

## Criticism and Diversity in the Tradition of Islamic Thought: The Case of Elias of Nisibis and Wazir Abū'l-Qāsim al-Maghribī\*

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**Abstract:** This study discusses Elias of Nisibis with the Marwānid wazir in light of the Islamic criticism culture in the 11th century. That encounter is examined within the framework of *Kitāb al-Majālis*, written by Elias in Arabic. The debate between Elias of Nisibis, the Metropolitan of Nisibis and Abū'l-Qāsim al-Maghribī, the Marwānid wazir, constitutes an essential example of mutual debate ethics. The dispute that Elias treats in seven sessions in his book shows that observing diversity is one of the main principles of Islamic thought. Therefore, it is pointed out here that the culture of criticism and the notion of tolerance are dominant distinctions within the tradition of Islamic thought. In addition, this study examines how Elias approaches Muslim-Christian debates and the method employed by himself. In this respect, it must be noted that Elias tries to use Islamic terminology and attempts to lead an argumentation over the interlocutors' own Scriptures.

**Keywords:** Marwānids, Elias of Nisibis, Abū'l-Qāsim al-Maghribī, *Kitāb al-Majālis*, Muslim-Christian Polemics, Islamic Culture of Criticism.

## İslam Düşünce Geleneğinde Eleştiri ve Farklılıkları Gözetme: Nusaybinli İliya ve Mervânî Veziri Ebu'l-Kasım el-Mağribî Örneği

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**Öz:** Bu çalışma, 11. yüzyılda İslam eleştiri kültürü ışığında Nusaybinli İliya'nın Mervânî veziriyle yaptığı tartışmayı bahse konu edinmektedir. Söz konusu karşılaşma, İliya'nın Arapça kaleme aldığı *Kitābu'l-Mecālis* çerçevesinde incelenmektedir. Nusaybin Metropoliti İliya ile Mervânî veziri Ebu'l-Kasım el-Mağribî arasındaki tartışma karşılıklı münazara etiğine önemli bir örneklik teşkil etmektedir. İliya'nın kitabında yedi oturumla ele aldığı bu tartışma, farklılıkları gözetmenin İslam düşüncesinin ana ilkelerinden biri olduğunu göstermektedir. Dolayısıyla burada, eleştiri kültürünün ve hoşgörünün İslam düşünce geleneğinde baskın bir yaklaşım olduğuna işaret edilmektedir. Ayrıca bu çalışma, İliya'nın, Müslüman-Hıristiyan tartışmalarına nasıl yaklaştığı ve hangi yöntemleri kullandığı incelenmektedir. Bu bakımdan İslami terminolojiyi kullanması ve muhatabın kutsal metni üzerinden bir delillendirme çabasına girişmesi önem arz etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mervāniler, Nusaybinli İliya, Ebu'l-Kasım el-Mağribî, *Kitābu'l-Mecālis*, Müslüman-Hıristiyan Polemikleri, İslam Eleştiri Kültürü.

### Introduction

This study emphasizes that the Islamicate has offered an environment for various religious traditions and scholars in which they could clearly put forward their own thoughts from theology to morality. Here, by taking a fragment from the history of Islam, the culture of criticism and tolerance will be elaborated. To achieve this purpose, a remarkable discussion that took place in the Marwānids court (983-1085) -one of the most powerful states of the century, will be discussed. In the Marwānid palace, the Marwānid wazir of the time, Abū'l-Qāsim al-Maghribī (981-1027) and the metropolitan bishop of Nisibis, Elias (975-1046) realized debates on miscellaneous subjects ranging from language-thought relationship to Muslim-Christian theological polemics. Elias of Nisibis recorded the discussions in these sessions (majālis) taking place in the summer of 1026 and named his work as the book of sessions (*Kitāb al-majālis*). In these sessions/assemblies, it is especially seen that many issues, from the existence and whatness of God to the issue of the Spirit, are

\* A similar topic was partially presented by the author in the International Symposium of The Criticism Culture and Morality of Tolerance in Islamic Thought organized by The Foundation for Research in Islamic Studies in 2019 and published among its proceedings (cf. Mehmet Alıcı, "XI. Yüzyılda Müslüman-Hıristiyan İlişkilerinde Entelektüel Boyut: Süryānî Nusaybinli İliya ve Mervânî Veziri Ebu'l-Kasım el-Mağribî'nin Tartışma Meclisleri", *İslam Düşüncesinde Eleştiri Kültürü ve Tahammül Ahlakı*, ed. M. AYTEPE-T. KARASU, Ensar Neşriyat, İstanbul, 2019, II, 173-182.

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discussed openly and freely. Today, it is possible to argue that the Kitāb al-majālis can be deemed as one of the most impressive examples exhibiting an extant affability towards the criticism in the tradition of Islamic thought.

In these sessions, Elias used the key concepts of Islamic thought while answering Abū'l-Qāsim's questions. Moreover, it is quite remarkable to see that Elias supports his claim that the Trinity creed is a monotheistic discourse by reinterpreting the verses in the Qur'an. Such that Elias tries to prove his claims through basing them on some tafsir works and some commentators/mufasssers dealing with such topics/issues such as naskh/abrogation. Elias's text reveals that the environment in which discussions are held may not be obstructed and that the parties could continue to argue without giving up on courtesy.

In this study, the abovementioned argument will be examined in reference to the cultural patterns of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the intra-textual context of Kitāb al-majālis, which provides some insight into the discussion environment. Before this, some information will be given about the two prominent actors, Elias and Abū'l-Qāsim, as they are thought to be shedding light on the multicultural structure of the 11<sup>th</sup> century in the Marwānid region. Afterward, the features of the debate will be discussed by focusing on the parties' attitudes in the context of Kitāb al-majālis. Finally, we will elaborate on how Elias applied Islamic terminology in his critical discourse and how he interpreted the Qur'anic verses so as to prove his allegations.

2

## 1. Multicultural Structure and Intellectual Actors of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century

### 1.1. The Presence of the *Other* in the Marwānid Region

From the rise of Islam on, bilateral discussion sessions/assemblies were held between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is known that many scholarly debates took place in various communities between the adherents of different religious traditions or in other words between Muslim scholars and Christians.<sup>1</sup> Among these assemblies, does this paper focus on a debate that shaped the basis of Muslim-Christian intellectual relations in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

At the beginning of the Marwānid period, an agreement with Byzantium was concluded. This agreement also brought on peace between Muslims and non-Muslims in the political context.<sup>2</sup> However, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, political conflicts and wars continued in the region, and disputes between Byzantium and the kingdoms in the region or between these city-states flared up occasionally.<sup>3</sup> Despite this state of struggle, different religious traditions lived together under the protection of Islamic sovereignty, known as *ahl al-dhimma* status.<sup>4</sup>

The different religious traditions continued to exist during the Marwānid period, though, Marwānid rulers embraced the Christian congregations who took refuge in them. One of the most prominent examples is the Syriac (Jacobite) Patriarch of Antioch, Mar Yuhanon bar Abdun (1004-1034), who was forced to abandon his sect and acknowledge the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon by the Byzantine emperor Basileios II (1029-1030). Subsequent to his rejection of leaving the Syriac (Jacobite) sect and his exile to Malatya, Mar Yuhanon bar Abdun died in Malitene. After his death, the Jacobites elected a new patriarch (Dionysius II) around the years 1033-1034. This latest election brought to the Byzantine's agenda again to ask the new patriarch to accept the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. However, the new patriarch rejected this compulsion and took refuge in Amid/Diyarbakır under the Marwānid's rule as a safe harbor. Then, the

<sup>1</sup> For more inferences see 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", *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999), 13-65; Christian C. Sahner, "A Zoroastrian Dispute in the Caliph's Court: The Gizistag Abālis in its Early Islamic Context", *Iranian Studies* 52/1-2 (2019), 61-83; Mehmet Aydın, *Müslümanların Hristiyanlara Karşı Yazdığı Reddiyeler ve Tartışma Konuları* (Ankara: TDV, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Elias of Nisibis Elias, *Tārīkh İliyā Barshināyā*, çev. Yüsus Habbi (Baghdad, 1975), 201.

<sup>3</sup> Yusuf Baluken, *Mervāniler Devrinde Dini Gruplar Arasındaki Münasebetler* (Van: Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, SBE, Unpublished Master Thesis, 2010), 21-25; 'Izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kāmil fi al-tārīkh*, thk. 'Umar Tadmuri (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2006), 688-689, 743-744.

<sup>4</sup> For further information see Clifford E. Bosworth, "The Concept of Dhimma in Early Islam", *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, ed. B. Lewis - B. Braude (London: Holmes-Meier, 1982), 37-51; M. Mahfuz Söylemez, "İlk Dönem İslam Toplumunda Gayrimüslimlerin Yeri", *İstanbul Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 22 (2010), 99-124; Zafer Duygu, *İslam ve Hristiyanlık: Hristiyanlara Göre İki Dinin Karşılaşması ve İlk Etkileşimler* (İstanbul: Timaş, 2021), 288-320.

governor of the city, Sa'd al-Dawla, refused the request for the Byzantine ambassadors to surrender the patriarch. After this date, the Patriarchate continued in Amid for a while.<sup>5</sup>

It is known that believers of various religious traditions performed some high-level duties in the Marwānid palace. There are considerable examples among Christian scholars who were accepted in the Marwānid court. Especially relevant to our subject is the example of Elias's brothers, who served in the palace as physician. In addition, Ibn Bukhtīshū' (d.1058/1059), a Nestorian, wrote a detailed epistle about animals at the request of Marwānid ruler Naṣr al-Dawla Aḥmad b. Marwān (981-1061); and this is another remarkable example. Similarly, Ibn Buṭlān (1066) wrote a tractate on the subject of medicine for the same ruler.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the relevant scholarly yields of this period, this situation indicates the tolerance and encouraging attitude of the Muslim rulers towards the members of different religions. There were also other Syriac groups living under the Marwānid rule. For example, an eminent Jacobite scientist in medicine, astronomy and philosophy Abu Naṣr Yahya b. al-Takritī (1103/1104) had close relations with the palace.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the council/dīvān scribe of Sa'd al-Dawla, the governor of Amid, was a Christian named Ibnu'l-Ḥammad (1019). During the Naṣr al-Dawla's rule, a Christian named Ibn Shaltia was looking after the Mayyafariqin foundations.<sup>8</sup>

Also, Syriac Christians known as Nestorian, Jacobite or Melkite Syriacs and Jews, had important religious places in this geography and their preservation in the Marwānid period has been recorded. Likewise, the active presence of important churches and monasteries in Mayyafariqin, Nisibis, His'n Kayfā, Jazira and Seert regions proves the existence of different Christian groups in the region.<sup>9</sup> Similar to Christian groups Jews lived in the capital of the Marwānids, as well. Likewise, the synagogue in Mayyafariqin in this period indicates the existence of a notable Jewish population. Some of the Jews were serving as palace scribes. Jewish travelers visiting the region after the Marwānid period (1165-1173, 1170-1180) also confirmed the Jewish presence and synagogue in the region.<sup>10</sup>

Here, we focus on the theological discussions between the most competent wazir of the Marwānids palace, Mağhribī and Elias, the metropolitan archbishop of Nisibis. The theological position of Jesus Christ, one of the main debate topics among Muslims and Christians, and of course other common theological subjects are discussed in these assemblies. These sessions between the two strongly signify that the region had a multicultural structure. On the other hand, the fact that the intellectual ground was written in Arabic by Elias, indicates that Arabic was both the lingua franca of the science of the period and the written language of Syriac scholars.

## 1.2. Elias of Nisibis

Historical records show that Elias of Nisibis spent a religious life as of his birth (975). For instance, he was appointed an arch-priest at the Monastery of Saint Simeon (Abba Shem'ōn) before turning twenty (994). As a matter of fact, Elias was later chosen as the regional bishop of Bēt Nūhadrān (1002). After the death of Metropolitan Yahballāhā, he was consecrated to the metropolitan archbishop of Nisibis in 399/1008 and served in this position until his death (1046).<sup>11</sup> In the record of Kitāb al-majālis, there is a tutelar for Elias regarding his religious education and his rise as a clergyman. According to this, Elias is counted among the

<sup>5</sup> Michael Rabo, *The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo (the Great) A Universal History from Creation*, çev. Matti Moosa (New Jersey: Beth Antioch Press, 2014), (13.7), 598; Bar Hebraeus, *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, çev. David Wilmshurst (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2016), 144-150; Yahyā b. Sa'id Al-Anṭākī, *Tārīḥ Al-Anṭākī: al-ma'rūf bi-ṣilat tārīḥ ūtiḥā*, thk. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmuri (Ṭarābulus: Ğurūs Burs, 1990), 409-410; Hanna Dolabani, *Antakya Süryani Kadim (Ortodoks) Kilisesi Patriklerinin Özgeçmişi*, ed. İbrahim Özçoşar - Hüseyin H. Güneş, çev. Gabriyel Akyüz (İstanbul: Mardin Tarihi İhtisas Kütüphanesi, 2006), 62-65.

<sup>6</sup> Aḥmad ibn al-Qāsim Ibn Abi 'Uṣaybi'a, 'Uyün al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibā', thk. Muḥammad Bāsil 'Uyün al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyah, 1998), 214, 328, 341; Ibn Buṭlān, İvānis b. Sa'dūn. Riḥlat ibn Buṭlān, thk. Shākir Lu'aybi (Abū Zaby: Dār al-Suwaydi, 2006), 14-15, 139-140.

<sup>7</sup> Khalil Samir, "Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien (2e partie: auteurs chrétiens arabes, XIe et XIIe siècles)", *Islamochristiana* 2 (1976), 217-221; Baluken, *Mervāniler Devrinde Dini Gruplar Arasındaki Münasebetler*, 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf ibn 'Ali Ibn al-Azraq al-Fāriqī, *Tārīḥ Mayyāfāriqin*, thk. Karim Fārūq Khūli - Yūsuf Bālūkan (İstanbul: Nūbihār, 2014), 492, 499.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīḥ*, 143; Baluken, *Mervāniler Devrinde Dini Gruplar Arasındaki Münasebetler*, 47-48; Abu-'l-Ḥasan 'Ali Ibn-Muḥammad Al-Shābushṭi, *Ad-Diyārāt*, thk. Kürkis 'Auwād (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muṭannā, 1966), 191, 198, 308-309.

<sup>10</sup> Binyāmīn ibn Yūnah al-Taṭīli, *Riḥlat Binyāmīn al-Taṭīli*, thk. Ezra Haddad - Abd al-Raḥmān 'Abd Allāh Shaykh (Abū Zaby: al-Majma' al-Thaqāfi, 2002), 285-287; *Travels of Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon*, çev. A. Benisch (London, 1856), 9; Ibn al-Azraq al-Fāriqī, *Tārīḥ Mayyāfāriqin*, 110-111; Aḥmad Ibn-'Abdallāh Abu-'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arri, *Risālat al-gufrān*, thk. 'Ā'isa 'Abd-ar-Raḥmān Bint-as-Ṣāṭi' (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'arif, 1977), 26-27.

<sup>11</sup> Elias, *Tārīḥ İliyā Barshināyā*, 203.

faithful disciples of the monk named Yūḥannā, known as the Lame (al-A'raj) in the Monastery of Saint Michael.<sup>12</sup> In addition to this, Elias had a philosophical and religious background.<sup>13</sup> This background can be clearly traced from his dialogue with Marwānid wazīr.

Elias's contact with the Marwānid palace is not limited to his position as the metropolitan archbishop of Nisibis. The contribution of his brothers, who were doctors in the Marwānid palace, should be evoked in this dialogue. One of his brothers, Abū Sa'īd Maṣṣūr b. 'Īsā known as Zāhid al-'Ulamā' (d. before 438/1046), used to be a physician of Marwānid sultan Naṣr al-Dawla. He built a hospital in Mayyafariqin with the encouragement of Naṣr al-Dawla. He wrote out many works on medicine as a palace physician.<sup>14</sup> His other brother, Abu'l-Ula Said ibn Sahl, was the doctor of the Marwānid wazīr Abū'l-Qāsim, with whom Elias established a close friendship. When Elias was the metropolitan archbishop of Nisibis, he met the Marwānid wazīr Abū'l-Qāsim for arranging meetings which later would be written down in *Kitāb al-majālis*. Considering the productive scholars of his time, the Syriac scholar preferred to discuss mainly theological issues in his works and used apologetic language.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from *Kitāb al-majālis*, Elias wrote another text on Jewish thought and tried to explain the Christian trinity creed by writing a treatise called *Risāla fī Waḥdāniyyat al-khālīq wa-tathlith aqānīmīhi*, addressed to Jewish philosophers in Mosul.<sup>16</sup> This shows that Elias was also involved in theological discussions outside *Kitāb al-majālis*. Similarly, he answered the questions conveyed to him due to his religious authority. In addition, in the context of advice literature, Elias also wrote an ethical work that touches on daily life and the person's spiritual development.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.3. Abū'l-Qāsim al-Maghribī

The other interlocutor of this discussion is the Marwānid wazīr Abū'l-Qāsim Hussein ibn al-Maghribī-born in Aleppo in 981. Abū'l-Qāsim, whose lineage Ibn Khallikān associates with the Sāsānid, was a member of a Fāṭimid family. During the reign of Al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh, he survived the massacre (401/1010) against his family and fled to the nearby areas of Palestine. Abū'l-Qāsim, who came to Baghdad after the unsuccessful rebellion attempts despite the contribution of the Bedouins, carried out the duties of vizier and scribe.<sup>18</sup> Afterward, he came under the patronage of Naṣr al-Dawla Ahmad b. Marwān (981-1061), the amīr of Diyarbakir and Mayyafariqin, is known as the guard of scholars. Because he ran from a family that affiliated with the Shiite Fāṭimids, Abū'l-Qāsim had to move to Baghdad. After staying in Baghdad for a while, he took refuge in the Marwānid palace. The Abbasid caliph was in contact with rebellions of Shiite origin in this period. It is also reported that Abū'l-Qāsim wrote a treatise against the rumors that he was in Shia thought.<sup>19</sup> Abū'l-Qāsim, who served as a wazīr in the Marwānid palace until he died in 418/1027, wrote down many works in various fields. Among them, the tafsir work called *Al-Masābih*, the *Kitāb Fī as-Siyāsa* work on state administration and his *Dīwān*, in which he compiled his poems, are noteworthy to mention.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Matrān Nasībīn İlyā, *Kitāb al-majālis li-mār 'İlyā, mutrān Nişibīn, wa-risālatuh ilā 'l-wazīr al-kāmil Abi 'l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Ali 'l-Maghribī*, thk. Nikolai N. Seleznyov (Moscow: Dār Ḡrifin, 2018), 89; Nikolai N. Seleznyov, "Seven Sessions or Just a Letter? Observations on the Structure of the Disputations between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī", *Scrinium* 14 (2018), 435; Louis Cheikho, "Majālis İlyā, mutrān Nuşaybin", *al-Mashriq* 20 (1922), 269; Samir Khalil Samir, "İlyā al-Nasībīn (975-1046 A.D.) wa-l-wazīr Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī (981- 1027 A.D.)", *al-Mashriq* 76/2 (2002), 444-446; David Bertina, "Elias of Nisibis", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. K. Fleet vd., Three (Erişim 27 Şubat 2018).

<sup>13</sup> For further information about Elias's works see. Hayriye Ö. Sürer, *Nesturi Metropolit Nusaybinli İlyā'nın Monoteist Teslis Anlayışı* (İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi, SBE, Unpublished MA. Thesis), 2020), 21-36.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Abi 'Uşaybi'a, 'Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibā', 341.

<sup>15</sup> İlyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 157-158, 165, 254; J. P. Monferrer Sala, "Elias of Nisibis", *Christian-Muslim Relations*, ed. D. Thomas - A. Mallet (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 2/728-740; Samir, "İlyā al-Nasībīn (975-1046 A.D.) wa-l-wazīr Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī (981- 1027 A.D.)", 446.

<sup>16</sup> Matrān Nasībīn İlyā, "Risāla fī waḥdāniyyat al-khālīq wa-tathlith aqānīmīhi", *al-Mashriq* 3/1 (Şubat 1903), 111-116.

<sup>17</sup> Matrān Nasībīn İlyā, *Kitāb daf' al-hamm*, thk. Qustantīn al-Bāshā (Mişr: Maṭba'at al-Ma'arif, 1900), 5-8; Ayşe İçöz, "Defining a Christian Virtue in the Islamic Context: The Concept of Gratitude in Elias of Nisibis' *Kitāb Daf' al-Hamm*", *İlahiyat Studies* 9/2 (2018), 169-179.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-Ayān wa-anbā ibn al-zamān*, thk. İhsān 'Abbās (Beirut: Dār Şādir, 1972), II, 172, 174-175 (193); Samir, "İlyā al-Nasībīn (975-1046 A.D.) wa-l-wazīr Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī (981- 1027 A.D.)", 451-452; Kamāl al-Dīn 'Umar ibn Aḥmad Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab fī tārikh Ḥalab*, thk. Suhayl Zakār (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 1983), 2533.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn al-Azraq al-Fāriqī, *Tārikh Mayyāfāriqin*, 469-504; Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab fī tārikh Ḥalab*, 2535-2537.

<sup>20</sup> P. Smoor, "Al-Maghribī, 4", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 5/1211-1212; Seleznyov, "Seven Sessions or Just a Letter? Observations on the Structure of the Disputations between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī", 437; İlyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 166; Morteza Karimi-Nia, *Wazīr-i Maghribī Rū Shenāsi-yi al-Masābih fī Tafsir al-Qurān Al-Wazīr al-Maghribī and his Methodology in al-Masābih fī Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Tahrān: Tahrān, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2016), 53-82.

The friendly relations between Elias and the wazir Abū'l-Qāsim, who was interested in the intellectual lifestyle and religious traditions of his epoch, continued until the unexpected death of Abū'l-Qāsim. *Kitāb al-majālis*, a fruitful outcome of the dialogue between them, also gives information about the level and quality of the communication between Muslims and Christians.

Nevertheless, the records of Elias on the subject that are available at present prompt the question; of whether the text reflects the absolute views of the Marwānid wazir or not. Although Elias wrote down his correspondence with Abū'l-Qāsim in addition to this book, it should not be disregarded that the Marwānid wazir's point of view on the discussions was examined through Elias. Of course, this does not imply an absolutely negative approach to Elias's transmissions, but it also points out that the wazir's opinions on the subject could not be reached firsthand.

## 2. *Kitāb al-majālis* and Main Topics of Debate

The only text that tells us how the theology-based discussions held between the Marwānid wazir Abū'l-Qāsim and Elias of Nisibis took place is Elias' *Kitāb al-majālis*. The vizier's opinions, questions or objections on the subject are known only as far as Elias narrates. The records show that the dialogue between the Abū'l-Qāsim and Elias, the metropolitan archbishop of Nisibis, which seems to have consisted of seven sessions, took place in the summer of 1026 during the visit of the wazir to Nisibis. After the first meeting, which started on the fifth of July, seven sessions/assemblies were held between the two until the first days of August. In these sessions, issues such as whether the Trinity, incarnation and prosodic union that are incompatible with the Islamic theology regarding Christianity were discussed. In addition, linguistic problems between Syriac and Arabic languages were also elaborated. It is understood that Elias wrote down this discussion ground in *Kitāb al-majālis* after Abū'l-Qāsim's death and sent the text to his brother Abu'l-'Ula Said ibn Sahl. We deduct this inference from the introduction part where he commemorates the wazir with mercy and writes the text addressed to his brother.<sup>21</sup>

Thanks to recent studies, it can be said that the dialogue between Elias and Abū'l-Qāsim went beyond this seven-session book. The most obvious indication of this information is that the Marwānid wazir again discussed various issues with Elias during his second visit to Nisibis in the winter of 1026. In this meeting, besides the previous discussions, the history of the Jews, the history of humanity and ancient times were put on the table. When Abū'l-Qāsim visited Nisibis in the following year's summer again, he had the opportunity to talk to Elias. However, in this meeting, the poor health conditions of the wazir took precedence and they could not discuss any subject. Abu'l-'Ula Said ibn Sahl, the physician of the wazir and brother of Elias, stated that there was no cure for Abū'l-Qāsim's illness. As a result of this disease, the wazir died in October 1027.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from the sessions mentioned earlier, the visits indicate that the wazir's questions regarding and interest in understanding the discussed subjects continued. Correlatively, Elias repeats to a large extent the contents of the *Kitāb al-majālis* while replying to Abū'l-Qāsim's letters after his return from Nisibis to Mayyafariqin in 1026. From this information, it is understood that Abū'l-Qāsim, who died one year after the first assembly/session, corresponded with Elias until the last day of his life.

When the letters are thoroughly examined, it is perhaps true to say that the Marwānid wazir was not satisfied with the arguments expressed in the relevant sessions and thus, was confused. Because, what the Marwānid wazir heard from the Christian clergy until these sessions, was largely falsified by Elias.<sup>23</sup>

Elias handles each of the seven sessions in the *Kitāb al-majālis* as an individual topic. At the beginning of each session, Elias put a title relevant to the subject. Considering that the text was edited later, it can be said that Elias already divided the subjects while writing. The Topics are as follows:

<sup>21</sup> İliyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 1-4, 157-158; Seleznyov, "Seven Sessions or Just a Letter? Observations on the Structure of the Disputations between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū'l-Qāsim al-Maghribī", 443; Samir, "İliyya al-Nasibini (975-1046 A.D.) wa-l-wazir Abū'l-Qāsim al-Maghribī (981-1027 A.D.)", 447, 453-454; David Bertaina, "Science, Syntax, and Superiority in Eleventh-Century Christian-Muslim Discussion: Elias of Nisibis on the Arabic and Syriac Languages", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22/2 (2011), 199-200; Karimi-Nia, *Wazir-i Maghribi Rū Shenāsi-yi al-Maṣābiḥ fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, 65-66.

<sup>22</sup> Samir, "İliyya al-Nasibini (975-1046 A.D.) wa-l-wazir Abū'l-Qāsim al-Maghribī (981-1027 A.D.)", 454.

<sup>23</sup> Seleznyov, "Seven Sessions or Just a Letter? Observations on the Structure of the Disputations between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū'l-Qāsim al-Maghribī", 443-445; İliyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 252-263.

1. About God's Unity/Tawhid and Trinity
2. About Hulul (incarnation) and Ittihad/Incorporation (the process of uniting Jesus with the body as God)
3. About bringing evidence from the Qur'an that Christians are People of Tawhid
4. On the determination that Christian theology is rational and divine
5. On the exclusion of Christianity from all sects opposed to the truth
6. Grammar, Language, Script (Alphabet) and Kalam
7. Christians' Beliefs on the Rule of the Stars (Astrology), Muslims and the Self

The main discussion topic of the first session (al-majlis al-awwal) is the belief in the Trinity, which constitutes the basic pillar of the Christian creed. Elias insistently claims that the Christian God does not conflict with Tawhid/oneness. He tries to unite God with the understanding of one-third based on the existence of three hypostases (*aqānīm*, sing. *uqnūm*) in a single element and attempts to prove this with the theory of substance (*jawhar*). Another highlight of this section is the narrative about Abū'l-Qāsim's refuge in a monastery due to his illness and finding healing there.<sup>24</sup> Although this narrative is not mentioned in Elias' correspondence with Abū'l-Qāsim, Elias stated that non-Christian patients who took refuge in the monastery would be cured.<sup>25</sup>

Another important discussion topic of this first session is the question of whether God is a substance/*jawhar* or not. Elias claims that the existence of three hypostasis/*aqanim* in one substance will not harm its oneness. Here, Elias, who uses the concept of substance for God, thus creates a common concept of God in which the three parts/*aqanim* of God's personality will be shared. According to him, God is substance/*jawhar* because He exists by himself. In this section, he tries to answer the objection of the wazir that the substance cannot be used for God since it exists in the outside world and accepts its opposites. According to Elias, the being that exists on its own must have life and speech/*nātiq*. For this reason, while God is a substance, he is composed of three entities/*uqnūms*: essence, life and speech.<sup>26</sup> While proving the Trinity, Elias tries to reach a conclusion by using Islamic terminology.

The main discussion of the second session continues on the nature of Jesus and the incarnation of God into him. Accordingly, Elias, who is a Nestorian, tries to prove the belief that Jesus had two natures, unlike the Jacobites and Melkites. To avoid the proposition "Jesus is God", Elias defends the idea that divinity is incorporated.<sup>27</sup>

The subject of the third dialogue of Elias with Abū'l-Qāsim is quite significant. Here, Elias claims that Christians are people of tawhid and tries to explain this claim through the Qur'anic verses. Elias interprets many Qur'anic verses and tafsir texts from his perspective to confirm his belief system through the holy Scripture that the interlocuter believes.<sup>28</sup>

The fourth session is about the determination of Christianity through a context of mental and divine miracles. Here, Elias was influenced by Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873). There is also a story about the Christian life being ruled by God. He also argues that this religion is based on rational foundations in the background that different nations, from Greek philosophers to Byzantium, Armenians to Persians and Turks to Chinese, share the Christian faith.<sup>29</sup>

In the fifth session, Elias gives place to his statement of faith regarding his Christian thought. He also elaborates on his views on theology. Elias insists that Christian thought is based on tawhid and wrote a treatise

<sup>24</sup> İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 4-35.

<sup>25</sup> İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 216-217.

<sup>26</sup> Mehmet Nesim Doru, "Süryani Düşüncesinde Nusaybinli İliya'nın Önemi ve 'Kitabu'l-Mecālis' Adlı Eserinde Tanrı Görüşünün İslam Felsefesi ve Kelamı Açısından Değerlendirilmesi", Milet ve Nihal 8/2 (2011), 70-72; Seleznyov, "Seven Sessions or Just a Letter? Observations on the Structure of the Disputations between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī", 438; İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 28-29.

<sup>27</sup> İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 36-63; Muhammet Tarakçı, "Nestorius ve Kristoloji", Uludağ Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi 19/1 (2010), 226-237; Talha Fortacı, Doğuşundan Günümüze Nestürî Kilisesi (Ankara: Eskiye, 2018), 47-57.

<sup>28</sup> İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 64-83.

<sup>29</sup> İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 84-93; Seleznyov, "Seven Sessions or Just a Letter? Observations on the Structure of the Disputations between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī", 442.

on this claim. While Elias emphasizes that there should be only one creator, based on the categories of existence and cosmological evidence, he holds that this does not contradict the Trinity.<sup>30</sup>

In the sixth chapter, Elias makes some linguistic comparisons between Syriac and Arabic.<sup>31</sup> He argues that Syriac is superior to Arabic and also emphasizes the superiority of the Syrians' proficiency in discussing theology and philosophy. In addition, he underlines that science and philosophy passed to Arabs through Syrians and tries to persuade Abū'l-Qāsim to this claim.<sup>32</sup>

In the seventh session, Elias indicates that it is possible to talk about the potential influence of the stars on cosmological events. According to him, in the context of universal issues, for example, it is evident that the approach of the sun or the states of the moon are effective on the world. On the other hand, he opposes that celestial objects are effective in people's relations with each other. Because he acknowledges that human beings can prefer their choices freely, also he opened the issue of the soul to discussion and referred to the need for a mutual law in Muslim-Christian relations.<sup>33</sup>

Samir Khalil Samir, who is known for his research on Eastern Christianity, reports that *Kitāb al-majālis* was examined by Abu'l-Farac Abdallah ibn Tayyib (1043)<sup>34</sup>, the assistant of the patriarch. It is stated that Elias' text was approved and well received by the Patriarch, in accordance with the procedure for the clergy to send the works written by the clergy to the Patriarch for approval.<sup>35</sup>

In the context of the *Kitāb al-majālis*, it is useful to keep some issues in mind while tracing Muslim-Christian relations. Although this work implies a dialogic discourse, it should not be forgotten that it is unliteral. Because what Abū'l-Qāsim says in the discussion is transmitted from the scope of Elias's narrations. Looking at the layout of the text, one can see the Marwānid wazir asks only short questions and Elias answers by presenting only the Christian thought of the period. During the discussions, after the word goes back to Abū'l-Qāsim, the wazir's short questions are answered in long passages and a new session starts. The extent of the objections of the Marwānid wazir is not discussed in these sessions. One of the sound evidence is the correspondence between the two, apart from *Kitāb al-majālis*. The letters, which cover more than half of the *majālis*, undoubtedly indicate that some issues have not been clarified in these sessions. However, in the letters, Elias even proved the basic propositions of Christian thought with Islamic terminology, recited various sessions and gave detailed and long answers to Abū'l-Qāsim's short letters.<sup>36</sup>

7

### 3. Ethics of Mutual Discussion: Respect for the Interlocutor and Freedom of Expression

At the beginning of the book, Elias mentions in detail the tone of the discussion and how it progressed and continued with an approach beyond a mutual polemic. Elias stated clearly that he would not speak to the wazir in a polemical and pugilistic discussion ground and wants to free himself from this attitude. In response, the wazir expresses his intention to only seek answers to his questions about the Christian faith.<sup>37</sup> This situation indicates that both parties are to understand each other.

Elias starts the first session by praising wazir, Abū'l-Qāsim, who kindly invited him to the palace.<sup>38</sup> Although they share quite the opposite opinions, a friendship has developed between them, and both sides understand this friendship from the first session. In this context, Elias, who understands Abū'l-Qāsim's

<sup>30</sup> İliyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 94-104; Matrān Nasibin İliyā, "Risāla fi Hudūs al-'ālam va Vahdāniyya al- Ḥālik Taqakadasa Ismahu va Taslis al-Eqānim", *Vingt Traités Philosophiques et Apologétiques d' Auteurs Arabes Chrétiens du IXe au XIVe Siècle*, ed. Paul Sbath (Cairo: H. Friedrich et Co., 1929), 75-103.

<sup>31</sup> Linguistic comparisons and debates about superiority between Arabic and Syriac language, see Ayşe İçöz, "Doğu Hıristiyanlarının Arapça'yı Yazı Dili Olarak Benimseme Sürecinde Gösterdikleri Farklı Yaklaşımlara Genel Bir Bakış", *Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 14 (2019), 87-110.

<sup>32</sup> İliyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 105-138; Bertaina, "Science, Syntax, and Superiority in Eleventh-Century Christian-Muslim Discussion: Elias of Nisibis on the Arabic and Syriac Languages", 200-204; John W. Watt, "Graeco-Syriac Tradition and Arabic Philosophy in BarHebraeus", *The Syriac Renaissance*, ed. Herman Teule - C. F. Tauwinkl (Paris: Peeters, 2010), 123-135.

<sup>33</sup> İliyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 139-162.

<sup>34</sup> Abu'l-Farac, a contemporary of Elias, wrote works on theology and morality as well as being a physician. Ibn Abi 'Uşaybi'a, 'Uyūn al-anbā' fi ṭabaqāt al-aṭibā', 298-300.

<sup>35</sup> Samir, "İliyā al-Nasibini (975-1046 A.D.) wa-l-wazir Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribi (981- 1027 A.D.)", 448; Martino Diez, "The Profession of Monotheism by Elias of Nisibis: An Edition and Translation of the Fifth Session of the *Kitāb al-majālis*", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28/4 (02 Ekim 2017), 494.

<sup>36</sup> Seleznyov, "Seven Sessions or Just a Letter? Observations on the Structure of the Disputations between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī", 163-263.

<sup>37</sup> İliyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> İliyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 4-5.

questions about Christian thought, tries to clarify the subject with his writings. Here, Elias does not build his defense based on struggle and rejection. On the contrary, he listens to understand the interlocutor.<sup>39</sup> As can be seen, the members of different religious traditions try to understand each other and also can freely express their opinions without any restrictions on this issue in the Islamicate.

The famous Christian researcher on Syriac thought, Samir Khalil, states that Elias learned a lot from these visits and correspondence. According to Khalil, through these sessions, Elias wised up on how to involve in a discussion, on which context to continue the discussion with his interlocutor, where to keep quiet and how to respond to his interlocutor. These should be the fundamental rules of any dialogue with someone who has an opposing view. By giving Elias as an example, Khalil recommends a calm and quiet attitude in order to understand the opinion of the interlocutor. In this context, he argues that Elias did not choose the path of dispute/jadal but acted calmly and defended the Christian religion. Khalil thinks that his positive and calm manner of Elias does not drive him from ingratiating himself with the wazīr.<sup>40</sup> Of course, the most important reason why Elias was able to lead the discussion with great maturity without failing to show respect to his interlocutor is hidden in the fact that his interlocutor, the Marwānid wazīr Abū'l-Qāsim, responded with the same calmness, sincerity and understanding. Otherwise, it would be impossible to discuss different ideas on the same plane and the sessions/assemblies that were the source of Elias' book would never have occurred. Khalil should have also touched on this point and appreciated the attitude of the wazīr.

8 According to Khalil, Elias listened to his interlocutor with understanding and clarified the issue from his perspective. He tries to explain this by giving an example from the seventh session. So, in the seventh session, the wazīr requests the clergy to pray for him. On the other hand, Elias expresses what prayer means in Christian thought before fulfilling this request. He states that the clergy does not pray for worldly matters such as prolonging the life of people or getting plenty of sustenance.

On the contrary, he expresses that he prays for realizing what is good for the person and for him to have good intentions. Elias specifically mentions that the wazīr was satisfied with this information. Then he states that he will pray for him. In the context of this narrative, Samir Khalil draws attention to Elias' understanding and affirmative endeavor in the discussion. Through this example, he mentions that Elias generally 'does not close the door in the face of the interlocutor' and follows a middle path, he reveals his intention by exposing all facets of the issue, and thus the sessions are held.<sup>41</sup> The fact that Elias took part in discussion with such an attitude indicates that the Marwānid wazīr, who was his addressee, acted with a similar point of view in the sessions.

*Kitāb al-majālis* also exhibits that the leading clergyman of a different religious tradition, under the Marwānid domination in the Islamic geography at the beginning of the 11th century, expressed his thoughts quite comfortably and freely. The fact that Elias talked about many issues, from theology to language, in the presence of Abū'l-Qāsim, one of the wazīrs of the Marwānid palace, is not just because he took into account his interlocutor and clearly expressed his intentions. The metropolitan archbishop of Nisibis Elias is naturally in the position of defending his own religious thought. However, this aspect of the stream of Islamic thought, which gives him this opportunity and provides a free environment, should not be ignored.

#### 4. The Practices of Producing Answers in *Kitāb al-majālis*

With the encounter of Muslims with Christians, different issues from theology to morality have been discussed. In particular, apologetics such as Yūḥannā ad-Dimashqī (679-750) used the Qur'anic verses to prove the nature of Jesus Christ and the creed of the Trinity.<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting that the concepts constructed by Islamic philosophy are used by Syriac philosophers such as Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (893-974).<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Elias of Nisibis frequently resorted to these two methods in proving his claims in this context.

<sup>39</sup> Samir, "İliyya al-Nasibini (975-1046 A.D.) wa-l-wazir Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribi (981- 1027 A.D.)", 447.

<sup>40</sup> Samir, "İliyya al-Nasibini (975-1046 A.D.) wa-l-wazir Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribi (981- 1027 A.D.)", 454-455.

<sup>41</sup> İliyyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 154-156; Samir, "İliyya al-Nasibini (975-1046 A.D.) wa-l-wazir Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribi (981- 1027 A.D.)", 455-458.

<sup>42</sup> John of Damascus Saint, *Writings*, çev. Frederic H Chase (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1981), 157-160.

<sup>43</sup> Yahya ibn 'Adi - Emilio Platti, *La grande polémique antinestorienne de Yahya b. 'Adi* (Lovanii: E. Peeters, 1981), 26-38; Mehmet N. Doru, "The Analysis of Yahyā Ibn 'Adī's Metaphysical Opinions", *Parole de l'Orient*, (2012), 432-451.



#### 4.1. Using Islamic Terminology

After transferring different philosophical doctrines to the Islamic world through translation activities, Islamic thought created its own conceptual infrastructure from theology to cosmology. In this way, it reaches a different philosophical level. On the other hand, Christian and mostly Syriac scholars did not gain momentum. The fact that Arabic is already the language of philosophical and scientific treatises, especially in the 11th century, implies the existence of a terminology unique to Islamic thought. Thus, it reveals the reason why the Syriac scholars produced their texts in Arabic.

Furthermore, a comparison between the two languages in one of the sessions between Elias and Abū'l-Qāsim indicates this. The use of Arabic in transferring this discussion ground to writings can be considered a reference to the philosophical depth of this language. Although Elias emphasized the archaicity of the Syriac language and Syriac thought in the sixth assembly/session of *Kitāb al-majālis*, it is remarkable that he wrote the text in Arabic. Moreover, while proving the basic principles of Christian thought, for example, the Trinity, Elias gives place to the conceptual infrastructure of the Islamic thought tradition. This manifests in how the Syriac philosophers describe their thoughts in Arabic with this conceptual framework- before and succeeding Elias.

The trinity-tawhid discussion on the unity of God, which is the subject of the first session between Elias and the Marwānid wazir, points out how Elias made Islamic concepts functional at the point of proving the Trinity and the oneness/unity of God.

In the first session, Trinity and tawhid are discussed in the context of God's substance/being *jawhar*. In the introductory section, the wazir mentions that he does not accept the characterization of Christians as infidels and polytheists, referring to a story he experienced. According to this narrative, Abū'l-Qāsim fell ill on the way from Diyarbakir to Bitlis and found healing in a monastery where he took shelter. For this reason, he states that he does not want to regard Christians as infidels and polytheists but still has doubts about them. Here is Elias trying to answer the wazir's questions about God.<sup>44</sup> In the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, the Marwānid wazir expresses his doubt about the Christians' presentation of God as a substance with three hypostasis/*uqnūms*. While producing answers, Elias also clarifies the subject through the same concepts.

Elias insisted that God is a substance/*jawhar* in terms of his "self-existence/*Qāim bi nafsihi*". According to him, the need for a self-existing being at the point of the existence of the world necessitates the existence of God. However, Abū'l-Qāsim mentions that the substance cannot be said for God in terms of being observed in the outside world and accepting the accident/*a'rād*. Elias, on the other hand, argues that the acceptance of God as "self-existence/*Qāim bi nafsihi*" in Islamic thought can mean that God occupies space and that he will accept its opposites. So, he claims that the substance also means existence on its own. For this reason, the fact that God is a substance/*jawhar* does not mean that he occupies space and accepts opposites. According to wazir, if God's being is a substance, it would be indicated that he is a matter. Responding to the wazir's objection, Elias argues that the state of existence alone is not a reference to the matter/*jism* in the continuation of the discussion. In his opinion, everything in the world is an object/*jism*. In addition, if there is no substance/*jawhar* other than the matter/*jism*, then there should be no other being in the world other than the matter with attributes such as living/*hayy*, doer/*fā'il*, omnipotent/*kādir* and scholar/*ālim*. However, Elias states that Muslims classify these attributes to God. So, God's being a substance cannot be proof of his matter/*jism*. The last objection of the wazir regarding God's being a substance is about the substance that occupies space and accepts the accidents/*a'rād*. Elias thinks that the expression "self-existence/*Qāim bi nafsihi*" in Islamic philosophy is equivalent to the " *jawhar* " concept in Syriac. According to him, since everything that exists on its own is called *jawhar* in Arabic, God is also a substance/*jawhar*. Otherwise, he states that Muslims should create another concept of self-existence.<sup>45</sup>

As seen in this discussion, Elias once again uses references from Islamic philosophy to prove the Christian understanding of God. In this way, he attempts to construct the philosophical basis of God's being

<sup>44</sup> Īliyā, Kitāb al-majālis, 5-9.

<sup>45</sup> Īliyā, Kitāb al-majālis, 9-17.

the only one substance/*jawhar* with three hypostasis/*aqanim*, that is, the creed of the Trinity. To summarize, Christians tend to express God's existence in the context of the Trinity, his substance/*jawhar* and accidents/*a'rād*. The source of this is Aristotle's definition of the substance (ousia) as existing independently and not in a subject. Islamic philosophers accept the substance/*jawhar*, but they do not acknowledge to attribute the concept of *jawhar* to God. Because the concept of *jawhar* is necessarily related to space and time, but there is no space and time for God. In other words, God's existence is unique and unique to itself. Otherwise, it is foreseen that the principle of tawhid will be broken down and it will lead to misunderstandings such as Trinity.<sup>46</sup>

For this reason, Elias insists on God's being the substance. To explain the Trinity and to prove his claim, he invests an effort for his hypostases that in the sense of persons/natures of God, do not harm his unity. It should be noted that Elias focuses on dealing with the subject within Islamic thought and attempts to correct the views of Islamic philosophers on the subject. According to Elias, God is a substance/*jawhar* as a "*Qāim bi nafsihī*" and is a being '*hayy*' with life and is '*nātiq*' with speech/*nutq*. Thus, God is an entity that embodies three natures/hypostases consisting of essence/*zāt*, life/*hayy* and speech/*nutq*. Therefore, there are not three Gods, but the only being that includes this triple structure. In this respect, Elias proves the Trinity by attributing existence to God's essence, speech to the word/Jesus Christ, and life to Holy Spirit/Ruh al-Quds. Abū'l-Qāsim, on the other hand, objects with a Mu'tazilite perspective<sup>47</sup>, stating that such an approach will lead to the multitude of ancient beings (*ta'addūd al-kudamah*). Although Elias does not go into the details of his objections on this particular subject, his objection to the Islamic Kalām tradition takes our attention. Because Elias deals with the *hypostasis* in the Trinity through the relationship between essence and divine adjective (*Zāt-sıfat*) in Islamic theology, and according to Ahl as-Sunnah theologians, he shows that God is omniscient/*alīm* with knowledge/'*ilm* and speaker/*mutakallim* with word/*kalām* and omnipotent/*kadīr* with might/*qudrat*. According to him, if the belief in the Trinity requires polytheism, the Ahl al-Sunnah tradition goes beyond this point, indicating the relationship between essence and divine adjective. In these debates, Elias refers to the objections put forward by the Christians before.<sup>48</sup> Also, Elias repeats the sun metaphor used by previous Christian thinkers such as Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī to describe the Trinity. Accordingly, while the Father is the sun, the Son is the sun's rays and the Spirit is the sun's heat. In the end, there are no three different things, these are the three qualities of the sun and it is essentially one being.<sup>49</sup>

Elias tries to prove the *uqnūm* issue with the verses associated with *taj̄sīm* (embody, anthropomorphism) in the Qur'an. He claims that Muslims interpret expressions such as "the hand of God"<sup>50</sup> as power on a reasonable ground, so the Word and Spirit can be handled intelligibly as *uqnūm*. In response to Elias, who multiplied the examples with his point of view on this matter<sup>51</sup>, wazīr Abū'l-Qāsim Maghribī states that these situations are beyond the apparent meaning and states that this will lead to unbelief.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, in discussing the deity of Jesus Christ, Ilia adopts a different approach when conveying that the Nestorian church, of which he is a member, has two unmixed human and divine natures in Christ Jesus. In this respect, he tries to explain that there is no bodily *hulul*/incarnation in the incarnation of divine nature but that there is a will-based *hulul*. He interprets the issue with the concepts of "*mashīat*, will, dignity" by benefiting from Islamic terminology. At this point, he draws a similarity between the realization of Allah's will without acting in the creation of the universe and *hulul*/incarnation.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Mahmut Kaya, İslam Kaynakları Işığında Aristoteles ve Felsefesi (İstanbul: Ekin, 1983), 209-231; Doru, "Süryani Düşüncesinde Nusaybinli İliya'nın Önemi ve 'Kitabu'l-Mecālis' Adlı Eserinde Tanrı Görüşünün İslam Felsefesi ve Kelamı Açısından Değerlendirilmesi", 65-70; İlhan Kutluer, "Cevher", İslam Ansiklopedisi (DİA) (İstanbul: TDV, 1993), 7/450-455.

<sup>47</sup> For further information about Mu'tazilite approach regarding to the attributes see Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī Qādī Abd al-Jabbār, Sarḥ al-uşul al-ḥamsa, thk. 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uṭmān (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1965), 151-298 (especially for refutation of Christian trinity, 291-298); Nader el-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes", The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 121-138.

<sup>48</sup> İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 17-23; Tahir Uluç, "Tevhīt-Teslis Polemiğinin İslām Felsefesindeki Yansıması: Yahyā bin 'Adī ve Makāle Fī't-Tevhīd Adlı Risalesi", Hitit Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi 5/9 (2006), 95-96.

<sup>49</sup> İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 24-25; Mehmet Nesim Doru, Süryanilerde Felsefe (İstanbul: Yaba, 2012), 142.

<sup>50</sup> Sād, 38/75, Mā'idah 5/64, 69.

<sup>51</sup> Hūd, 11/37, al-Qalam, 68/42, al-Baqara 2/115, 2/210, Tā-Hā 20/5.

<sup>52</sup> İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 26-30, 54-56.

<sup>53</sup> İliya, Kitāb al-majālis, 36-42.

Elias thinks that even Muslims see Jesus Christ as the Word of God “*Kalimatullah*” in the matter of *hulūl*, and this supports his argument. The wazir objects to this claim by stating that the formation of Jesus Christ as the word is not separate from other beings and cannot be considered separately without being created in the context of the command “*be!*”. On the other hand, Elias is convinced that there must be a special reason and meaning for the mention of Jesus separately. So, he argues that the Word of God is formed by the combination of “*nafs/soul*” and “*nutq/speech*”.<sup>54</sup>

Herewith it could be said that Elias transforms the conceptual framework of Islamic thought into a practice of producing an answer at the point of confirming the creed of the Trinity. This is because Islam was the dominant language of thought of the period. Before and after Elias, Christian scholars frequently used Islamic terminology in their argumentations.

#### 4.2. Vindication Based on the Interlocutor Scriptures

The dialogue between Elias and Marwānid wazir Abū'l-Qāsim proceeds within the framework of different sessions and topics. Concerning this study, the thread of the dialogue between them and the language and thought infrastructure used in the sessions are important. The subject of the third session indicates that the intellectual environment of the period had very wide freedom of expression and the freedom to express their thoughts openly. As a part of this, Elias claims that Christians are people of tawhid and at this point places the Qur'an at the center to prove it. This effort to prove through the sacred text of the interlocutor also points out how effective Islam and the Qur'an were in this period.

When attention is paid to the introduction of *Majālis*, it is inevitable to detect that Abū'l-Qāsim acknowledges that he does not want to see Christians as infidels and polytheists related to his illness story. However, the doubts about the Marwānid wazir are the main reason for these sessions. At this point, the subject of the third session is the verses in the Qur'an about Christians and to prove that Christians are also people of tawhid. This session occurs within the framework of the Marwānid wazir's statement that Christians are polytheists by referring to verses in the Qur'an and Elias' attempt to produce answers with the Qur'anic verses.<sup>55</sup> The inclusion of both sides in the discussion calmly and with an effort to understand the interlocutor, as reported by Elias, can be seen as a result of the effort to build a mutual understanding ground.

When Abū'l-Qāsim mentions the expression “Those who say that Allah is the third of three have become disbelievers...” in the 73rd verse of the chapter/sūrah of Mā'idah, Elias emphasizes that Allah makes a distinction between Christians in the Qur'an. In this respect, according to some of the verses, he claims that there are groups among Christians who can be called the people of tawhid. As regards him, different groups among Christians can be called the people of tawhid and polytheism, and the Qur'an refers to them. The point of the divergence for Elias is that, in the 113-115th verses of the chapter of Āl-'Imrān, it is stated that all “Ahl al-Kitab” (People of Book) are not the same and that there are righteous people among them who worship at night, recite the verses, believe in the hereafter, enjoying good and forbid evil, and compete in goodness. In this way, Elias argues that true Christians are muwahhid. At this point, Elias sees Marcionism, Manichaeism, Daysāniyya and the Trinitarians (Tristiyya) as members of the unbelief/shirk.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, Elias maintains the claim that Christians are monotheists through the verses of the Qur'an. For instance, in verse 62 of chapter al-Baqara, “Indeed, those who believe (Muslims) and Jews, Christians and Sabians/Mandaeans (each group in their own shari'ah) say, “Those who believe in Allah and the Last Day and do good deeds will have their reward with their Lord; They will not be feared, nor will they be sad' (it has been decreed)”. It means that Christians are people of tawhid. Elias thinks that those who believe in Allah and the Hereafter and do righteous deeds will attain salvation. On the other hand, the Marwānid wazir expresses the 85th verse of the chapter of Āl-'Imrān: “Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, (he should know that) it will not be accepted from him and he will be among the losers in the Hereafter.” In the framework of the statement, he objects to Elias' claim. Interestingly, the wazir instead of expounding the verse (2/62) in the

<sup>54</sup> Īliyā, Kitāb al-majālis, 44-46.

<sup>55</sup> Īliyā, Kitāb al-majālis, 64-83.

<sup>56</sup> Īliyā, Kitāb al-majālis, 64-66, 72-73.

chapter al-Baqara, voices that the verse (2/62) is abrogated with the al-Maidah 3/85. On the other hand, Elias prefers to leave discussing the al-Maidah 3/85 and concentrates on the concept of abrogation. Elias goes on to show that abrogation is evidence and states that since it is an informal sentence, it will not be in question and that abrogation will only occur when the provision is abolished. Moreover, it is noteworthy that he argues that abrogation means replacing a provision with a better one and that abrogation cannot be applied to theological issues.<sup>57</sup> Interpreting the concepts and controversial issues that appeal to the mind of the addressee demonstrates that Elias is quite familiar with the concept of abrogation.

Explaining that the verse in Surah al-Baqara is not abrogated, Elias opposes the claim that Jews, Christians and Sabians/Mandaeans will attain salvation after converting to Islam. According to him, if such a thing were in question, it would be meaningless and useless to express the religious traditions mentioned in verse. In addition, the fact that those who belong to these religious traditions were given rewards and salvation as a result of their conversion to Islam would create a problem for the people of other faiths, such as Magus/Zoroastrian, Hindu and pagans, to convert to Islam, and would result in a difference between them and the Jews, Christians and Sabians/Mandaeans. For this reason, it is out of the question for Christians to put forward the condition of entering Islam, and Christians are muwahhid.

Moreover, Elias shares Ibn Jarīr Tabarī's (d. 310/923) opinion on this verse and supports his claim. However, when Tabarī's opinion on this issue is thoroughly examined, it is fair to say that he states until a  
12 new divine law is revealed, the previous one is valid and must be practiced. According to Tabarī, those who follow the requirements of Judaism until Jesus Christ comes are the ones who attain salvation. Those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are the losers. Those who believe in Jesus as a prophet would find salvation. Later, if they do not follow the prophet Muhammad (pbuh), they will be disappointed.<sup>58</sup> In this respect, it becomes clear that there are some problems in Elias' narration of the subject from his own point of view. Moreover, it is quite significant that the Marwānid wazīr's thoughts on this issue are not included in the text.

In order to prove his claim, Elias states that although the Qur'an forbids marrying polytheist/mushrik women, he allows marriage with Christian women (2/220). It also provides evidence that the polytheists are mentioned separately from the People of the Book in the chapter of Hajj (22/17).<sup>59</sup> Elias particularly utilizes the Qur'anic verses so he can persuade his argument. For example, it is an effort to produce evidence by pointing out that the closest group to Muslims is those who say "We are Christians". In this regard, Elias cites the 82nd verse of the chapter of al-Mā'idah, which expresses the comparison of Jews and Christians. So, he goes for confirmation through the Qur'an by mentioning that Christians are closer to Muslims. Referring to Tabarī, who mentions that Jews killed prophets but Christians showed humility, he might aim to demonstrate that the closest group to Muslims is Christians, who are muwahhids.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout the session, Elias continues to emphasize the verses of the Qur'an that Christians are monotheistic. For example, in the chapter of Hajj (22/40), he proceeds from the fact that the name of Allah is mentioned in Christian temples. Similarly, he continues to mention that the polytheists should be killed in the chapter of at-Tawbah (9/5), with the exception of the People of the Book who are subjected to the jizya and that it can be eaten by their sacrifice (5/5). Thus, he associates all these verdicts with his claim that Christians are muwahhids. Another claim he put forward in this regard is that he claims that they are muwahhid, based on the verse (2/221) in the surah al-Baqara, which prohibits Muslim men from marrying polytheist women. Elias is not content with the verses of the Qur'an and seeks to prove his claim by referring to the commentators/mufasssirs. In the chapter of Mā'idah (5/66), he refers to the commentators who state that what is meant by the expression 'a people who take the middle path' is the People of the Book and that they are those who follow the books of Allah, accept the Torah and the Gospel and obey their orders. For this reason,

<sup>57</sup> Īliyā, Kitāb al-majālis, 67-69.

<sup>58</sup> Īliyā, Kitāb al-majālis, 70-72, 76-77; Ibn Jarīr Tabarī, Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī min kitābihi Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wil āy al-Qur'an, thk. B. 'Awwād Ma'rūf - I. Fāris Ḥurristānī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1994), I, 230-232.

<sup>59</sup> Īliyā, Kitāb al-majālis, 72, 74.

<sup>60</sup> Īliyā, Kitāb al-majālis, 77-79; Tabarī, Tafsīr, III, 148-149.

Elias insists that Christians are this group and shows evidence that he is the only group that accepts the Torah and the Gospel. Thus, he argues that the Qur'an describes Christians as people of tawhid.<sup>61</sup>

However, there seems to be a problem in Elias's reference to Mujāhid ibn Jabr al-Makhzūmī (d. 103/721), one of the early commentators, that he refers to those who follow the middle path as the People of the Book. Because no explanation can be found on this verse in the Tafsīr of Mujāhid and Abd al-Raḥmān Suddī (d.127/745).<sup>62</sup>

Despite the answers of Elias, Abū'l-Qāsim finally objects him by stating that the Christians mentioned in the Qur'an are different from those of his time. Elias opposition follows: If the Christians of this period were different from the previous ones, why are Christians still charged jizya, their sacrifices are eaten, and Muslims marry their daughters? Therefore, the claim that Christians have changed is seen as invalid by Elias. It is interesting that Elias mentions theological scholars as well as commentators at the point that Christians are monotheistic. Elias refers to the fact that Bāqillānī (d.403/1013), one of the important figures of Ash'ari kalam, stated that the Trinity is one-third, it is understood that he did not holistically examine the text. Bāqillānī, first of all, puts forward the claims of the Christians and then moves to criticism. However, Elias accepts only a part and sees it as a confession and claims that Christians are muvahhids.<sup>63</sup>

The Marwānid wazir cannot give a convincing answer to Elias' comments on the verses of the Qur'an and his effort to make Christians muvahhid in the *Majālis*. However, it should not be forgotten that the details of the dialogue between these two are only conveyed by Elias. So, the question of what Abū'l-Qāsim's answer was, can be only found as much as Elias reports.

## Conclusion

The aforementioned encounter, which is an answer to the question of how Muslim-Christian relations took place on the intellectual ground at the beginning of the 11th century, indicates that different religious traditions continued to exist freely with the dhimmi status under the Islamic reign. It is a necessity of Islamic morality that Muslims do not interfere with the way the interlocutor expresses himself, and they are even responsible for providing a free environment for non-Muslims to express their point of view about Islam and criticize its theology. It is noteworthy in this respect that the details of this discussion were written down by Elias of Nisibis and luckily reached the present day.

The fact that the sessions, in which the culture of criticism is openly exposed, deal with controversial issues in terms of Islam and Christianity, refers to the vitality of the dialogic relationship between the two traditions. Moreover, the effort of Christian scholars to defend the Trinity within the framework of the concept of one God shows that in this period, the dominant religious structure was Islamic thought. Accordingly, Elias takes advantage of Islamic terminology and refers to the Qur'anic verses to support his claims.

It is noteworthy that the debate has reached the present day in the context of the *Kitāb al-majālis*. This causes Elias lengthily conveys the propositions of his own tradition of thought and does not give enough space to the voice of the Marwānid wazir. Hence, it could be presumed that the Abū'l-Qāsim almost received satisfactory answers to the questions he asked or that he asked questions in order to explain some ambiguous parts of some issues. Sometimes, there is a suspicion that the questions were asked by Elias in a manner appropriate to the flow of the subject. The fact that the text was written down, at best, one year after the date of the discussion strengthens the opinion that there were many interventions in the construction process of the work. In any case, *Kitāb al-majālis* gives precious information on the methods of producing answers by explaining the issues of discussion between the two traditions in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The content of this text, which has survived in the context of the records of Elias, and the region in which it was written, reveal that the followers of different religious traditions of the 11th century lived together with cultural diversity. Moreover, *al-majālis* shows that the basic belief principles of Islam and Christianity are

<sup>61</sup> İliyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 72-75.

<sup>62</sup> Mujāhid ibn Jabr, *Tafsīr al-Imām Mujāhid ibn Jabr*, thk. M. 'Abd al-Salām Abū al-Nīl (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Ḥadīthah, 1989); Ismā'il ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Suddī, *Tafsīr al-Suddī al-Kabīr*, thk. M. 'Aṭā Yūsuf (al-Manṣūrah: Dār al-Wafā', 1993).

<sup>63</sup> İliyā, *Kitāb al-majālis*, 79-82; Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, III, 24-29; Ebūbekir Muhammed b. et-Tayyib Bāqillānī, *Kitābu't-Temhīd* (Beyrut: Mektebetu's-Şarkīyye, 1957), 98-103.

discussed in a very comfortable environment and that differences of opinion are accepted as an element of multiculturalism.

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## İslam Düşünce Geleneğinde Eleştiri ve Farklılıkları Gözetme: Nusaybinli İliya ve Mervânî Veziri Ebu'l-Kasım el-Mağribî Örneği

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### Genişletilmiş Özet

Bu çalışmada, İslam düşünce ve kültür tarihi boyunca farklı dini geleneklerin, kelimadan ahlaka kadar kendi görüşlerini ortaya koyabildikleri konusu üzerinde durulmuştur. Bu bağlamda eleştiri ve hoşgörü kültürünün, İslam tarihinde hâkim bir yaklaşım olduğuna bir örnek verilerek değinilecektir. Bu vesileyle 11. yüzyılın güçlü devletlerinden Mervânîler'in sarayında cereyan eden bir tartışma ele alınacaktır. Bu karşılaşmada Mervânî Veziri Ebu'l-Kasım el-Mağribî ile Nusaybin Metropolit İliya Müslüman-Hıristiyan teolojisine dair pek çok konuda tartışmıştır. İliya ile Mağribî arasındaki oturumlar, karşılıklı tartışma etiğinin önemli bir örneğini teşkil etmektedir. Nusaybinli İliya'nın 1026-1027 yılları arasında farklı zamanlarda gerçekleşen bütün oturumları Arapça olarak kaleme aldığı Kitâbu'l-Mecâlis, açık fikirli İslam düşünce geleneğinin somut örneklerinden biridir. Nitekim başka hiçbir metinde kaydı bulunmayan bu oturumlarda Tanrı'nın varlığından Ruh'a, teslisten İsa Mesih'in mahiyetine kadar teolojiye temas eden pek çok konunun açık ve özgür bir şekilde tartışıldığı görülmektedir. Üstelik İliya, Hıristiyan düşüncesinin temel ilkelerini, örneğin teslisi ispat ederken İslam düşünce geleneğinin kavramsal altyapısına da yer vermektedir. Teslisi kanıtlamak için Arapça cevher kavramını Tanrı'nın zatı için kullanırken araz ve sıfat kavramlarını da bahse konu etmektedir. Ayrıca teslisteki hipostazi, İslam teolojisindeki zat ve ilahi sıfat (Zât-sıfat) ilişkisi üzerinden ele almaktadır. İliya'nın İslam düşüncesinin kavramsal çerçevesini Hıristiyan teolojisini doğrulama noktasında bir cevap üretme pratiğine dönüştürdüğü anlaşılmaktadır. Bu durum Süryani filozofların düşüncelerini Arapça anlatma biçimlerinde kendini göstermektedir. İliya'nın bu oturumlarda Ebu'l-Kasım'ın sorularına cevap verirken Kur'an ayetlerini yeniden yorumlayarak teslis inancının tevhidî bir söylem olduğunu iddia etmesi oldukça ilginçtir. Ona göre Hıristiyanlar arasında tevhid ve şirk ehli olarak adlandırılacak farklı gruplar vardır ve Kur'an bunlara atıfta bulunmaktadır. Aslında İliya eleştirel söyleminde İslami terminolojiyi kullanmakta ve iddialarını bazı tefsir yöntemlerine ve Taberî, Mücâhid ve Süddî gibi bazı müfessirlere dayanarak kanıtlamaya çalışmaktadır. Ancak detaylı bakıldığında İliya'nın iddialarını desteklemek için Kur'an ayetlerinden yararlandığı görülebilir. Bir yılı aşkın bir süre devam eden bu tartışma ortamı hiçbir şekilde engellenmemiş ve taraflar nezaketi elden bırakmadan tartışmaya devam etmişlerdir. Bizzat İliya'nın metni üzerinden bu durumun izini sürmek mümkündür. Burada dönemin eleştiriye açık kültürel yapısı, bu tartışma ortamını bize aktaran Kitâbu'l-Mecâlis bağlamında incelenecektir. İliya'nın kayıtları bağlamında günümüze ulaşan bu metnin içeriği ve yazıldığı coğrafya, 11. yüzyılın farklı dini geleneklere mensup takipçilerinin kültürel çeşitlilikle bir arada yaşadığını ortaya koymaktadır.