

## Gerasimos

Gerasimos, Abbot of the Monastery of St Symeon

DATE OF BIRTH	Unknown; perhaps 12 <sup>th</sup> or early 13 <sup>th</sup> century
PLACE OF BIRTH	Unknown; perhaps Antioch
DATE OF DEATH	Unknown; perhaps 13 <sup>th</sup> century
PLACE OF DEATH	Unknown; perhaps Antioch

### BIOGRAPHY

Gerasimos is an exceedingly obscure figure. The body of his sole surviving work offers no biographical information. From its title, we learn that its author, Gerasimos, was 'the abbot of the Monastery of the Blessed Saint Symeon the Wonderworker', on the 'wondrous mountain' (*thaumaston oros*). This would be the monastery of Symeon the Thaumaturgos (d. 597), known as the Younger, to distinguish him from his famous namesake. A church and a monastery sprang up around the younger Symeon's pillar, and soon became a popular goal for urban pilgrims who could easily reach it from Antioch in a day. The monastery seems to have suffered little during the Muslim conquests. By the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries it had become a center for the intellectual life of Arabic-speaking Christians, with many works being written, translated, and copied there.

It is difficult to be precise as to when Gerasimos was active. The few scholars to examine the question have been inclined to place him in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was particularly the conclusion of Cheikh and Nasrallah. While Graf did not hazard a specific guess, he discussed Gerasimos's work in the context of authors dating to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The main points of evidence cited in this connection are the date of the earliest manuscript of his work and the history of his monastery. The oldest known manuscript dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, while his monastery flourished as a literary center between the 9<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, after which it quickly faded from view. Gerasimos cannot have been writing earlier than the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, as he knew and used the works of Theodore Abū Qurra (d. c. 820, q.v.).

While it cannot be excluded that Gerasimos lived in an earlier century, a date in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century does not seem unreasonable. A late date also helps to explain the lack of references to him in earlier

Christian Arabic literature. Assuming that Gerasimos does belong to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, one wonders whether he is not to be identified with the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scribe Gerasimos, who helped produce a copy of the lives of St Symeon and the Blessed Martha, his mother, 'in the Monastery of Symeon the Thaumaturgos on the wondrous mountain'. The name Gerasimos seems not to have been widely used in early medieval Syria, so this identification is especially tempting.

Whoever Gerasimos may have been, he was clearly well educated. He makes easy and extensive use of the terminology and concepts of Aristotelian logic, and draws freely on a large corpus of non-Christian literature: the testimony of the ancient Greeks, the lore of the pagans of Ḥarrān, and the Qur'an itself. He does not as a rule cite his sources, though it is clear that he was well read in the disputation literature of earlier centuries. Stylistically, his work is largely composed in *saj'* or rhyming prose – with its necessary multiplication of modifiers, the clausal parallelism, the researched vocabulary, and the preference for oblique propositions. While this device sometimes gets the better of good sense, on the whole Gerasimos keeps his exuberant use of the form under control.

#### MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

##### *Primary*

- M. Vogel and V. Gardthausen, *Die griechischen Schreiber des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, Leipzig, 1909 (for the scribe Gerasimos)  
 A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Hierosolymitike bibliotheke*, 5 vols, St. Petersburg, 1891-1915 (for the scribe Gerasimos)

##### *Secondary*

- W. Dalrymple, *From the holy mountain. A journey among the Christians of the Middle East*, New York, 1997, pp. 54-60 (a moving account of a modern traveller's visit to the remains of the Monastery of St Symeon)  
 G. Vikan, 'Art, medicine and magic in early Byzantium', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38 (1984) 65-86 (an overview of the history of the monastery of St Symeon)  
 Nasrallah, *HMLEM* iii.2, pp. 115-18  
 J. Nasrallah, 'Couvents de la Syrie du Nord portant le nom de Siméon', *Syria* 49 (1972) 127-59 (pp. 136-40, for the monastery's 'age of gold' in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries; pp. 146-47, for the life of Gerasimos; and pp. 147-48, for the latest attested activity of its scriptorium, around 1260)  
 Graf, *GICAL* ii, pp. 82-84

## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Al-kāfī fī l-ma'nā l-shāfī*, 'The sufficient,  
on the healing meaning'DATE Unknown; 13<sup>th</sup> century

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

## DESCRIPTION

Gerasimos' work is divided into six parts. The first five seek to discover the marks by which one can recognize the true religion. They include an extensive collection of testimonies, some from the Old and New Testaments, but most from non-Christian literature. The last part is disproportionately long, and offers a series of detailed responses to possible objections.

Parts 1 and 2 apply reason to the problem of discerning the true religion. Gerasimos opens with an examination of the nature of religion, and how it summons creatures to God by revealing a law of commands and prohibitions and by the promise of reward and punishment. An examination of the various religions and their laws shows that Christianity alone fulfills the proper function of religion – to summon creatures to God – while others summon to earthly or evil ends by catering to base passions. Gerasimos then turns to a second set of criteria for recognizing the true religion: it must not be tribal or parochial but have a universal message; it must be attested by miracles; and it must address people in languages they understand. An examination of the religions of his immediate region shows that Christianity alone meets these criteria.

Parts 3 and 4 cite testimonies to confirm the earlier discussion, first from the Old and New Testaments, and then from later Jewish authors such as Josephus, the writings of the Sabeans (i.e., the pagans of Ḥarrān), the Greek philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Hermes, Socrates, etc.), and finally from the Qur'an itself.

Part 5 treats six clusters of possible objections.

Objection 1 examines the questions: How can Christianity be the true religion when it is not the largest, when it has not always existed, and when there are places where it is held in contempt? On the last point, the author is eager to show that 'the ascendancy of the *umma* of Muḥammad and their oppression' of Christianity does not invalidate his argument, for such things are marks of the mercy of God, in that he disciplines his children through 'the sword of Islam'.

Objections 2-4 are philosophical in nature. Gerasimos is required to show that the Christian doctrines of the crucifixion, the Trinity, and the Incarnation are not repugnant to reason; that God's foreknowledge of sin does not make him responsible for it, but rather that freewill is a necessary attribute of human beings; and that God's omnipotence does not require that he should have saved Adam by fiat, but rather his own nature and attributes of mercy, might, justice, and wisdom all require that he submit to death on the cross.

In response to Objections 5 and 6, Gerasimos explains that revelation is progressive, and thus one cannot fault God for abolishing earlier revelations, specifically the Law of Moses. He argues that religion in this respect is analogous to education, in that people at different stages require different levels of training. The Law, for instance, offered training in basic matters, and is analogous to the use of wooden swords to train soldiers or to a parent's tolerance of certain behavior in the young but not in those who are older. In general, revelation passes through three stages: natural law, the Law of Moses, and the Law of Christ.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Gerasimos' is one of the most detailed defenses of the faith written by an Orthodox author in Arabic. His is also perhaps one of the most learned and gracious of such writers. He is well versed in the history of disputation theology and quite conversant with the ideas of his opponents. He avoids the temptations of an overly scholastic approach and instead weaves together theological reflection with memorable and provoking analogical stories. While buttressing the faith of Christians, Gerasimos takes care not to offend the sensibilities of potential Muslim readers. The rancor that sometimes characterizes later apologetic literature is lacking in this skilful and gracious presentation.

#### MANUSCRIPTS

MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 448 (Kamil 495), fols 100v-127r (13<sup>th</sup> century; Nasrallah, *HMLEM* iii.2, p. 116, reports that this MS contains the first part of the treatise)

MS Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine – Ar. 451 (Kamil 497), towards the end (1323; Nasrallah, *HMLEM* iii.2, p. 116, reports that this MS contains the third part)

MS Paris, BNF – Ar. 258, fols 73-78 (15<sup>th</sup> century; testimonies of the Greeks)

MS Beirut, Bibliothèque Orientale – 548, pp. 243-71 (16<sup>th</sup> century; testimonies from the Greeks and from the Qur'an)

- MS Aleppo, Nahhas (private collection) – no shelf mark (See Sbath, *Fihris*, supplément, p. 80) (1627)
- MS Joun, Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ – 1807, 4<sup>th</sup> work (17<sup>th</sup> century; see Edelby, *Sulāiman al-Ġazzī*, pp. 23-24; this seems to be the MS that Nasrallah, *HMLEM* iii.2, p. 117, cites as ‘A.CENTURY 359 [1644], 4<sup>th</sup>)
- MS Oxford, Bodleian Library – Marshall Or. 69 (Uri ar. chr. 49) (1656)
- MS Vat – Sbath 49, pp. 304-500 (1686)
- MS Beirut, Bibliothèque Orientale – 552, pp. 65-179 (17<sup>th</sup> century; parts 1, 4, and 5, bowdlerized)
- MS Aleppo, Maronite Archdiocese – 1190, 274 pages (1700)
- MS Homs, Dr Sim‘ān (private collection) – no shelf mark (1701; Cheikho notes the existence of this MS in his *Catalogue*, p. 81)
- MS Homs, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese – 33, fols 1-99 (17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century)
- MS Jerusalem, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate – Holy Sepulchre Ar. 101, fols 82v-87v (17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century; testimonies from the Greeks)
- MS Aleppo, Fondation Georges et Mathilde Salem – Sbath 1324, 18<sup>th</sup> work (1773; present location unknown)
- MS Damascus, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate – 181 (formerly 1616), 5<sup>th</sup> work (18<sup>th</sup> century; testimonies of the Greeks and the Muslims)
- MS Nasrallah (private collection) – 46 (18<sup>th</sup> century; current location unknown; it is reported that Nasrallah’s heirs dispersed the collection)
- MS Basha – no shelf mark (the existence of the MS was first noted by Cheikho, *Catalogue*, p. 81; it may be the same as Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ 1807, cited above)
- MS Beirut, Bibliothèque Orientale – 553 (19<sup>th</sup> century; modern copy of the preceding MS)
- MS Damascus, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate – 252 (formerly 1675), pp. 258-72 (19<sup>th</sup> century; according to Nasrallah, *HMLEM* iii.2, p. 117, this is the fourth part of Gerasimos, on the testimonies of Christ)
- MS St Petersburg, Institute of Oriental Studies – B1218, fols 64r-68r (19<sup>th</sup> century; testimonies of the Greeks)
- MS Bakhkhach (private collection) – no shelf mark (see Sbath, *Fihris*, i, p. 40, with no indication of date; no trace of the MS has been found)
- MS Bassal (private collection) – no shelf mark (see Sbath, *Fihris*, i, p. 40, with no indication of date; no trace of the MS has been found)

MS Saegh (private collection) – no shelf mark (see Sbath, *Fihris*, i, p. 40, with no indication of date; no trace of the MS has been found)

## EDITIONS &amp; TRANSLATIONS

A. Bakhou has prepared an edition and translation of the work's sixth part for a dissertation in progress at PISAI, Rome. Otherwise, the text has never been edited.

R. Khawam (trans.), *Dialogues oecuméniques de guérison suivi de Traité sur la Sainte Trinité*, Paris, 1998 (it is somewhat unclear whether this translation is from one or more MSS; it should also be noted that Khawam sometimes omits parts of the text and at other times adds to it, presumably to make it more accessible to modern readers)

## STUDIES

A. Bakhou, 'Kitāb al-kāfi fi al-ma'nā al-šāfi, The complete book of the proper meaning. The Christian apology of Gerasimus', *Pd'O* 34 (2009) 300-43

N. Edelby, *Sulāimān al-Ġazzī (X<sup>e</sup>-XI<sup>e</sup> siècles). Écrits théologiques en prose (Patrimoine Arabe Chrétien 9)*, Jounieh, 1986 (for a description of the Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ MS)

A.-M. Dubarle, 'Le témoignage de Josèphe sur Jésus d'après des publications récentes', *Revue Biblique* 84 (1977) 38-58, pp. 57-58 (on Gerasimos' use of Josephus)

L. Cheikho, *Catalogue des manuscrits des auteurs arabes chrétiens*, Beirut, 1924

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