or prophet’s name. The paper in itself is not revered, but once the name of the father or prophet is written on the parchment, then the paper takes on an added importance.⁵⁶ By extension, the same goes for the Scriptures, as Theodore stated: “Before God’s word is written on them, sheets of parchment have no honour in anyone’s eyes. But once the holy word is confirmed to be on them, they are dignified and accorded the greatest honour.”⁵⁷

Abū Qurrah also noted the practices of his Jewish contemporaries, of their making prostration to a stone monument in Jerusalem.⁵⁸ This was a place of pilgrimage of the Jews, where they would honour the rock by anointing or kissing it because they believed it came from the garden of Paradise. Eventually, between c.685–705, the Islamic caliph built a mosque over this place, and it came to be called the “Dome of the Rock.”⁵⁹ Abū Qurrah reproved the Jews for this contradiction in their iconoclasm, and because they had failed to realize that the prostration due to icons is akin to the

⁵⁴ Ibid. 11.57.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 11.58–9. See the note 11.59, n.96.; and 18.77.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 13.64. He used a similar example of paper and then an image of a father being drawn on it, in 23.91.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 22.91.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 17.76. See n.102 on the history of the “Dome of the Rock” in Jerusalem.

prostration they made to the rock. He further pointed out that none of the Scriptures recorded the significance of this rock. Theodore then concluded that Judaism had a concept of unwritten Tradition which included prostration done towards sacred objects or places.

Where Abū Qurrah constructively built upon the inherited tradition of John of Damascus was in his explicitness about the communion, or relationship, that results between the one who venerates an icon and the one who is depicted in the icon (veneration thus including touching, kissing, or praying). As a scriptural basis he turned to Ezekiel 4:1–3, where God commanded the prophet to make an image of the city of Jerusalem and then to draw the city as being fortified, so that by this symbolic artistic activity, the city of Jerusalem would in reality be protected. Abū Qurrah thus reasoned, “everything done to [Jerusalem’s] icon made contact with her; the like of what was done to her, as it was in the icon.”⁶⁰ He continued:

Therefore, great profit is at the disposal of the Christians, on the occasion of their making the act of prostration to the icons of the saints, since it is this action that puts them into contact with the saints. By my life, no one can walk up to a saint’s icon and make the prostration before it without rousing the saint whose image it is to pray on one’s behalf. Nor does the one making the prostration care that not much speaking is required along with his prostration. By my life, the saint knows better than he does what will benefit him. This is a great blessing which the one who makes a prostration acquires effortlessly. Who would not covet it?⁶¹

In other words, through the veneration of images, Christians are brought into communion with Christ, the Mother of God or the saints.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 14.66.

⁶¹ Ibid. 15.68–69.

Anamnetic and Didactic Theology in Colour

Both John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah also spoke about the didactic and anamnetic (memorial) function of icons. For them, the written Word of God, or Scripture, is one monument of Tradition. And in various ways, both fathers equally described icons as the Word of God in colour and symbols. John of Damascus stated that, “Just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye. What the book is to the literate, the image is to the illiterate.”⁶² In the same way that we listen to and read words to gain an understanding of spiritual mysteries, so too may we may also perceive such mysteries in colours and symbols. Abū Qurrah basically adopted the same approach in saying that writing is an icon for speech, or that icons are the Scriptures in colour and symbols:

So then are not the icons simply a clear writing that anyone can understand, whether he can read or he cannot read? Consequently, in a way they are better than writing, because both writing and icons are memorials for the things to which they point, but in functioning as memorials, the icons are much more eloquent than writing for their purpose of instructing someone who cannot read – on the grounds that for instruction they are more reliable than writing.⁶³

Icons and their symbols are therefore anamnetic in their inspiring us to imitate the works of Christ and the lives of the saints.⁶⁴ This didactic role thus fulfilled the pastoral need of instructing Christians in the mysteries of faith.

The Eucharist as Icon?

Another interesting facet of the apology for icons relates to both writers’ treatment of the Eucharist. This perhaps reverberates in some of the debate at Nicea II and later in the writings

⁶² Jn.Dam. *Images*. 1.17, cf. 1.13.

⁶³ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 13.63–64; cf. 15.71.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 1.29.

of Theodore the Studite (c.759–826) surrounding the question whether or not the Eucharist is an icon.⁶⁵ The Eucharist as being the only permissible icon, however, is a key part of the rejection of images at the iconoclastic Council of Hieria (c. 754). In their respective treatises, both authors referred at least once to the notion of the Eucharist being the real (sacramental) Body and Blood of Christ. And both authors drew parallels between the material elements of the bread/wine and the material elements of the icon. Abū Qurrah stated that Christians now:

[Offer] the offering, knowing for certain that it is Christ's body and blood, without seeing after the consecration anything except what they put forward before it was consecrated. ... As in the case with the other mysteries, so must the holy icons, equivalent to the other items, receive honour comparable to the honour accorded them.⁶⁶

John of Damascus too spoke of the materiality of bread and wine and our partaking of eternal life through the Eucharist.⁶⁷ The sacramentality of the Eucharist was thus broadly compared to the sacramentality of icons. If, however, both explicitly stated that the Eucharist is an icon, they would have manifested a serious flaw in their understanding of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and contradicted their positions on the distinction between types and prototypes. In their theory of images already mentioned, the image (the type) does not share the same essence with what is imaged (the prototype). So *if* – and I emphasize *if* – they had said that the Eucharist is an icon, then by extension they would have implied that the Eucharist (as a type) does not share the same essence as Christ (as the prototype), which would thereby deny the real sacramental presence of Christ. Affirming that the Eucharist is the Body

⁶⁵ For a brief overview of the issues, see “The Doctrine of the Icon-Eucharist for Byzantine Iconoclasts,” in J. Baun, A. Cameron, M. Edwards, M. Vincent, eds. *Studia Patristica* 44 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010): 41–46.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 16.73.

⁶⁷ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 1.16, cf. 3.26.

and Blood of Christ is to affirm that the eucharistic elements are identically the sacramental presence of Christ, and are thus not icons of Christ. But my comments here are merely intended to foreshadow a further refinement in the theological justification for icons because the evidence in both writers does not at all lead to the conclusion that they believed the Eucharist to be an icon, nor that they were aware of this as being a position expounded by the iconoclasts. The notion of the “Eucharist as an icon” is, nevertheless, explicitly rejected by the next generation of iconophiles.⁶⁸

Christology as a Justification for Icons

Another interesting level of comparison between the two authors is their theologies of Christ, and the degree to which they made an explicit Christological justification for icons. John of Damascus mentioned Christ more frequently, by far, than did Abū Qurrah. Abū Qurrah’s silence was in part an indication that he wanted to refute the iconoclasm of Judaism and Islam on the basis of a shared common sacred text, namely, the Old Testament Scriptures. Also, Abū Qurrah was perhaps reticent to use a Christological argument since he did not want to incur the wrath of Muslims for publicly proclaiming Christ as the incarnate God, especially in light of the increasingly severe restrictions placed upon the freedoms of Christians in the Muslim caliphate.

John of Damascus unambiguously affirmed the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, where the two natures were united in the one person of Christ. The Damascene was aware that one cannot depict the eternal and infinite God in finite images but, he said, one can image the God who took on material form.⁶⁹ So, the significant development for the justification for icons was extended to include the theology of the incarnation of Christ. John asked:

⁶⁸ For a synopsis of this see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (Chicago, 1974,) II:108–10.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 1.7–8; cf. 1.4, and 2.5, 2.8, 3.25.

How can the invisible be depicted? How does one picture the inconceivable? How can one draw what is limitless, immeasurable, infinite? How can a form be given to the formless? How does one paint the bodiless? How can you describe what is a mystery? It is obvious that when you contemplate God becoming man, then you may depict him clothed in human form. When the invisible One becomes visible in the flesh, you may then draw his likeness.⁷⁰

The *kenôsis*, or condescension of Christ in becoming human, then became a justification for imaging the birth, life and death of Christ (and of basically all the feasts of the Christian East).

One should also note that the incarnation, as a justification for icons, could also have been addressed to those Christians who tended to use language that envisaged Christ as really having only “one nature” (*mia-physis*), that is, a divine nature. For these strict monophysites, since Christ is in one nature – the divine – no image could be made of him because no image could be made of the eternal and infinite God. The monophysite position was first formally condemned at the council of Chalcedon (451) because it threatened an affirmation of the full humanity of the incarnate Word. Here, in the eighth and ninth centuries, monophysitism was again being anathematized in the context of its application towards the rejection of images because it essentially denied Christ’s fully taking on a human nature, and hence his being circumscribable in material form, and by extension, his being circumscribable in images. Nestorianism, as a separation of the two natures of Christ, was also untenable since it failed to sufficiently affirm the unity of natures in the “one incarnate person” of Christ.

Like John of Damascus, Abū Qurrah referred to the “incarnation of Christ from the Holy Spirit and from the Virgin Mary.”⁷¹ He encouraged his interlocutors to know “the nature of [Christ’s] divinity and of his humanity, of the unity of his *hypostasis* [person], of the prostration due to the icon of his

⁷⁰ Ibid. 1.8; cf. 1.16.

⁷¹ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 1.29; 15.69.

incarnation and to the icons of his saints.”⁷² However, in the context of the monotheism of both Judaism and Islam (and even in parts of the monophysite camp), Abū Qurrah very seldom went into such arguments. When he affirmed a Triune God, he was quick to point out that there was still only one God:

[Each divine Person] is God like God, and of his very being. So they worship the Son and the Spirit together with God, but they do not worship many gods. Rather, they say that God, and his Son, and his Spirit, are one God because their minds have subtlety to understand this matter.⁷³

He was quite conscious of the fact that Judaism and Islam regarded Christ as merely a human being,⁷⁴ so Abū Qurrah was not at all adamant in repeating John’s notion that the incarnation of Christ could also be cited as a theological justification for icons.

What is also very important to note in the defence of icons are Theodore’s concluding remarks:

If anyone says that the outsiders oftentimes reproach us for the cross of Christ, without ever seeing these icons, he should understand that were there none of these icons in our churches, what we have mentioned would never occur to the minds of most of these people going inside our churches. As for the icons, they are what arouse them to reproach us.⁷⁵

This is nothing other than saying that the icons proclaimed publicly a faith that the iconoclasts rejected. The icons were not at the root of the real problem, but the faith in the incarnate

⁷² Ibid. 24.96.

⁷³ Ibid. 18.80.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 9.51.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 24.95.

God was.⁷⁶ Abū Qurrah recognized that now he had shifted the debate from the common monotheistic grounds of all three faith traditions to what was uniquely the heritage of Christianity. This shift in argumentation would have thus had a particular appeal to Christians, especially those Christians whose iconoclasm was a form of accommodation in non-Christian environs.

The Appeal to the Fathers

In their rejection of the iconoclasm of some of their fellow Christians, there are also some parallels between both theologians' appeals to authorities in the ancient Christian Tradition who supported images or icons.⁷⁷ Abū Qurrah mentioned two early Christian writers likewise mentioned in John of Damascus's treatise, though, interestingly enough, it seems that a third reference was added later in Abū Qurrah. The two in question were Athanasius of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea. The "third" person in the context of this patristic appeal was Abū Qurrah's reference to Gregory Nazianzen and his narrative of making prostration to the cradle in which Christ lay, though Abū Qurrah added some elements which were not part of Nazianzus' original work (i.e., making prostration to a rock on which Christ or the manger lay).⁷⁸ It is very

⁷⁶ See also Griffith's comments, in "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract," 68. Abū Qurrah's comments here repeat his earlier comments in II:31–32. Cf. also Griffiths, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 145.

⁷⁷ By far the greatest number of patristic authorities cited are in John of Damascus' three Orations, in which many of the same sources are repeated from oration to oration. For a list of such authorities, which are omitted from some translations, see *St. John Damascene: On Holy Images*, trans. Mary H. Allies (London: Thomas Baker, 1898), 115–16; or Andrew Louth, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's, 2003).

⁷⁸ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 8.47. The addition to Gregory's work is also noted by Griffith on 8.47, n.89. Georg Graf, *Die arabischen Schriften des Theodor Abū Qurra, Bischofs von Harrân (ca. 740–820)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1910), 289–293 contains a catalogue of patristic references. See also Pizzo's *La difesa delle icone*, 61–62 for similar references.

probable that either Abū Qurrah, or someone else, added this latter story after the main text was written.⁷⁹

Both John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah referred to the pseudo-Athanasian *Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem*, which John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah regarded as an authentic work of Athanasius in support of icons.⁸⁰ Both John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah also recalled a story transmitted by Eusebius of Caesarea (Pamphylia) in his *Ecclesiastical History*, of an haemorrhaging woman being healed by an icon.⁸¹ Abū Qurrah's apology contained the same quote as John of Damascus, but Abū Qurrah left out some sentences, and changed the meaning of the last lines. The result was that one was led to believe that Eusebius unambiguously approved of images.

What both did not cite was a letter of Eusebius in which he made explicit his rejection of images. Scholars have come to believe that this was not an authentic letter of Eusebius,⁸² despite this letter being preserved in the acts of the Nicea II. The letter was Eusebius' response to a request from Emperor Constantine's sister, Constantia, who had asked that an icon of Christ be brought to her. Eusebius replied:

[Which] icon of Christ do you mean? ... that which is true and unchangeable and which bears the characteristics of his nature, or that which he assumed for us, the figure that is, that he took in the form of a servant?⁸³

This is classically expressed as a "disjunctive syllogism," in which Eusebius sets up two seemingly logical propositions that

⁷⁹ Abū Qurrah referred to the "two teachers," though he cited three. See also Griffith's note 8.47, n.90.

⁸⁰ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 1.25; Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 8.45, 16.73.

⁸¹ In Jn.Dam. *Images*. in his Third Oration (94–95); Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 8.45–46. (The reference here should be 7.18, and not 7.17).

⁸² For example, see Mary Charles Murray, "Art and the Early Church," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 28 (1977): 330–336 and Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (NY: Routledge, 2000), 105–106.

⁸³ See the account (and translation) in Daniel Sahas, *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm* (Toronto, 1986), 134–35 (313a–313d), which is the Sixth Session of Nicea II (787), fifth volume.

ultimately yield false conclusions.⁸⁴ Briefly, according to him, one may not depict the divine nature of Christ since no one has seen the invisible God. Therefore finite images cannot contain the infinite God. If one makes an image only of Christ's human nature, then one also falls into error, since one would thereby exclude the divinity from the identity of Christ. Therefore, one can neither solely depict the human nature nor solely depict the divine nature in an image. The falsity of this proposition, though still a rejection of icons by Eusebius, is answered by Nicea II in its affirmation that the icon seeks to image neither the divine nor human natures in isolation from each other, but rather the icon images the union of two natures in the "incarnate person" of Christ. The refutation of the disjunctive syllogism is anticipated in John of Damascus and, in part, in Abū Qurrah in that they both agreed that one may not image the divine nature. John most explicitly, though, spoke of the incarnation of Christ, of God being circumscribed by material form, as a justification for icons.

Both authors also cited icons as being part of the "unwritten traditions" of the Church. John of Damascus garnered these examples from Basil the Great, like triple immersion at baptism, making the sign of the cross, and facing East in prayer, as well as some of the Christological terms borrowed from Greek philosophy, and thus not found in the Scriptures.⁸⁵ Abū Qurrah also appealed to such unwritten traditions, though he did not cite Basil in this regard. In his list he included the liturgies of Baptism and Chrismation, consecration of churches, ordination, the striking the semantron, and, of course, the icons. He emphatically exclaimed that "nothing is more prevalent in the church than the icons. What country is there, by my life, in whose churches there are no icons of the saints?"⁸⁶ In these, and other areas, John and Theodore believed that they had the weight of their inherited Tradition on their sides.

⁸⁴ For an analysis of this text, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton, 1990), 72–74.

⁸⁵ Jn.Dam. *Images*. 1.23, 3.11, referring to Basil's *De Spiritu sancto* 27.66ff. [SC 17.478–480].

⁸⁶ Theod.A.Q. *Icons*. 7.42.

Conclusion: Inheriting and Constructing a Tradition

What I have basically attempted to show in this essay is that John of Damascus and Theodore Abū Qurrah were placing themselves squarely in a Tradition that they felt they had inherited from the past in their rejection of iconoclasm. This Tradition included the sacred Hebrew Scriptures, common to all of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Building upon such sacred texts, their inherited Tradition also included the post-apostolic theological and liturgical history of Christianity. In responding to the needs and crises of their times, and in the apologetic with Judaism and Islam, both contributed to the further construction of the Christian tradition and a theology of icons. Their contributions to scriptural interpretation; the refinement of the distinctions between worship and veneration, and type and prototype; and, of Christology being the preeminent justifications for icons, formed part of a creative transmission and inheritance to subsequent generations of Christians. This “transmitted Tradition” (a tautology) is consequently what makes it possible for later Eastern Christians to reflect on this inheritance, and to perhaps even add their own contributions in theology, spirituality and liturgy in the development of the Eastern Christian Tradition for their own cultures and times.

**Резюме**

Все більше і більше вчених заперечують думку, що зростання розвитку ісламу в шостому і наступних століттях сприяло посиленню іконоборства на візантійському сході в сьомому-дев'ятому століттях. Двома знаковими постатями, що жили під ісламською владою, були Йоан Дамаскин та Теодор Абу Кура. Обидва займалися справою допустимості існування зображень та їх богослов'я, посиляючись на юдейські, християнські та ісламські писання. Вони обидва підкреслювали важливість того, що потрібно відрізнити поклоніння Богові від шанування ікон, попереджуючи таким чином звинувачення в ідолопоклонстві. Однак вони адресували свої аргументи дуже різним слуха-

чам: Йоан звертався до християнської аудиторії, у той час, як Теодор – до єврейської та ісламської. Проте обидва стверджували, що вони не тільки повторюють успадковану традицію, а й активно вдосконалюють, щоби вона мала здатність протистояти новим викликам. Автор розглядає, як вони розвивали традицію у своїх різних контекстах, щоби підкреслити спільні моменти в захисті ікон.