

# *The Life of John of Edessa*

Anonymous

DATE OF BIRTH Perhaps 8<sup>th</sup> c.  
PLACE OF BIRTH Perhaps Edessa  
DATE OF DEATH Perhaps 9<sup>th</sup> c.  
PLACE OF DEATH Perhaps Edessa

## BIOGRAPHY

The anonymous author of the *Life of John of Edessa* seems to have been active in about 900, perhaps in Edessa. Beyond this, nothing else about him is known.

## MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

*Primary* —

*Secondary*

- J. Lamoreaux and H. Khairallah, 'The Arabic version of the Life of John of Edessa', *Le Muséon* 113 (2000) 439-60  
P. Peeters, 'La passion de S. Michel le Sabaïte', *AB* 48 (1930) 65-98, pp. 85-91  
K. K'ek'elidze, 'Zhitie i podvigi Ioanna, katolikosa Urhaïskogo', *Khristianskii vostok* 2 (1914) 301-48, repr. with minor additions and corrections in his *Et'iudebi dzveli kartuli lit'erat'uris ist'oriidan*, 13 vols, Tbilisi, 1945-74, vii, pp. 102-35

## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

### Untitled

DATE Perhaps c. 900  
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

### DESCRIPTION

*The Life of John of Edessa* recounts the saintly bishop's debate and thaumaturgic contest with a certain Phineas the Jew, in the presence of the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809). The text opens with a description of the wicked Jew Phineas, a courtier of the caliph, and how he had turned the caliph against the Christians. When John

learns of this, after praying before the image of Christ in Edessa (mandylion), he travels to al-Raqqa to meet with the caliph. Upon John's arrival, the caliph summons him and Phineas to take part in a debate. The debate focuses on passages from the Hebrew Bible that support the doctrine of the Trinity. The caliph eventually finds himself convinced of the truth of the Christian position, and proceeds to present philosophical arguments in favor of the Trinity. Finding himself on the losing side, Phineas challenges John to perform miracles. The text recounts that John cast out a demon, caused Phineas to lose his ability to speak, drank poison without harm, caused Phineas' hand to wither, and lastly raised the caliph's daughter from the dead. Not surprisingly, the caliph was seized by fear and wonder, with the result that he ordered a cessation of hostility against the Byzantines, permitted Christians to practice their faith openly, relieved them of their taxes, and allowed churches to be built throughout his kingdom.

While the text does not mention John's ecclesiastical affiliation, he was probably a Melkite – at least judging from the fact that only they preserved a memory of him. The text can be dated to some time after the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd, but before its first witnesses. The earliest of these is a liturgy in John's honor, copied by the famous Georgian hymnographer Michael Modrekeli, preserved in MS Tbilisi, Institute of Manuscripts, S-425 (copied between 978 and 988). Whoever the author of the original Georgian liturgy was, it is clear that he made use of a Georgian version of the *Life* of John. This Georgian version, in turn, was translated from Arabic, apparently the language of its composition. The text must therefore have appeared after c. 800 (the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd) but before c. 975 (the *floruit* of Modrekeli). A date of composition c. 900 seems not unlikely.

The Georgian version of the *Life* is preserved in a single manuscript (MS BL – Add. 11281, copied at the Monastery of the Holy Cross, near Jerusalem, between 1034 and 1042). A complete copy of the Arabic version once existed in a 10<sup>th</sup>-century Sinai MS. It entered the antiquities market in the 1920s (Hiersemann Katalog 500, no. 14), and was purchased by the Catholic University of Louvain. It did not survive the Second World War, however, being destroyed by fire in 1940 during the German invasion of Louvain. What must have been an index added to this manuscript by a later scribe was excised and sold separately. It ended up in the Mingana Collection (MS Mingana – Chr. Arab. Add. 172, copied in 1287). An additional page from this manuscript has been preserved in MS Mingana – Chr. Arab. Add. 195.

Substantial portions of the Arabic version of the *Life* have been published from the fragments preserved in MS Sinai – Ar. 441, copied in 1287. The complete Arabic version of the *Life* is also said to be extant in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript in Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ (2252). It has not yet been published.

## SIGNIFICANCE

This text is patently a work of fiction and the events it recounts never took place. But it is remarkable because it is a fine example of how the telling of stories can function polemically and apologetically, to refute the faith of one's opponents and defend one's own.

## MANUSCRIPTS

MS Sinai – s.n. (10<sup>th</sup> c.) (MS that once contained a copy of the Arabic version, of which the index has survived in MS Mingana – Chr. Arab. Add. 172 and an additional page in MS Mingana – Chr. Arab. Add. 195) (For a brief description of this MS, prepared by A. Baumstark, see K.W. Hiersemann, *Katalog 500. Orientalische Manuskripte. Arabische, syrische, griechische, armenische, persische Handschriften des 7.-18. Jahrhunderts*, Leipzig, 1922, pp. 10-12 and plate VI)

MS BL – Add. 11281, fols 273v-285v (Georgian version copied between 1034 and 1042) (See J. Wardrop's appendix on the Georgian MSS of the British Library in F. Conybeare, *A Catalogue of the Armenian manuscripts in the British Museum*, London, 1913, pp. 397-405.)

MS Sinai – Ar. 441, fols. 191r-198r (1287)

MS Joun, Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ – 2252, fols 13v-21r (19<sup>th</sup> c.) (cited in Haddad, *La Trinité divine*, p. 29)

## EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

Lamoreaux and Khairallah, 'The Arabic version of the life of John of Edessa', pp. 450-54 (edition and English trans. of the portions of the text preserved in MS Sinai Ar. 441)

Peeters, 'La passion de S. Michel le Sabaïte', pp. 87-89 (edition and Latin trans. of Ch. 14, from the now lost Sinai MS)

K'ekelidze, 'Zhitie i podvigi Ioanna, katolikosa Urhaïskogo', pp. 114-29 (edition of the Georgian version, with Russian trans., as well as an edition and trans. of Modrekili's liturgy in John's honor)

## STUDIES

S. Rosenkranz, *Die jüdisch-christliche Auseinandersetzung unter islamischer Herrschaft 7.-10. Jahrhundert*, Bern, 2004, pp. 89-91

- H. Khairallah, 'La joute de Jean d'Edesse avec le juif Phinéas', *Chronos* 4 (2001) 63-89
- J. Lamoreaux, 'John of Edessa and Phineas the Jew at the court of Harun al-Rashid', *Karmo* 1 (1999) 5-21 (with a detailed summary of the life, based on the Georgian version)
- R. Haddad, *La Trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes, 750-1050*, Paris, 1985, pp. 29-30
- R. Caspar et al., 'Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien (6)', *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980) 259-99, p. 294
- W. Strothmann, 'Die orientalischen Handschriften der Sammlung Mettler (Katalog Hiersemann 500)', in W. Voigt (ed.), *XIX. deutscher Orientalistentag*, Wiesbaden, 1977, 285-93, pp. 286-87 and 292 n. 31 (on the fate of the Sinai MS purchased by Louvain)
- R. Caspar et al., 'Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien (1)', *Islamochristiana* 1 (1975) 125-81, p. 156
- B. Outtier, 'Le sort des manuscrits du "Katalog Hiersemann 500"', *AB* 93 (1975) 377-80, p. 378
- K. K'ek'elidze, *Geschichte der kirchlichen Georgischen Literatur*, ed. P.M. Tarchnišvili and J. Assfalg, Rome, 1955, p. 480
- Graf, *GCAL* ii, pp. 25-26
- J. Simon, 'Répertoire des bibliothèques publiques et privées d'Europe contenant des manuscrits arabes chrétiens', *Orientalia* NS 7 (1938) 239-64, pp. 252-53 (on the Sinai MS purchased by Louvain)
- P. Peeters, 'La passion de S. Julien d'Émèse', *AB* 47 (1929) 44-76, p. 63 n. 1 (on the date of the Sinai MS purchased by Louvain)

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