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# Seven Sessions or Just a Letter? Observations on the Structure of the Disputations between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī

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## Abstract

The following article examines the structure of a remarkable Christian Arabic treatise from the eleventh century, the heyday of Arabic culture: the *Book of Sessions* (*Kitāb al-majālis*) of Elias of Nisibis (975-1046), metropolitan of the Church of the East. In this treatise, Elias presents his discussions with his Muslim interlocutor, the vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī (981-1027). The article compares the *Book of Sessions* with Elias' *Epistle* to the vizier, taking into consideration some further documents that shed new light on the genesis of the *Book of Sessions*.

## Keywords

Muslim-Christian dialogue – Arabic manuscripts – Elias of Nisibis – Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī – *Book of Sessions* – *Kitāb al-majālis*

## Metropolitan Elias of Nisibis and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī

The following postscript to the old manuscript containing the *Chronography*, Elias of Nisibis' principal historical work<sup>1</sup>, provides basic biographical information about this author:

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1 London, BL add. 7197, fol. 41r.

On the birth of Mār Elias, metropolitan of Nisibis, who wrote this book: He was born on the eve of Thursday, the 11th of the month Shḥaṭ of the year 1286 of the Greeks, which was the 26th of the month of Jumādā I of the year 364 of the Arabs [=11 February 975 CE]. Then he was ordained a priest by Yōʿānīs, bishop of the town of Shena, who later became catholicos<sup>2</sup>. [Yōʿānīs] appointed him as a senior priest at the monastery of Abba Shemʿōn opposite Shena, on Saturday, the 15th of the month of Elul of the year 1305 of the Greeks, which was the 7th of the month of Shaʿbān of the year 384 of the Arabs [=15 September 994 CE]. He was appointed, by the same catholicos Yōʿānīs, as a senior bishop of the diocese of [our?] Bēth Nūhadrā<sup>3</sup> on Sunday at the beginning of the Great Lent, the 15th of Shḥaṭ of the year 1313 of the Greeks, which was the 29th of Rabīʿ I of the year 392 of the Arabs [=15 February 1002 CE]. The same Yōʿānīs appointed him metropolitan of Nisibis on Sunday, the 26th Kānūn I of the year 1320 of the Greeks, which was the 24th of Rabīʿ II of the year 399 of the Arabs [=26 December 1008 CE].<sup>4</sup>

Another biographical detail: in the fourth *majlis* of the *Book of Sessions*, Elias mentions that “at the monastery of Mār Michael in Mosul, there was a monk, a venerable old man named Yūḥannā, known as the Lame (*al-Araḡ*),” and that he (Elias) “was one of his close disciples.”<sup>5</sup>

Elias occupied the metropolitan see of Nisibis until his death. According to Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā (fourteenth century), whose testimony in the *Book of Secrets* (*Asfār al-Asrār*) has been accepted by modern scholars as trustworthy, Elias of Nisibis died on 10 Muḥarram 438 AH (which corresponds to 18 July 1046 CE). He was buried in the church of Mayyāfāriqīn, next to the grave of his brother Abū Saʿīd, mentioned<sup>6</sup> at the end of the *Book of Sessions*.<sup>7</sup>

2 V.B. Болотовъ, *Изъ исторіи Церкви сиро-персидскоѣ* [V.V. Bolotov, On the History of the Syro-Persian Church], *Христіанское чтеніе* 6 (1899), pp. 1196-1197 (repr.: V.B. Болотовъ, *Изъ исторіи Церкви сиро-персидскоѣ*. Saint Petersburg, 1901, pp. 126-127).

3 In the manuscript: *Bēth Nūhadran*.

4 *Eliae metropolitae Nisibeni Opus chronologicum*, ed. E.W. Brooks, I.-B. Chabot (CSCO 62-63; Syr, Ser 3, 7-8), Rome–Paris, 1909-1910, pp. 228-229.

5 كُتِبَ المَجَالِسُ لِمَارِ إِلْيَا مَطْرَانَ نَصِيْبِيْنَ وَرِسَالَتُهُ إِلَى الْوَزِيرِ الْكَامِلِ أَبِي الْقَاسِمِ الْحَسَنِ بْنِ عَلِيٍّ الْمَغْرِبِيِّ، تَحْقِيقُ نِيكُولَايْ كَاتِبِ الْمَجَالِسِ لِمَارِ إِلْيَا مَطْرَانَ نَصِيْبِيْنَ وَرِسَالَتُهُ إِلَى الْوَزِيرِ الْكَامِلِ أَبِي الْقَاسِمِ الْحَسَنِ بْنِ عَلِيٍّ الْمَغْرِبِيِّ، تَحْقِيقُ نِيكُولَايْ كَاتِبِ الْمَجَالِسِ، مَوْسُكُو، ١٤٣٩ هـ *Kitāb al-majālis li-Mār Iliyyā, muṭrān Nuṣaybīn, wa-risālatuhu ilā l-wazīr al-kāmil Abī l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-Maghribī*, taḥqīq Nikūlāy Siliznyūf [Book of Sessions by Mār Elias (Iliyyā), Metropolitan of Nisibis, and his Epistle to the Perfect Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-Maghribī, ed. N. Seleznyov], Moscow, 1439H/2017/8, p. 89.

6 كُتِبَ المَجَالِسُ، تَحْقِيقُ نِيكُولَايْ كَاتِبِ الْمَجَالِسِ، مَوْسُكُو، ١٤٣٩ هـ *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 157.

7 S.Kh. Samir, *Foi et culture en Irak au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle: Elie de Nisibe et l'Islam* (Variorum), Aldershot, 1996, Essay II, pp. 124-125.

The written heritage of Elias of Nisibis is extensive and multifaceted. His most popular works were the *Sessions* with the vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī and the treatise *Dissipation of Sorrow and Elimination of Anguish*<sup>8</sup> (*Kitāb Dafʿ al-hamm wa-muzīl al-ghamm*),<sup>9</sup> written at this vizier's request.<sup>10</sup> In addition to Elias' preoccupation with practical philosophy reflected in the *Kitāb Dafʿ al-hamm*, one can also notice his interest in apologetics attested in the *Book of the Proof of the True Faith* (*Kitāb al-burhān ʿalā ṣaḥīḥ al-īmān*)<sup>11</sup> and the epistles.<sup>12</sup> Besides, he composed treatises on such diverse subjects as history (his aforementioned *Chronography – Maktbānūtā d-zabnē* or *Kitāb al-azmina*)<sup>13</sup> – written in both Syriac and Arabic), grammar,<sup>14</sup> lexicography,<sup>15</sup> canon law,<sup>16</sup> and hymnography.<sup>17</sup>

The literary opponent of Elias, the vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-Maghribī was born in 981 CE. His family had served the Fāṭimids, but most of its members were killed in 1010 on the orders of the mentally unstable caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amri Llāh.<sup>18</sup> Abū l-Qāsim was the only survivor of this massacre. He fled to Palestine and attempted to start a rebellion, but with no success.

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- 8 Elia di Nisibi (975-1046), *Il libro per scacciare la preoccupazione (Kitāb Dafʿ al-hamm)*, ed. Kh. Samir [et al.] (Patrimonio culturale arabo cristiano, 9-10), Turin, 2007-2008.
- 9 See Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā's note in Samir, *Foi et culture en Irak au XIe siècle*, Essay II, pp. 124-125.
- 10 تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف، كتاب المجالس، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 165, 254, 259.
- 11 L. Horst, *Des Metropolitēn Elias von Nisibis Buch vom Beweis der Wahrheit des Glaubens*, Colmar, 1886.
- 12 J. P. Monferrer Sala, "Elias of Nisibis," *Christian-Muslim Relations*, ed. D. Thomas [et al.], Leiden–Boston, 2009– [in progress], vol. 2, pp. 733-736.
- 13 *Eliae metropolitae Nisibeni Opus chronologicum*, ed. E.W. Brooks, I.-B. Chabot; L.-J. Delaporte, *La Chronographie d'Élie Bar-Šinaya, métropolitain de Nisibe*, Paris, 1910.
- 14 *A Treatise on Syriac Grammar by Mār(i) Eliā of Šōbḥā*, ed. R. Gottheil, Berlin – London – New-York, 1887.
- 15 *Praetermissorum libri duo. كتاب الترجمان في تعليم لغة السريان Kitāb at-Tarjūmān fi taʿlīm lughat as-suryān*, ed. P. de Lagarde, Göttingen, 1879; A. McCollum, "Prolegomena to a New Edition of Eliya of Nisibis's *Kitāb al-turjūmān fi taʿlīm luḡat al-suryān*," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 58:2 (2013), pp. 297-322.
- 16 *The Nomocanon of Abdisho of Nisibis: A Facsimile Edition of MS 64 from the Collection of the Church of the East in Thrissur*, ed. I. Perczel (Syriac Manuscripts from Malabar, 1), Piscataway, 2005, pp. xv-xvi.
- 17 L. Basanese, "Le Cantique d'Élie de Nisibe (975-1046)," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 78:2 (2012), pp. 467-506.
- 18 *Ibn Challikani Vitae illustrium virorum*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen, 1835, fasc. 1, p. 138; *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, tr. Bn Mac Guckin de Slane, Paris, 1843, vol. 1, p. 452.

Thereafter, he fled again, this time to northern Mesopotamia, where he was granted asylum by Naṣr al-Dāwla Aḥmad ibn Marwān, the emir of Diyarbakır and Mayyāfariqīn, known for his patronage of intellectuals.<sup>19</sup> There, Abū l-Qāsim took up the post of a minister (*wazīr*), which he occupied until his death in 1027 CE.<sup>20</sup> He is known as the author of several works: on the correctness of speech, genealogy and history of Arab tribes, and state administration.<sup>21</sup> His treatise on state administration is, in fact, mentioned by Elias of Nisibis.<sup>22</sup> He also authored a commentary on the Qurʾān.<sup>23</sup> The famous Syrian poet Abū l-ʿAlāʾ Aḥmad al-Maʿarrī (973-1057), the vizier's younger contemporary, dedicated to him the final lines of his poetry collection *Necessity of What Is Not Necessary* (*Luzūm mā lā yalzam*).<sup>24</sup>

### The Book of Sessions and the Epistle

The content of the debates that took place between Elias and Abū l-Qāsim is transmitted in two substantially different versions: one of them is presented in

- 19 *Ibn Challikani Vitae illustrium virorum*, fasc. 1, p. 139; *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 454.
- 20 تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف، كتاب المجالس، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 158; *Ibn Challikani Vitae illustrium virorum*, fasc. 1, p. 139; *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 454.
- 21 Samir, *Foi et culture en Irak au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 1, p. [5]/259; P. Smoor, "Al-Maghribī, 4," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, Leiden, 1986, vol. 5, pp. 1211:2-1212:2.
- 22 كتاب في السياسة، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف، كتاب المجالس، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 166; *Kitāb fi l-siyāsa* [On Governance], *taʿlif al-wazīr al-kāmil Abī l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-Maghribī*, ed. Sāmī al-Dahhān, Damascus, 1948.
- 23 عبد الكريم بن صالح بن عبدالله الزهراني. المصاحح في تفسير القرآن العظيم للحسين بن علي المعروف بالوزير المغربي (ت. ٤١٨ هـ). دراسة وتحقيق، بحث مقدم لنيل درجة الدكتوراة. جامعة أم القرى، مكة، ١٤٢١هـ - ٢٠٠٠م (Abd al-Karīm ibn Ṣāliḥ ibn Ṣāliḥ ibn ʿAbdallāh al-Zahrānī, *Al-Maṣābiḥ fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm li-l-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-maʿrūf bi-l-Wazīr al-Maghribī* (t. 418 h) [Lamps of the Interpretation of the Great Qurʾān by al-Husayn ibn ʿAlī Known as Vizier al-Maghribī (d. 418 H)], PhD dissertation, Umm al-Qurā University, Mecca, 1421/2000; cf. مرتضى كريبى نيا، وزير مغربي و روش شناسی، *Morteẓā Karīmī Niyā, Vazīr-e Maghrebī va rūsh shenāsī-ye al-Maṣābiḥ fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān* [The Vizier al-Maghribī and the Methodology of His Lamps of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān], PhD dissertation, Tehran University, 1394sh/2015.
- 24 احسان عباس، الوزير المغربي أبو القاسم الحسين بن علي . . . دراسة في سيرته وأدبه مع ما تبقى من آثاره، عمان، ١٩٨٨ Iḥsān ʿAbbās, *Al-wazīr al-Maghribī Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī: Dirāsa fi siratihī wa-adabihī maʿa mā tabaqqā min āthārihi* [The Vizier al-Maghribī Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī: A Study of His Biography, Writings, and Heritage], Amman, 1988, p. 81.

the *Book of Sessions*, the other, in Elias' *Epistle* to the vizier. The *Book of Sessions* was first published in an abridged and uncritical edition by Louis Cheikho in 1922.<sup>25</sup> Afterwards, several sections of it were published by Samir Khalil Samir.<sup>26</sup> A complete critical edition of the *Book of Sessions*, along with an edition of Elias' *Epistle* to Abū l-Qāsim and some additional material, has been recently published by the present author.<sup>27</sup> It seems appropriate to offer a comparative survey of these texts here.

The first session (*majlis*) of the *Book of Sessions* consists of three main parts: a story about the healing that the vizier received in a monastery; theological and philosophical discussion in which Elias asserts that the confession of God as "one substance in three hypostases" contains no contradiction since his Word and Spirit are not accidental; and, finally, the explanation of the Christian doctrine characteristic of the Church of the East which distinguishes two entities in Christ: the divine (eternal, uncreated) and the human (created).

The first part of the first *majlis* – the vizier's healing story – is missing in the *Epistle*. One can only find allusions to this story in the following impersonal phrases of Elias: "If something happens to one of them [non-Christians] or he suffers any evil, such as illness or something else, then he appeals to them [Christians] for help and benefits from this" and if he "enters a monastery, he will live."<sup>28</sup>

The second, theological and philosophical part of the first *majlis* is presented in the *Epistle* with the same argument: the confession of God being "one substance in three hypostases" contains no contradiction, because substance (*jawhar*) ought to be understood as "that which subsists in itself" (*qā'im bi-nafsihi*), while hypostases (*aqānīm*) should be interpreted in the sense that God is "living by a life and speaking by speech," and since "the Creator's self does not admit of accidents," His Word (speech) and Spirit (life) are not accidental. To the vizier's objection that such an imagery is anthropomorphic, Elias responds that, similarly, many Qur'ānic verses contain anthropomorphic imagery.<sup>29</sup>

25 (1922) 20 المشرق L. Shaykhū, "Majālis ʿIlīyā, muṭrān Nuṣaybīn," *al-Mashriq* 20 (1922), pp. 34-44, 112-122, 267-272, 366-377, 425-434.

26 See bibliography in Monferrer Sala, "Elias of Nisibis," p. 732. Martino Diez, "The Profession of Monotheism by Elias of Nisibis: An Edition and Translation of the Fifth Session of the *Kitāb al-majālis*," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28.4 (2017): 493-514 (on p. 513, Diez thanks Samir for providing him with a typewritten copy of the *Majālis*).

27 *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov. تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف

28 *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 216-217. تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف

29 *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 28-29, 174-175; 261-262. تحقيق نيكولاى al-Qur'ān 11:37/39; 20:40; 5:64/69; 68:42; 2:115/109; 2:210/206; تحقيق نيكولاى

The third part of the first *majlis* is presented in the *Epistle* in an abridged form: the history of the condemnation, by the catholicos of the Church of the East ʿĪmātēʿōs I, of the mystics who argued that the human hypostasis of Christ could see His divine hypostasis omitted.<sup>30</sup> To the mystics, vision of God implied transformation of the visionary into divinity (what one might call “deification”), for only God sees Himself. Paradoxically, based on the same assumption – that vision of God is available only to God Himself – ʿĪmātēʿōs and the mystics’ other opponents denied the possibility of a human vision of God, because they rejected as impious the idea that a created being could be transformed so as to become uncreated. In the *Epistle*, we find only a few quotations from the New Testament pertaining to the invisibility of God (including “No one has ever seen God”).<sup>31</sup> On the basis of these quotations, Elias argues that Christians do not associate God with “anything but Himself” and are, consequently, entirely committed to monotheism (*tawḥīd*).

It is noteworthy that in Louis Cheikho’s abridged edition of the *Book of Sessions*, based on inferior manuscripts, the whole section emphasizing the distinction between the created and the uncreated and the story of ʿĪmātēʿōs’ condemnation of the mystics were omitted.<sup>32</sup>

In the second session (*majlis*), the theme of Christology is developed further. The main subject is the concept of indwelling (*ḥulūl*) of divinity in humanity and the special character of God’s indwelling in Christ. This section of the disputation with some differences (notably, the presence of Christian apocryphal legends in quotations from Ibn al-Kalbī’s *Tafsīr*<sup>33</sup> in the *Epistle*) is present in both the *Book of Sessions* and the *Epistle*. However, the problem of a theologically motivated removal of a part of the text is also manifest in this

30 Болотовъ, *Изъ исторіи Церкви сиро-персидскоі* [Bolotov, On the History of the Syro-Persian Church], p. 1185 (repr.: p. 115); A. Treiger, “Could Christ’s Humanity See His Divinity? An Eighth-Century Controversy between John of Dalyatha and Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 9 (2009), pp. 3-21.

31 1 John 4:12; تحقیق نیکولای سیلیزنیوف، *کتاب المجالس*, *Kitāb al-majālīs*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 199.

32 1 John 4:12; تحقیق نیکولای سیلیزنیوف، *کتاب المجالس*, *Kitāb al-majālīs*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 199.  
32 مجالس ایلیا مطران نصیبین، *مجالس ایلیا مطران نصیبین* (تحقیق)، *مجالس ایلیا مطران نصیبین*, Shaykhū, “Majālīs ʿĪliyyā, muṭṭrān Nuṣaybīn,” pp. 33-44. A critical edition of the first *majlis* was published by Samir Khalil Samir: Kh. Samir, “Entretien d’Elie de Nisibe avec le vizir al-Maghribī sur l’Unité et la Trinité,” *Islamochristiana* 5 (1979), pp. 31-117; French translation based on good manuscripts: E.-K. Dely, *La Théologie d’Elie bar-Sénaya. Etude et traduction de ses Entretiens*, Rome, 1957, pp. 65-78; Spanish translation: F. del Río Sánchez, “Un debate entre Elías de Nisibe y el visir Ibn ‘Alī al-Magribī (417H-1026 d. C.),” *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 1 (2003), pp. 163-183.

33 تحقیق نیکولای سیلیزنیوف، *کتاب المجالس*, *Kitāb al-majālīs*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 185.

case: the discussion of God's indwelling in Christ is omitted both in a number of manuscripts of the *Book of Sessions* and in Cheikho's edition.<sup>34</sup>

It is worth mentioning that in Christian theological terminology, the concept of indwelling is based on the following words from the prologue of the Gospel of John: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt in us" (John 1:14). In some Arabic translations used at that time, the words *καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν* ("and dwelt in us") were translated as *wa-ḥalla fīnā*. This translation can also be found in the commentary on John 1:14 by Elias of Nisibis' contemporary Abū l-Faraj 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Ṭayyib al-'Irāqī (d. 1043).<sup>35</sup> The image of the indwelling of God's Word in mankind similar to His dwelling in the temple (cf. John 2:19) was frequently used by Syrian authors, both in Syriac and in Greek (in particular, Theodore of Mopsuestia).<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, opponents of the Antiochene Christological tradition found this indwelling imagery to be "Nestorian" and renounced it.<sup>37</sup> Evidence of this can be seen in the text of the second *majlis*: according to Elias, it is only the Church of the East, but not the other two Christian denominations (the Jacobites and the Melkites) that uses the concept of indwelling (*ḥulūl*). This is because it is only the Church of the East that draws a consistent distinction between the divinity and the humanity of Christ; for this reason, the concept of indwelling is appropriate for it, while the other two denominations emphasize Christ's divinity to such an extent ("Christ is God") that the concept of indwelling is no longer acceptable for them. There is no doubt that the omission, in some manuscripts of the *Book of Sessions* and in Cheikho's edition, of precisely this section of the second *majlis*, in which Elias

34 Н.Н. Селезнев, «И вселился в ны»: Боговселение (*al-ḥulūl*) в мусульманско-христианском диалоге – Илия Нисивинский и Абū-л-Қасим ал-Мағрибī” [N.N. Seleznyov, “And Dwelt in Us’: Divine Inhabitation (*al-ḥulūl*) in Muslim-Christian Disputation – Elias of Nisibis and Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī”], *Христианский Восток* 8 (14) (2017), pp. 297-312.

35 ١٩١٠. القاهرة. يوسف منقريوس، تفسير المشرقي ابي القس ابو الفرج للاربعه اناجيل، القاهرة، ١٩١٠. Y. Manqariyūs, *Tafsīr al-Mashriqī, ay al-qass Abū [sic] l-Faraj, li-l-arba‘at anājil* [A Commentary on the Four Gospels by the Oriental <Author> i.e. Priest Abū l-Faraj], Cairo, 1910, vol. 2, pp. 387-388; see also manuscripts: Cairo, St. Mark Cathedral Library, لا هوت 28, fol. 259v-260r (*sub loco*); Cairo, St. Mark Cathedral Library, لا هوت 29, fol. 261v-262r (*sub loco*).

36 Н. Селезнев, *Христология Ассирийской Церкви Востока* [N. Seleznyov, *The Christology of the Assyrian Church of the East*], Moscow, 2002, pp. 31-32, 39, 47, 56-57, 63-64, 84-86, 88; A. Treiger, “Al-Ghazālī’s ‘Mirror Christology’ and Its Possible East-Syriac Sources,” *Muslim World* 101.4 (2011), pp. 698-713, esp. p. 704 (the article also traces the idea of *ḥulūl* in Muslim sources).

37 A. Treiger, “The Christology of the *Letter from the People of Cyprus*,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 65.1-2 (2013), pp. 21-48.

clearly subscribes to the doctrine of indwelling, is due to theologically motivated censorship.

In his emphasis on the duality in Christ – or, in other words, on the total “otherness” of the created in relation to the uncreated – Elias likely pursued two goals at once. First, by drawing an emphatic distinction between the humanity of Christ on the one hand and God the Word on the other, the latter dwelling in the former with an excellent “dignity, contentment, and will” (“and holiness,” according to the *Epistle*), he seeks to justify, in the eyes of his Muslim interlocutor, not only the confession of his Church, but also the very concept of God’s indwelling, often deemed suspect in Islamic thought. Second, Elias seeks to present his own denomination in a favorable light as compared to the Christology of his theological opponents: the Jacobites and the Melkites. His polemic with these two Christian communities is, therefore, far from accidental.

The third session (*majlis*) – “Concerning the Proof of the Monotheism of the Christians from the Qur’ān” – is found, with some discrepancies, both in the *Book of Sessions* and in the *Epistle*. In the *Epistle*, it is preceded by an argument that the Qur’ānic accusation that Christians are polytheists is either meant literally and is, therefore, erroneous (with the implication that the Qur’ān is wrong – something that Elias’ Muslim opponent cannot acknowledge) or is meant to be interpreted allegorically.<sup>38</sup> Following this argument, New Testament quotations are adduced to confirm the monotheistic belief of the Christians of the Church of the East.<sup>39</sup> Both the argument and the quotations are omitted in the *Book of Sessions*. Also in the *Epistle*, Elias quotes several statements by Muslim Qur’ān commentators. Elias draws them from Abū Ja’far al-Ṭabarī, whose *Tafsīr* he quotes frequently and at length. The *Epistle* refers to “readings of Ibn Mas’ūd”,<sup>40</sup> in the *Book of Sessions*, however, these quotations are omitted. The following two sections in the *Epistle* concerning the Christians’ obedience to Muslims, which exceeds their obedience to other rival communities, and concerning the mutual conformity of the Muslim and Christian laws are present in the *Book of Sessions*: the section on obedience is placed at the very end of the book, and the section on laws is included in the third *majlis* in an abbreviated form (in particular, references to three founders of the main schools of Muslim law – al-Shāfi‘ī, Mālik and Abū Ḥanīfa – are omitted).<sup>41</sup>

Anti-Jewish polemical passages, both in this section of the text and in many other places, were removed and are mostly absent from the *Book of Sessions*.

38 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاي سيليزنيوف، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 195-196.

39 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاي سيليزنيوف، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 197-200.

40 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاي سيليزنيوف، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 203.

41 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاي سيليزنيوف، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 226-228.

They were evidently intended for the vizier himself, who was interested in the subject,<sup>42</sup> but were no longer useful in the *Book of Sessions*.

The fourth *majlis* of the *Book of Sessions* – “On the Confirmation of the Christian Faith by Both Intellectual [Argumentation] and the Divine Miracle[s]” – is not found in the *Epistle*. The first section seems to be an abridgment of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq’s (809-873/7) treatise *How to Comprehend the Truth of a Religion (Kayfyat idrāk ḥaqīqat al-dīyāna)*.<sup>43</sup> Elias’ acquaintance with Ḥunayn’s works is evidenced by the text of the sixth session, where Elias mentions Ḥunayn’s *Kitāb al-nuqaṭ*.<sup>44</sup> The second section of the fourth *majlis* is a story about Elias’ teacher Yūḥannā, a clairvoyant elder. This story was evidently designed to show that the events in a Christian’s life are governed by God’s providence.

In the fifth *majlis* of the *Book of Sessions* Elias outlines his creed as well as lists theological views rejected by the Christian community that he represents. Both elements are found also in the *Epistle*, except that Elias’ emphatically monotheistic creed is located at the very beginning of the *Epistle*, whereas the list of rejected views is provided considerably later, approximately in the middle of the text.

The sixth *majlis*, containing a comparative analysis of syntax, lexicography, calligraphy, kalām (*‘ilm al-kalām*), i.e., the art of argumentation, and logic among the Arabs and the Syrians, is completely absent from the text of the *Epistle*. This “debate” looks like an artificial addition – the vizier would have hardly endorsed a conversation about the Syriac language, especially given that Elias insists on the superiority of Syriac over Arabic.<sup>45</sup>

In the seventh *majlis* of the *Book of Sessions*, Elias refutes the validity of the “decrees of the stars” (*aḥkām al-nujūm*, i.e., astrology), examines the issue of

42 ١٩٦١، دمشق، إعتاب الكتاب، إعتاب الإبار، أبو عبد الله محمد بن الإبار، Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn al-Abbār [1199-1260], *Itāb al-kuttāb* [Contentment of the Secretaries], Damascus, 1961, p. 206 (Ibn al-Abbār mentions a treatise against Jews by Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī); P. Sbath, *Bibliothèque de manuscrits*, Cairo, 1934, vol. 3, p. 11 (Abū l-Qāsim asks for Elias’ opinion about the Jews).

43 Н.Н. Селезнев, “Ибо их Писание повелевает...”: Четвертая беседа Илии, митрополита Нисивина, и везира Абу-л-Касима ал-Магриби” [N.N. Seleznyov, “For Their Scriptures Command...”: The Fourth Debate Between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī], *Вестник Санкт-Петербургского Государственного Университета*, Ser. 9, 4 (2015), pp. 57-65.

44 كُتُبُ المَجَالِسِ، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 124, 127.

45 D. Bertaina, “Science, Syntax, and Superiority in Eleventh-Century Christian-Muslim Discussion: Elias of Nisibis on the Arabic and Syriac Languages,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22.2 (2011), pp. 197-207.

Christian-Muslim relations, and offers an account of the nature of the soul. In the *Epistle*, the anti-astrological section is expanded, and the discussion of Christian-Muslim relations is incorporated in the third *majlis*, in the section on the obedience of Christians to Muslims and the mutual conformity of Muslim and Christian laws. The *Epistle* contains no detailed discussion of the soul; it mentions only that the view that the soul is an accident and not a substance is characteristic of the Jews, whereas the opposite view is characteristic of the Sabians.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, at the end of the *Book of Sessions*, the vizier asks Elias to call on the monks to pray for him. Subsequently, an account of subsequent meetings and communications between the metropolitan and the vizier is provided. It also includes details of a conversation between Elias and his brother (who was a doctor who looked after Abū l-Qāsim) and of the vizier's death (on 15 October 1027). It is mentioned that the *Book of Sessions* was approved (effectively, given the "*nihil obstat*") by Abū l-Faraj 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Ṭayyib.<sup>47</sup> None of this, of course, is found in the text of the *Epistle*.

### The Sevenfold Structure of the *Book of Sessions*

In the *Book of Sessions*, the debates between Elias and the vizier are presented as having taken place in the summer 1026, immediately following their initial meeting in Nisibis. The encounters are presented as a series of seven extensive dialogues, and the *Book of Sessions* itself is supposed to be a transcript of these dialogues, which is why it comprises seven "sessions."

However, when one reads Elias' *Epistle* as well as the vizier's letter that preceded it<sup>48</sup> and the vizier's subsequent response,<sup>49</sup> the picture appears in a completely different light. The anonymous Coptic scribe who authored an abridged version of the *Epistle*<sup>50</sup> has reconstructed the events as follows. In this introduction, he writes, following the structure of the *Book of Sessions*, that after the initial meeting between the metropolitan and the vizier in Nisibis,

46 تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف، كتاب المجالس، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 239.

47 The see of the Catholics of the East was vacant at the time (تحقيق نيكولاى)، كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 159-160), and thus the approval was given by the highest authority: the catholicos' secretary; Болотовъ, *Изъ истории Церкви сироперсудскої* [Bolotov, *On the History of the Syro-Persian Church*], p. 1197 (repr.: p. 127).

48 Sbath, *Bibliothèque de manuscrits*, vol. 3, pp. 10-12.

49 تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف، كتاب المجالس، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 255-259.

50 Published in: تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف، كتاب المجالس، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 260-263.

they held several meetings, “up to seven sessions.” “Then,” he continues, “the aforementioned vizier left Nisibis for his residence and pondered over what he had talked about with the aforementioned metropolitan; and [because] some things from the discussion were difficult for him [to accept], he sent him a letter,”<sup>51</sup> asking for clarification. In response, Elias sent him the detailed *Epistle*.

This purported reconstruction, however, proves to be inadequate, since large sections of the *Epistle* and the *Book of Sessions* are identical. Given that the *Epistle* repeats sections of the *Book of Sessions* verbatim, it was certainly not intended as a clarification of the *Book of Sessions*. Moreover, it is evident from the vizier’s first letter to the metropolitan that the vizier was dissatisfied with what he had previously heard about Christianity from some (other) learned Christians, whereas from Elias, on the contrary, he expects to receive satisfactory responses to his perplexities; he also expresses his desire that these responses be as brief as possible. It is obvious that by the time of writing he had already communicated with Elias. For example, he asks Elias to send him “what he had written in refutation of al-Jāḥiẓ” (*mā ‘amilahu fī l-radd ‘alā l-Jāḥiẓ*) and expresses a desire to read Elias’ *Dissipation of Sorrow*,<sup>52</sup> which Elias had promised to send the vizier because of the latter’s anguished state of mind, as becomes clear from the vizier’s subsequent letter.<sup>53</sup>

It seems more plausible that after Elias’ initial meeting with Abū l-Qāsim, they did not have the kind of long and sophisticated discussions of theological and ethical matters that we find in the *Book of Sessions*, but rather touched on a number of topics of interest to the vizier. Subsequently, the metropolitan would have promised to respond to the vizier in writing in further detail.<sup>54</sup> The vizier must have departed to his residence in Mayyāfāriqīn. Soon thereafter, he would have received a gift from Elias – a kind of “calculator of feast days and the beginning of years and months.”<sup>55</sup> Intrigued by this and wishing to hear more, the vizier replied by expressing gratitude and requesting both additional information about the calculation system and answers to the questions previously touched upon.<sup>56</sup> This was followed by Elias’ *Epistle* with the promised answers. Neither the treatise on the dissipation of sorrow nor the “refutation of al-Jāḥiẓ” seems to have been ready at the time.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, as can be seen

51 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 260.

52 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 165.

53 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 258-259.

54 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 104.

55 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 165.

56 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 164-165.

57 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 252-253.

from Abū l-Qāsim's response, the *Epistle* pleased him, and he immediately shared it with some of his co-religionists.<sup>58</sup> Elias, too, shared it with his own co-religionists,<sup>59</sup> and it is in this way that the *Epistle*, together with the vizier's preceding and following letters, became an important event in the history of Christian-Muslim polemical literature. Subsequently, additional meetings and conversations must have taken place. Elias mentions the subjects discussed at these meetings towards the end of the *Book of Sessions*.<sup>60</sup> A year after their initial meeting, the vizier Abū l-Qāsim died.<sup>61</sup> After his death, Elias created a new version of the disputations, omitting what was no longer relevant and adding elements that would not have been appropriate before: "self-narratives" – i.e., personal stories of various kinds<sup>62</sup> – and emphatically apologetic texts. The result was a new work, arranged in a more orderly way and divided into seven sessions, an arrangement in which influence of the *maqāma* genre with its literary reworking of actual life situations can be recognized. Being a historian who authored the *Chronography*, Elias keyed each *majlis* to the actual chronology of his meetings with the vizier. It is in this way that having been reworked according to the laws of literature, the *Epistle* was transformed into the *Book*.

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- 58 "A group of scholars, experts in the Qur'ān" is mentioned in the vizier's second letter (كتاب تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف المجالس، *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 255), and "Qāḍī Abū Ya'lā al-mutakallim" is mentioned in the introduction to the fifth *majlis* (كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, p. 94).
- 59 Al-Mu'taman Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn al-'Assāl mentions that "this *Epistle* is widespread and well known" – see مجموع أصول الدين ومسموع محصول اليقين، العسال، المؤمن بن العسال al-Mu'taman Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn al-'Assāl, *Majmū' usūl al-dīn wa-masmū' maḥṣūl al-yaqīn* [Summa of the Foundations of Religion and of the Traditions (lit. What was Heard) of Reliable Knowledge], ed. A. Wadi [=W. Abullif] (Studia Orientalia Christiana; Monographiae, 6a-9), Cairo–Jerusalem, 1998, vol. 6a, p. 309.
- 60 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 158-159.
- 61 كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 158. The words "May God have mercy on him!" following the vizier's name in the *Book of Sessions* also point to his death (كتاب المجالس، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف، تحقيق نيكولاى سيليزنيوف، ed. Seleznyov, p. 2).
- 62 D.F. Reynolds [et al.], *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, Berkeley, 2001.