The Life of John of Edessa

Anonymous

DATE OF BIRTH Perhaps 8th c.
PLACE OF BIRTH Perhaps Edessa
DATE OF DEATH Perhaps 9th 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

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 10th-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 19th-century manuscript in Dayr al-Mukhallis (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. (10th 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 Sinai – Ar. 441, fols. 191r-198r (1287)
MS Joun, Dayr al-Mukhallis – 2252, fols 13v-21r (19th c.) (cited in Haddad, La Trinité divine, p. 29)

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

STUDIES
R. Haddad, La Trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes, 750-1050, Paris, 1985, pp. 29-30
R. Caspar et al., ‘Bibliographie du dialogue islamochrétien (1)’, Islamochristiana 1 (1975) 125-81, p. 156
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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