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Книга собеседований Илии, митрополита Нисивина, с везиром Абӯ-л-Қасимом ал-Ҳусайном ибн ‘Али ал-Мағрибӣ и *Послание* митрополита Илии везиру Абӯ-л-Қасиму, Национальный Исследовательский Университет Высшая Школа Экономики, Институт Классического Востока и Античности, Москва: Грифон, 2017/2018. كتاب المجالس لمار إليا مطران نصيبين ورسالته إلى الوزير الكامل أبي القاسم الحسين بن علي المغربي تحقيق الدكتور نيكولاي سيليزنيوف موسكو ١٤٣٩ هـ

N.N. Seleznyov (ed.)

The *Book of Sessions* by Elias, the Metropolitan of Nisibis <which he had> with the vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Mağribī and the *Letter* of the Metropolitan Elias to the vizier Abū l-Qāsim, National Research University «Higher School of Economics», Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies, Moscow: Grifon, 2017/2018 (Arabic text and Russian translation) 476 p.: 208 + ٢٦٨, ISBN 978-5-98862-366-3 + 978-5-98862-367-0 (two volumes); 978-5-98862-371-7 (one-volume edition).

In the year 1026 AD, the Nestorian Elias Bar Šināyā, metropolitan of Nisibis (today Nusaybin in South-East Turkey) from 1008 till his death in 1046, held several sessions (Arab. *mağālīs*)¹ concerning the Christian faith and some other topics with the Muslim Iraqi vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Mağribī (981-1027) shortly before the latter's death in 1027. In response to Abū l-Qāsim's written request for more detailed explanation of a number of questions discussed, Elias sent him a long letter in Arabic in which he granted the vizier's wish. After his interlocutor's death, Elias revised the letter giving it the form of seven "sessions" and adjusting some less important details. Judging by the number of available manuscripts,² both the *Letter* and the *Book of Sessions* enjoyed wide circulation among Arabic speaking Christians from the 11th century onward, and their historical value as two pieces of Christian apologetics written in the Abbasid Caliphate is likewise considerable. Yet, only the

1 Cf. the definition of *mağlis* (the singular form of *mağālīs*) by S.H. Griffith, "The Monk in the Emir's *Majlis*: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period," in: *The Majlis. Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, ed. H. Lazarus-Yafeh et al. (Studies in Arabic Language and Literature, 4), Wiesbaden, 1999, p. 13: "A prominent institution in the intellectual life of the early Islamic community was the *majlis*, a salon-like session in a caliph's or an emir's court, in which scholars were often summoned for debate (*jadal*) and disputation (*munāẓarah*) about the important religious issues of the day."

2 The critical edition is based on 15 Arabic and Garshuni manuscripts, see their description on p. 24–30. To this number some more shall be added, cf. p. 29, n. 1 and 2. Seleznyov does not say how many they are and why they could not be used.

Arabic original and the French translation of the first, sixth, and seventh (with omissions) sessions by Samir K. Samir were at the general public's disposal.³ This regrettable gap has been filled by the publication under review.

Seleznyov brings his readers face-to-face with the all pertinent texts around vizier's and metropolitan's conversations. Besides the critical edition of the *Book of Sessions* and Elias' *Letter*, the volume provides the vizier's initial letter which triggered Elias' apologetic activity, his thank-you note written after reading the metropolitan's *Letter*, and the Arabic introduction to the short version of the latter. The Russian part of the book supplies translations of all Arabic texts with short explanatory notes, a valuable introduction, a bibliography, and several indices in Russian and English – Biblical quotations, Koranic quotations, names, and general – encompassing both text and translation.

Given that Elias of Nisibis was one of the most outstanding Eastern Christian writers of the 11th century, and his *Book of Sessions* brought the genre of *mağlis* to its full development, the choice of text can only be commended: both for the Russian and the general readers Seleznyov makes available an important source, the study of which opens a whole range of intriguing possibilities. In a general context, the edition and translation of the Elias' apologetic works are to be seen as a new significant contribution to the resources for the study of the Arabic Christianity – a much neglected area within the Church history.⁴ Furthermore, the *Book of Sessions* and Elias' *Letter* provide valuable evidence about relations between Muslims and Syriac Nestorian⁵ Christians in the early Islamic period,⁶ a relation which had quite idiosyncratic dynamics in com-

3 S.K. Samir, *Foi et culture en Irak au XIe siècle. Élie de Nisibe et l'Islam* (Variorum Collected Studies Series, 544), Aldershot et al., 1996, N° VII, XI, x. Cf. the Spanish translation of the first session, 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 (2004), pp. 163–183. The edition of the Arabic text of all seven sessions by L. Cheikho, "Mağālis Īliyyā muṭrān Naṣībīn," *المشرق*, 20 (1922), pp. 35–34, 112–122, 267–272, 366–377, 425–434 is not commonly available and omits parts of the text.

4 Cf. a recent ground-breaking publication in this area: S. Noble, A. Treiger (eds), *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World 700–1700. An Anthology of Sources*, DeKalb, 2014.

5 In the sense of a small contribution to the modern discussion concerning the appropriateness of the term "Nestorian(s)" in scholarly discourse (cf. S.P. Brock, "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 78 (1996), pp. 23–35) one can observe that Elias does not avoid using this word as the self-designation of his coreligionists along with the matter-of-fact names of the adversaries of his church such as Jacobites and Melkites, cf. p. ۳۷, 52; ۵۸, 62; ۱۹۱, 133. What is more, it seems to be a customary term in the Church of the East of that time, cf. the Chronicle of Seert, *PO* 4,3 (1907), p. 295.9.

6 Cf. the new sourcebook covering this subject by M.Ph. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims. A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam*, Oakland, 2015.

parison with Syriac, Greek or Arabic Melkites and Jacobites.⁷ Apart from the anti-Islamic apologetics, Elias provides some information on subjects Abū l-Qāsim was interested in, e.g. a comparison of Syriac and Arabic grammar, syntax, and written script (Session 6), or Christian views on astrology (Session 7); of special interest are Elias' remarks concerning the Jews and their place in Christian-Muslim relations (cf. e.g. *Letter*, ٢١٨-٢٢٠, 150-151).

Among the apologetic topics Elias focused upon are the unity and trinity of God (Session 1), the incarnation and relation between the human and divine nature in Christ (Session 2), Christian monotheism according to the Koran (Session 3), the role of reason and miracles in the Christian faith (Session 4), and Elias' profession of monotheism (Session 5). At the end of the seventh *maḡlis*, Elias gives an account about the ecclesiastical approval of the *Book of Sessions*, which suggests that he intended it for reading in the congregations of his church.

In the following, I will briefly refer only to one point – partly touched upon in the Introduction by Seleznyov – which offers a fascinating prospect for further research of issues connected with Elias' works. In the second Session, the metropolitan suggests twice (٢٧, 52; ٥٨, 62) that Nestorian Christology is better compatible with the Muslim understanding of God and Christ than that of the Jacobite or Melkite faiths. Elias elaborates on this idea further in his *Demonstration of the Correctness of the Faith*, a treatise showing, among other things, that presentations of Nestorian Christology before Muslims authorities clearly did have a political dimension.⁸ In this regard, Elias follows the tradition of the Nestorian catholicos Isho'yahb III (649-659) and Timothy I (779/780-823), who claimed special treatment of the Nestorians in the Muslim world in recognition of their genuine Christology being much closer to the Koran than that of the other two Christian confessions.⁹

Intriguingly, when presenting Nestorian Christology, Elias mentions an ecclesiastical council held by the catholicos Timothy, at which some proponents

7 Cf. e.g. a collection of Byzantine anti-Islamic writings in Russian translation: *Византийские сочинения об исламе (тексты переводов и комментарии)* / Под редакцией Ю.В. Максимова [*Byzantine Writings about Islam (Translations and Commentaries)*], ed. Y.V. Maximov], Moscow, 2006, 2012.

8 L. Horst (transl.), *Des Metropolitens Elias von Nisibis Buch vom Beweis der Wahrheit des Glaubens*, Colmar, 1886, pp. 41–49.

9 Cf. R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it. A Survey and Evaluation of the Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 13), Princeton, 2007, p. 179 and Timothy, *Disputation with the Caliph al-Mahdī 20:1–9*, in: M. Heimgartner (ed., transl.), *Timotheos I., ostsyrischer Patriarch: Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Magdi* (CSCO 631/632, Syr. 244/245), Louvain, 2011, pp. 156–158 (Syriac text), 105–106 (German translation).

of the teaching saying that the man Jesus born from Mary could, can or will see the Eternal Word of God, had been condemned (Session 1, ٣٣-٣٤, 50-51). The metropolitan has in view the council convoked by Timothy in the year 786/787 and the Syriac mystics John of Dalyatha, Joseph Hazzaya, and John the Solitary it had banned.¹⁰ Elias confirms that the man “received from Mary”, notwithstanding his union with God, is not and will not be able to see the Logos. He emphasizes that God – according to this Nestorian teaching – does not and will not have a human companion (i.e. Christ’s human hypostasis) in His perennial self-contemplation. Using the root *š-r-k* for denying the idea of God’s companion, Elias clearly alludes to the Koran¹¹ and Muslim anti-Christian polemics, which heavily criticized the establishment of any “partners” at God’s side.

Elias’ reception of the council of 786/787 as well as the council itself, provide a vivid example of how Nestorian Christological teaching could be applied practically. When claiming two natures (*kyānē*) and two hypostases (*qnūmē*) united in one person (*paršūpā*) of the Son of God,¹² the Nestorian theologians conceived Deity and humanity in Christ divided enough to preclude any real interaction with God – in this case, the contemplation of the Divine – on the part of the human hypostasis. Speaking of Jesus’ humanity as a mere man born from Mary, united with the Logos but not being God in the proper sense of the word, Elias adjusted the teaching of his church to the Muslim understanding of Jesus more than a Jacobite or Melkite theologian would be able to do in this regard.

Before coming to the general evaluation of the book, one can point out some minor shortcomings, most of which have to do with the explanation of the text being sometimes less elaborated than expected. Just a few examples would suffice. Different from the Arabic original, where references to the Koran

10 Apart from sources indicated by Seleznyov (p. 51, n. 1), one can refer to S.K. Samir, “Le premier Entretien d’Élie de Nisibe avec le vizir Ibn ‘Alī al-Mağribī, sur l’unité et la Trinité,” in: *ibid.*, *Foi et culture en Irak* (see n. 3), N° VII, pp. 38–39, who provides a chronology of the condemnation and its reception in Syriac literature. For Syriac and Arabic texts of some relevant documents and their German translations, see N. Kavvadas, *Isaak von Ninive und seine Kephalaia Gnostica. Die Pneumatologie und ihr Kontext* (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 128), Leiden – Boston, 2015, pp. 8–11.

11 Cf. e.g. Q 4:48 and Q 39:65, where the same root is used which, in this context, means ascribing “partners” to God or making anything else equal to Him. Q 5:72 applies the root *š-r-k* to Christians believing that Christ is God.

12 Cf. e.g. F.G. McLeod, “Theodore of Mopsuestia’s Understanding of Two *Hypostaseis* and Two *Prosōpa* Coinciding in One Common *Prosōpon*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 18 (2010), pp. 425–451 and M. Metselaar, “The Mirror, the Qnoma, and the Soul: Another Perspective on the Christological Formula of Babai the Great,” *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, 19 (2015), pp. 331–366.

in the footnotes are preceded by the letter Q (= Qurʾān) all but one (p. 151, n. 1) such references in the translation lack this or an equivalent Russian indication. In note 1 on page 168, one can learn that the two Arabic astronomical terms *al-qirānāt al-kibār* and *taḥāwīl sunī-l-ʿālam* used by Elias were often parts of the titles of Arabic books of astronomy. Yet, their exact meanings are not explained. In the introductory part of the *Book of Sessions*, Elias dedicates his work to a certain Abū l-ʿAlā Ṣāʿid ibn Sahl, whom he calls “brother”. On the pages ١٥٧-١٥٩, ١١٠-١١١ Elias’ own brother, the physician Abū Ṣāʿid, is mentioned. Since no comment on the identity of these two people is given, one might doubt whether or not Elias dedicated the *Book of Sessions* to his biological brother. In the translation, the names of almost all Biblical figures are rendered according to the Christian tradition, i.e. Моисей for Moses, Мария for Mary etc., yet, without any explanation in the main text, Enoch is called Идрис (Idris, e.g. p. 126), a Muslim rendering of Enoch’s name not necessarily familiar to those not acquainted with Muslim tradition. On the other hand, not every Christian user of Seleznyov’s book would dispense with an explanation of the name Шимʿун Кефа (Šimʿūn Kefa, p. 110, designating the apostle Peter) which is likewise missing. Though needed information about the names can be found in the indices, one might miss it in the translated text. In some cases, references to obvious biblical allusions are missing, e.g. to Lk 1:42 on the p. ١٨٥/129. Some more information as to the exact principles of the edition and the mutual relations of the manuscripts used in the sense of a stemma would satisfy those interested in textual criticism.

Considering the book as a whole, one can stress that the main achievement of Seleznyov’s work lies in editing and translating a major group of related Christian Oriental texts of considerable length and significance which were not available beforehand. This should be appreciated as an important step in the development of Eastern Christian studies and the history of Christian-Muslim relations in modern Russia and beyond.

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