

The Ecumenical Aspect of Bar Hebraeus' Christology

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Introduction

Ecumenical discussions between different churches have been taking place from a long time ago and some major agreements have been reached among different churches. But these discussions have been cooled for the last two or three decades. The 13th century non-Chalcedonian bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Bar Hebraeus, established many of the main talking points of his time. In this short work, I am going to analyse the ecumenical views and thoughts of Bar Hebraeus which are reflected in his work. I will examine his Letter to Catholicos Denha, The Book of the Dove, and finally the four of his poems "On Disputations", showing that his attitude started more rigid before becoming more tolerant later in his career.

1. Life and Works

Bar Hebraeus was a Syriac polymath who left writings on theology, philosophy, law, history, grammar, science and medicine¹. Mar Gregory Abu-al-Faraj, better known as Bar Hebraeus lived from 1225/26 until 1286. He was the son of a physician born in Meletine under Islamic rule. He became a monk and rose through the ecclesiastical ranks to the Maphrian of the east, the second highest office in the Syrian Orthodox Church. He had written the majority of his works during his Maphrianite (1264- 86). He spent most of his time in Mosul and Maragha in modern-day Iraq². This paper will show that he did not always have the same spirit towards other churches that he had at the time of the writing of *The Book of Dove*.

2. Ecumenical view in general in the period of Bar Hebraeus

Firstly, it is worth looking at the history of ecumenical dialogue with the Syriac tradition itself. The Syriac churches were intellectual battlegrounds for the fifth-century

¹ Bar Hebraeus, *Bar Hebraeus' book of dove together with some chapters from his ethikon*, p.6

² Takashashi, *Barhebraeus*, pp. 3-26

Christological debates surrounding the natures, hypostases, and the person of Christ. Within the Syrian Orthodox Church itself, Ali- ibn- Dawud-al-Afradi believed that the differences between Greek Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox Christians are merely different ways of speaking of the same belief. On the other hand, Bar Slibi sees anyone outside of the Syrian Orthodox Churches as outright heretics. Michael the Syrian also had the same view.

3. Ecumenical Aspects of Christology of Bar Hebraeus in His Works

3. 1. Letter to Mar Denha I

While his opinion towards other Christian churches was even more charitable, he was far from indifferent about the differences between them. In an undated letter to the Catholicos of the east, mar Denha I, he refutes the legitimacy of Catholicos and his church's Nestorian Christology. Bar Hebraeus shows great personal respect for Mar Denha, praising him and comparing him to many heroic figures from the Hebrew Scriptures. However, Bar Hebraeus dissect the church of the East's separation of the divine nature of Christ. He uses scripture and patristic quotations to show that the second person of the Trinity is one having perfectly united divinity and humanity.³

Even though he refutes Nestorian Christology in the letter, his praise for Mar Denha is evident in this. He writes, "I trust, that you, o excellent one from the east, understand of this writing, that it is without contention."⁴ He urges the Denha to agree with the majority of Christians in the Syriac world by forsaking Nestorianism in favour of Miaphysitism⁵. This letter is an example of disputation that he would forsake by the time of the Book of Dove.

3. 2. Poems "On Disputations"

The next text that we will examine will be four poems that were collected by Patriarch Philexinos Dolabani in 1929. He grouped these poems and one other under the heading "on disputations". The first poem, "An admonition and commentary of the divisions from those who guide", praises Theophilus who does not love Nestore or Cyril more

³ Bar Hebraeus, 'une lettre de bar hebraeus au catholicos denha I'

⁴ Bar hebraeus. II p.90

⁵ Bar Hebraeus, p. 128.

than Jesus. Bar Hebraeus alludes to 1 Cor 3;4, chastising both his fellow Syrian Orthodox Christians and the church of the East Christians.

The next poem in the Dolabani's critical edition is not actually from Bar Hebraeus but sets the stage for a reply for his. They are a brief exchange between Khamis bar Quardahe from the church of the East and Daniel mar Hattab from the Syrian orthodox church. Khamis asks whether according to the 'ten simple measures' (Aristotle's categories), Jesus' divinity could be confined in a body of flesh. Bar Hattab replies that Jesus' divinity is not limited to the bodily sense, although he does not fully explain the Miaphysite Christology beyond this⁶.

In his reply, Bar Hebraeus praises the greatness of khamis. He seems to respect this fellow poet, despite his divergent Christology. As in the letter to Denha, he upholds his own church's doctrine, but urges Khamis to seek true wisdom rather than doctrine, and by so doing drive out errors⁷. The tone throughout the letter is cordial and friendly to Khamis, but he still refutes Khamis' Christology based on it not fitting under the Aristotelian categories.

3. 3. The Book of Dove

The Book of Dove contains Bar Hebraeus' greatest ecumenical statements. Most likely, this book was written after the *ethikon* which can be dated to AD1278. That brings this writing to the last eight years of life, and so may be seen as the final stage of his development in his appreciation for other Christian churches.

The autobiographical section that begins chapter four of the Book of Dove is undoubtedly the crux of Bar Hebraeus' ecumenism. This chapter of the Book of Dove describes a mystical experience in which the author encountered the Holy Spirit in a way that confirmed his devotion to God. The sincerity of this section in particular has been questioned based on its similarities to experiences recorded by the Muslim mystic, Al- Ghazali. Based on the previous attitudes towards the church of the East, though, it is best to read this as an authentic expression of Bar Hebraeus' own experience, even if he is using the words of another to help him describe it.

⁶ Bar Hebraeus, *Bar Hebraeus Mush'hotho Book*, p. 157.

⁷ Bar Hebraeus, p. 158.

Conclusion

This section is marked by its candidness, giving readers a taste of Bar Hebraeus' thoughts. Despite Bar Hebraeus' voluminous corpus, the majority of his works are the compilations of other sources. This section gives us an insight into how he thought about Christology and theology. As Maphrian, Bar Hebraeus did defend his metaphysite beliefs. However, his talk of having "eradicated the root of hatred" seems to be an exaggeration of his earlier views. Perhaps before *the lamp of sanctuary* in his youth, he held more polemic views, but from his election to the 'maphrianite' "hatred" seems too strong a word to describe what his views towards other churches were. It is evident from the texts described above that Bar Hebraeus saw the debates between Christians holding different Christologies doing more harm than good. This was evident from his earlier works, although it did develop fully later in his life. Bar Hebraeus did not achieve a reunion of the Syrian Orthodox and the church of the East nor is there evident he sought to. However, in the last 70 years, modern ecumenists have reached significant conclusions about the compatibility of the views of different churches.

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