“ELIAS GEVERI OF DAMASCUS”
IN RUSSIAN STUDIES
OF CHURCH HISTORY:
A WITNESS TO THE TWO-FINGER SIGN
OF THE CROSS IN A MEDIEVAL
TREATISE ON DENOMINATIONS
OF SYRIAN CHRISTIANITY

The cultural heritage of Middle-Eastern Christianity was so influential in the rest of the Christian world that it frequently attracted the attention of scholars studying particular church traditions. It is not surprising, therefore, that Middle-Eastern Christian practices became an intriguing subject for historians of the origins of the Russian “Old Believers,” a movement which itself frequently referred to some Middle-Eastern Christian practices as proofs of the truthfulness of its own tradition. One such episode invoking early Middle-Eastern evidence for making the sign of the cross deserves a special inquiry.

In 1847, in the Colloquia of the Imperial Society for Russian History and Antiquities at the University of Moscow, Philaret Gumilevskiy (1805–1866), who was then the bishop of Riga, published his study The Worship of the Russian Church in the Pre-Mongolian Period.1 Concerning the various ways of making the sign of the cross, Bishop Philaret cited a Middle-Eastern Christian author who had touched on the subject in his treatise: “The Nestorian author Elias of Damascus who lived in the late ninth century, intending to reconcile the Syrian Monophysites with the Orthodox and the Nestorians, wrote as follows: ‘As to the fact that they do not agree with each other in making the sign of the cross, this is not an obstacle at all. Some of them, for instance, make the sign of the cross with one finger and move the hand from the left side of the body to the right. Others do it with two fingers, and do so from the right side to the

(1) ФИЛАРЕТ [ГУМИЛЕВСКИЙ], еп. Рижский, “Богослужение Русской Церкви до монгольского времени” [Divine Service of the Russian Church before the Mongols’ Time], ЧИОИДР, 7 (1847), с. 1–42.
left... Jacobites sign themselves with one finger. By making the sign of the cross with two fingers, from right to left, Nestorians and Melkites (Orthodox) confess the faith that the divinity and the humanity <of Christ> were united while on the cross’ (Assemani Bibl. Orient, T. 3, pt. 2, p. 383).”2 This testimony was taken, as the author clearly indicated, from the famous encyclopedic work of the Maronite scholar Joseph Simon Assemani (1687–1768), the Bibliotheca orientalis, even though the reference provided was imprecise, and the other part of the Bibliotheca orientalis where Assemani had discussed this passage in more detail along with the parallel Arabic quotations, was not referenced at all.3

This testimony, introduced by bishop Philaret into Russian studies of Church history, drew both criticism and lively interest.4 In 1870, archimandrite Nikanor (Brovkovich) (1826/7–1890/1), subsequently archbishop of Kherson and Odessa, published his study, entitled The Church of St. Sophia in Constantinople: A Witness to the Ancient Orthodox Sign of the Cross. Being an expert in Latin and a polemicist, he enthusiastically translated and commented on the quotations from the treatise De concordia Fidei “by Elias of Damascus, Metropolitan of the Nestorian community,” found in Assemani’s Bibliotheca orientalis.5 Following Assemani’s account, Nikanor wrote, “Who was this Elias of Damascus? …Elias …nicknamed Geveri (Гевери), the Nestorian bishop of Jerusalem, was ordained metropolitan of Damascus by the patriarch John on the 15th of July of the year 1204 of the Greek era (i.e. since Alexander the Great), <corresponding to the year> 893 of the Christian

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(2) ФИЛАРЕТ, еп. Рижский, “Богослужение Русской Церкви”, с. 31, n. 2. Italics in the original.


(4) The critics regarded the testimony as an argument in favour of the Old Believers. See Letter 84 (especially its postscript) in Письма Филарета, Архиепископа Черниговского, к А. В. Горскому [Letters of Philaret, Archbishop of Chernigov, to A. V. Gorsky], Москва, 1885, с. 216–217; Е. ГОЛУБИНСКИЙ, “К нашей полемике с старообрядцами” [Concerning Our Polemics with the Old Believers], ЧИОИДР, 3/214 (1905), с. 246.

(5) НИКАНОР [БРОВКОВИЧ], архим., “Цареградская церковь святой Софии — свидетельница древле-православного перстосложения” [Constantinople’s church of Saint Sophia — the witness of the Old Orthodox arrangement of fingers], Православный собеседник, издаваемый при Казанской Духовной Академии, 3 (1870), с. 189–202. Nikanor’s reference, like that of bishop Philaret, is to the second part of the third volume of the Bibliotheca orientalis, but he adds another reference — to the more detailed description of the treatise in the first part of the third volume of the Bibliotheca orientalis.