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The Caliph, the Jew, and the Bishop: Power and Religious Controversy in the Georgian Life of John of Edessa

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Damien LABADIE, « The Caliph, the Jew, and the Bishop: Power and Religious Controversy in the Georgian Life of John of Edessa », dans G. Dabiri (éd.), *Narrating Power and Authority in Late Antique and Medieval Hagiography from East to West*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2021 (Fabulae 1), p. 43-58 [référence aux pages entre crochets]

[p. 43] The *Life of John of Edessa* is an interesting, though little studied, apologetic Christian text composed in the early Islamic era.¹ The narrative is primarily focused on the theological debate and thaumaturgic contest that took place at the court of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. 809), pitting the bishop, John of Edessa, against Phineas, a Jewish courtier. This short text deserves further literary and philological treatment than it has received thus far for it is a relevant specimen of the rich and abundant apologetic literature that was produced by Christians in a Muslim context. But, while modern scholarship has been interested mostly in the apologetic and theological features of this text, to-date no attempts have been made, as far as I am aware, to describe how the narrative is carefully elaborated from a literary point of view. Here, I will focus on one particular aspect: the literary construction of the caliph as a figure of authority in this Christian hagiographical text. I will explore how the anonymous author of the *Life of John of Edessa* defined and fashioned a Muslim authoritative figure along Christian lines and how he positioned this political character to mirror John's own religious authority and charisma in his support of the latter.

[p. 44] Manuscript Witnesses

The text is extant in two languages, Arabic and Georgian. The text was first written in

¹ For studies and short commentaries on this text, see: Caspar et al., 'Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien (1)', p. 156; Caspar et al., 'Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien (6)', p. 294; Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, II, pp. 25-26; Haddad, *La Trinité divine*, pp. 29-30; Kekelidze, *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur*, p. 480; Khairallah, 'La joute de Jean d'Édesse avec le juif Phinéas'; Lamoreaux, 'John of Edessa and Phineas the Jew'; Lamoreaux, 'The Life of John of Edessa'; Rosenkranz, *Die jüdisch-christliche Auseinandersetzung*, pp. 89-91.

Arabic and then translated into Georgian. As far as Arabic witnesses are concerned, four manuscripts have been identified. Unfortunately, all of these manuscripts are either lost or fragmentary. Therefore, we do not possess a complete copy of the Arabic text of the *Life of John of Edessa*. Herein is a summary of what is known about these four manuscripts:

- *K. W. Hiersemann, Kat. 500, Nr. 14.*² The University of Leuven in Belgium possessed this manuscript of Melkite provenance, from Sinai, probably dating back to the tenth century. Unfortunately, it was lost during World War II.³ A portion of it was edited in 1930 by Paul Peeters in the *Analecta Bollandiana*.⁴ It has been listed under number 14 in Hiersemann's catalogue.
- *Mingana Chr. Arab. add. 172.*⁵ Alphonse Mingana possessed two leaves of a Sinai manuscript preserving the table of its contents. Among the texts listed appears the *Life of John of Edessa*. Unfortunately, the rest of the manuscript no longer exists, either at Sinai or elsewhere. The two leaves were dated to the beginning of the fifteenth century on palaeographic grounds.
- *Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ 2252.* Rachid Haddad asserted, in a book written in 1985, that the Arabic text of the *Life of John of Edessa* was preserved in a manuscript held at the monastery of Dayr al-Mukhalliṣ in Lebanon.⁶ With the help of the monastery's superior, John C. Lamoreaux and Hassan Khairallah attempted to locate the text which Rachid Haddad alluded to, but the manuscript does not contain the *Life*. Instead, it contains a series of homilies by John Chrysostom.⁷
- *Sinai ar. 411.*⁸ A fourth copy of the Arabic *Life* is preserved, though in fragmentary form, at Mount Sinai.⁹ The manuscript was copied in the year 1287. This lacunar manuscript was edited and translated by John C. Lamoreaux and Hassan Khairallah in 2000.¹⁰

[p. 45] The Georgian witnesses of the *Life of John of Edessa* are the following:

- *British Library add. 11281.*¹¹ In Georgian, we possess a complete version of the *Life of John of Edessa*. It is only preserved in the British Library add. 11281 manuscript, which was copied in Palestine at the beginning of the eleventh century. This text was translated from a now lost Arabic recension of the *Life of John of Edessa*.¹² This Georgian text was edited and translated into Russian by Korneli Kekelidze in 1914 and then reprinted in

² The manuscript is described in Baumstark, *K. W. Hiersemann, Katalog 500*, pp. 10-12.

³ On the fate of this manuscript, see Strothmann, 'Die orientalischen Handschriften', pp. 286-87 and p. 292, n. 31; Outtier, 'Le sort des manuscrits', p. 378.

⁴ 'La passion de S. Michel le Sabaïte', ed. and trans. by Peeters, edition of the Arabic text and Latin translation on pp. 87-89.

⁵ Mingana, *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts, III*, p. 52.

⁶ Haddad, *La Trinité divine*, pp. 29-30.

⁷ See introductory remarks in 'The Arabic Version of the Life of John of Edessa', ed. and trans. by Lamoreaux and Khairallah, p. 443.

⁸ Kāmil, *Catalogue of All Manuscripts*, p. 43.

⁹ Only the beginning (ch. 1 and 2) and the end (end of ch. 12 and ch. 13 to 19) have been preserved.

¹⁰ 'The Arabic Version', ed. and trans. by Lamoreaux and Khairallah, pp. 450-60.

¹¹ See John Oliver Wardrop's appendix in Conybeare, *A Catalogue of the Armenian Manuscripts*, pp. 397-405.

¹² See introductory remarks in 'The Arabic Version', ed. and trans. by Lamoreaux and Khairallah, p. 447.

1961.¹³ My study below about the caliph's role is based on this Georgian recension.

• *Tbilisi Institute of Manuscripts S-425*. There is another Georgian witness to the *Life*, preserved in a shorter form and contained in a manuscript held at the Tbilisi Institute of Manuscripts. It is a commemorative text designed for liturgical reading on the occasion of the saint's feast on the thirteenth of November. It is a Georgian composition and not a translation from the Arabic. The manuscript preserving this liturgical service was copied by the hymnographer Michael Modrekili between 978 and 988. Though the text was not composed by Micheal Modrekili himself, the original author certainly made use of the *Life of John of Edessa*, in a form close to the text preserved in the British Library add. 11281. It was also edited by Korneli Kekelidze, in 1914 and then in 1961, together with the longer form of the *Life*.¹⁴

Date and Provenance

On the basis of manuscript evidence, the original Arabic text was produced at quite an early date, probably during the ninth or tenth century. The action takes place during the reign of Harun al-Rashid, who was caliph between 786 and 809, and we may conjecture that the text was produced during these years or a little afterwards. This *terminus a quo*, however, is far from secure. Since we know that the Georgian *Life* was known to the author of the commemorative service, which was copied by Micheal Modrekili, the *terminus ad quem* is accordingly set before Modrekili's *floruit*, which was between 978 and 988. Thus, the *Life* was translated into Georgian in the middle of the tenth century. Therefore, the Arabic text must have been produced in the first half of the tenth century at the latest.

As for John of Edessa, his historical reality remains elusive and uncertain. But, as Ignace Dick suggested, John of Edessa might be identified with the [p. 46] recipient of Theodore Abū Qurrah's *Treatise on the Veneration of Icons*, written around 800. Indeed, Theodore Abū Qurrah, bishop of Harran, wrote his work for a certain 'Anbā Yannah', (bishop John), who requested from him an apologetic tract defending the cult of icons. Accordingly, Anbā Yannah needed such a treatise so that he could use it against those who criticized the veneration of the 'Image of Christ' (*ṣūrat al-masīḥ*), a phrase that probably alludes to the holy mandylion of Edessa.¹⁵ If this is correct, Anbā Yannah's episcopacy would perfectly fit the chronological boundaries of Harun al-Rashid's reign and this Anbā Yannah could therefore be identified with bishop John of Edessa. Nonetheless, in the absence of other pieces of evidence, this assumption remains to be further investigated and supported.

¹³ 'Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna', ed. by Kekelidze, pp. 114-29. The previous edition appeared in Kekelidze, 'Žitie i podvigi', pp. 317-40.

¹⁴ 'Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna', ed. by Kekelidze, pp. 129-35. First edition in Kekelidze, 'Žitie i podvigi', pp. 340-48.

¹⁵ Cf. Dick, 'Introduction', pp. 39-40.

The production milieu of the *Life* can be mostly deduced from the manuscript tradition. Indeed, John's *Life* appears in manuscripts of Chalcedonian provenance: the Arabic manuscript K. W. Hiersemann, Kat. 500, Nr. 14 was copied at Mount Sinai, and the Georgian manuscript British Library add. 11281 was copied at the Orthodox Monastery of the Cross, near Jerusalem. In addition, John of Edessa is commemorated as a saint in Chalcedonian Georgian and Syrian liturgical services, as in Modrekili's commemorative notice and bishop Macarius III's calendar.¹⁶ As a consequence, it seems likely that the *Life of John of Edessa* was first written in an Arabic-speaking Melkite community in Syria, probably in Edessa, and was then copied, preserved and translated in Chalcedonian monastic circles in Palestine, Egypt, and Georgia.

Outline and Genre of the Story

According to the Georgian version contained in British Library add. 11281,¹⁷ the text opens with a description of a Jewish courtier named Phineas, who has succeeded in turning the caliph Harun al-Rashid against the Christians of his realm. Learning this, John, bishop of Edessa, goes to the church of the Image of Christ¹⁸ where he prays that God will grant him victory over Phineas. Seven days later, John receives a vision of the angel Gabriel, who assures him that he will be victorious. After gathering his fellow bishops, John goes to see the Commander of the Faithful, *amīr al-mu'minīn*, at Raqqa, in Northern Syria (the Georgian text uses the Arabic phrase *amīr al-mu'minīn* under the form *amiri momli*). The caliph greets him gladly and then summons Phineas for a [p. 47] theological debate with John. After a long dispute between John and Phineas, the caliph finally declares that he agrees with the bishop's arguments and wonders how Phineas cannot be convinced that God is triune. Then Phineas challenges John to perform miracles. John heals a demoniac, causes Phineas to lose his ability to speak, drinks poison, causes Phineas' hand to wither, and finally raises the caliph's daughter from the dead. This last momentous miracle impresses the caliph, who then takes important measures beneficial to Christians. The text concludes with the baptism of Phineas and his household.

Though we cannot absolutely dismiss John of Edessa's historical reality, it seems safe to assume that his *Life*, preserved in Arabic and Georgian, is fictional. It belongs to the literary

¹⁶ For the Arabic text of bishop Macarius's notice, see 'The Arabic Version', ed. and trans. by Lamoreaux and Khairallah, p. 445.

¹⁷ See 'Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna', ed. by Kekelidze, pp. 114-29.

¹⁸ It refers to the church of the Holy Mandyllion in Edessa. Kept in a church of Edessa and venerated among the most precious relics in the Christian East, this mandylion was a piece a cloth on which, according to tradition, Jesus pressed his face so that it retained the impression of his features (see Ševčenko, 'Mandyllion').

genre of the *majlis* (‘meeting’, ‘session’), in which Christians, Muslims, and Jews dispute and contend with one another about the truth of their faith in the presence of the caliph, who plays the role of arbitrator but who also takes a major part in these vivid conversations. Though such interfaith debates did take place at the caliphal court in Abbasid times, the *disputatio* of the bishop or monk in the caliph’s *majlis* emerged as a specific literary genre of Christian apologetics during the ninth and tenth centuries.¹⁹ These *majlis* texts stage fictional characters, be they Christians, Muslims or Jews, engaged in a theological and polemical contest about the superiority of one’s own religion. In most of them, the caliph or the *amīr* plays a central role and he is often presented as the main Muslim interlocutor of the Christian protagonist. The outcome of the session varies from one text to another. Either the Christian monk or bishop has the upper hand and may even succeed in converting the caliph, or is sentenced to capital punishment and dies a martyr. It is worth remarking that most of these texts, like the *Passion of Michael of Mar Saba*,²⁰ the *Disputation of the Monk Abraham with the Amīr ‘Abd al-Rahmān*,²¹ the *Debate of Theodore Abū Qurrah at the Court of al-Ma’mūn*,²² the *Life of Theodore of Edessa* (BGH 1744)²³ or the *Life of John* [p. 48] of Edessa were produced in Melkite circles in Palestine and Syria and share many literary motifs and *topoi*: the presence of a Jewish controversialist in the *majlis*,²⁴ the Christian hero’s preeminent rhetorical abilities,²⁵ the caliph’s knowledge of the Christian Scriptures,²⁶ miracles performed by the monk or

¹⁹ Griffith, ‘The Monk in the Emir’s Majlis’; Griffith, ‘Christians, Muslims and Neo-Martyrs’. Paul Peeters lists more than a dozen texts belonging to this literary genre (see remarks in ‘La passion de S. Michel le Sabaïte’, ed. by Peeters, pp. 94-97).

²⁰ This *Passion* exists in an independent form but it was later inserted into the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*. English translation in ‘The Georgian Version of the Martyrdom of Saint Michael’ ed. by Blanchard, pp. 149-63 and Latin translation in ‘La passion de S. Michel le Sabaïte’, ed. by Peeters, pp. 66-77. For secondary sources, see Roggema, ‘The Martyrdom of Michael of Mār Saba’ and Griffith, ‘Michael, the Martyr and Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery’.

²¹ *Le dialogue d’Abraham de Tibériade*, ed. and trans. by Marcuzzo. See also Swanson, ‘The Disputation of the monk Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī’.

²² *La discussion d’Abū Qurra*, ed. by Dick. Griffith, ‘The Qur’ān in Arab Christian Texts’.

²³ The text is preserved in Greek, Arabic, Georgian and Slavonic. The Greek version was published in *Žitie iže vo svjatyx otca našego*, ed. by Pomjalovskij. the Georgian version is in ‘Teodore Edeselis cxovreba’, ed. by Kekelidze. This text has received much scholarly attention: Vasiliev, ‘The Life of St. Theodore of Edessa’; Abel, ‘La portée apologetique’; Griffith, ‘The *Life of Theodore of Edessa*’; and Swanson, ‘The Christian al-Ma’mūn Tradition’ pp. 69-84.

²⁴ See *Passion of Michael of Mar Saba*, ch. 7-8 (‘The Georgian Version’, trans. by Blanchard, pp. 153-54); *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, ch. 86-91 (*Žitie*, ed. by Pomjalovskij, pp. 91-97); *Disputation of the Monk Abraham*, ch. 14, ch. 153, ch. 162 and ch. 213 (*Le dialogue*, ed. and trans. by Marcuzzo, pp. 268-71, 342-43, 346-47, and 366-67).

²⁵ This power of persuasion often leads to the conversion of the interlocutors or the surrounding listeners; see, for example, *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, ch. 89-90 (*Žitie*, ed. by Pomjalovskij, pp. 94-96).

²⁶ See *Life of John of Edessa*, ch. 12 (‘Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna’, ed. by Kekelidze, pp. 123-24); *Passion of Michael of Mar Saba*, ch. 7 (‘The Georgian Version’, trans. by Blanchard, p. 152).

bishop,²⁷ and the ordeal by poison.²⁸ The desire of their authors, namely, to defend Chalcedonian orthodoxy and to strengthen the sense of identity of the Melkite communities living in a Muslim environment may account for the production of such texts in the early Islamic period.²⁹ Aimed at such communities, these texts certainly intended to bolster the internal resistance of Melkite Christians and to offer a response to the temptation of conversion. In Sidney H. Griffith's words, these texts are fictions, 'artfully composed for apologetical/polemical purposes.'³⁰

Among these texts, the *Life of Theodore of Edessa* shares many features with the *Life of John of Edessa*, particularly as far as the *majlis* episode is concerned.³¹ Though the *Life of John of Edessa* was probably composed before the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, they were nevertheless written around the same time period and in the same Melkite milieu.³² However, the *Life of Theodore of* [p. 49] *Edessa*, much longer than the *Life of John*, diverges markedly in one aspect: Theodore manages to convert the caliph al-Ma'mūn after healing him.³³ This conversion, on which I will comment briefly in the concluding remarks, is a striking feature that sets the *Life of Theodore of Edessa* apart from the *Life of John of Edessa*.

The Figure of the Caliph in the Georgian *Life of John of Edessa*

Though Phineas remains the main opponent of John throughout the narrative, the caliph intervenes at crucial moments. Therefore, he does not appear as a secondary character but as a major player in the story, whose presence is essential for the unfolding of the plot. I will now concentrate on the three passages in which the Commander of the Faithful makes an appearance. First, in chapter five, as John draws near Raqqa to meet Harun al-Rashid, the caliph has a divine vision:

და ვ[ითარც]ა მიეახლნეს ქალაქსა მას რაკადსსა. იხილა ამირა

²⁷ These are mainly healing miracles. See *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, ch. 74-75 (*Žitie*, ed. by Pomjalovskij, pp. 78-79); *Life of John of Edessa*, ch. 13-17 ('*Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna*', ed. by Kekelidze, pp. 124-28; 'The Arabic Version', ed. and by Lamoreaux and Khairallah, pp. 451-54 and pp. 456-60).

²⁸ In this recurring motif, the Christian protagonist is asked to drink poison, but it has no effect on him. See *Passion of Michael of Mar Saba*, ch. 10 ('The Georgian Version', trans. by Blanchard, pp. 155-56); *Life of John of Edessa*, ch. 14 ('*Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna*', ed. by Kekelidze, pp. 125-26; 'The Arabic Version', ed. by Lamoreaux and Khairallah, pp. 452-53 and pp. 457-58); *Disputation of the Monk Abraham*, ch. 550-56 (*Le dialogue*, ed. and trans. by Marcuzzo, pp. 520-23).

²⁹ Griffith, 'The *Life of Theodore of Edessa*', p. 155.

³⁰ Griffith, 'Michael, the Martyr', p. 145.

³¹ See *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, ch. 86-91 (*Žitie*, ed. by Pomjalovskij, pp. 91-97). According to the text, an anonymous wealthy Jew arranged a debate with bishop Theodore in the presence of the caliph. Failing to gain the upper hand at the end of the dispute, the Jew is sent to prison and blinded. But Theodore intercedes for him and the Jew is miraculously cured. Like the *Life of John of Edessa*, the Jew receives baptism at the hand of the bishop.

³² 'La passion de S. Michel le Sabaïte', ed. by Peeters, pp. 89-91.

³³ *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, ch. 78-83 (*Žitie*, ed. by Pomjalovskij, pp. 80-88).

მომღმან ძილსა შინა ცეცხლი მოტყინარც: სახლსა შინა მისსა. აღგებული. და უმად რომელი ეტყოდა. ძილსა შინა თუსსა: აჰა ესერა მოწაფც ქრისტცსი მოვალს შენდა. ან იხილე ვ[ითა]რ იგი შეემთხვო მას. და დიდითა დიდებითა პატივ ეცმას. შემთხუევასა მისსა. ყოვლითა ძალითა შენითა. და პატივითა მიეგებე მას: რ[ათა] იდიდოს უფლებად და უელმნიფებად შენი: და ჰრქუა მას უმამან მან: და უკუეთუ არა ჰყო ესე. დაჰჰსნდეს და განქარდეს: ძალი და მეფობად შენი: და მოაკლდეს დღეთა შენთა: დაილივნენ ჟამნი შენნი. და აუფლე იგი ჰურიასა მას ზედა. ხ[ოლო] ჰურიად განაყენე მსხვლისა მის ზრახვისა მისისა-გან ბოროტისა: სიტყვს გებისა მისისა-გან. და ნუ უტეობ მძლავრობად. წინაშე შენსა. და ნუცა მიუშუებ სიტყვს-გებად: მოწაფისა ქრისტცს მიმართ. ა[რამე]დ სიტყვთა კეთილითა იტყოდის. წინაშე გონიერთა და მეცნიერთა და სწავლულთა. აჰა ესერა გრქუა შენ წინადასწარვე: და უწყებულ იყავ: რ[ამეთუ] მისცა ღმერთმან უელმნიფებად მოწაფესა ქრისტცსსა ამბა იოვანეს: თუ უნდეს მოაკუდინოს ჰურიად. და თუ უნდეს აცხოვნოს.

When they [John and the other bishops] drew near the city of Raqqah, the *amīr al-mu'minīn* saw a blazing fire while he was sleeping, and it was burning in his house. He heard a voice that told him in his sleep: 'Behold, the disciple of Christ is coming to you. Look how you will [p. 50] meet him and honour him with much praise! When you meet him, you will reward him with all your strength and honour so that he may glorify your rule and authority'. The voice said to him: 'If you do not do this, your power and kingship will be destroyed and annihilated. Your days will be fewer and your times will come to an end. Let him rule over this Jew! Stop this Jew in his inordinate thinking and impious dispute! Do not either let him commit violence in front of you or allow him to challenge the disciple of Christ. On the contrary, he [John] will utter beautiful words in front of the intelligent, the wise, and the learned. Behold, I am telling you this in advance so that you may know that God has given authority to the disciple of Christ, Abba John, who, as he wishes, will kill the Jew or grant him life'.³⁴

After this divine warning, the caliph goes out of the city with his troops to meet John, and the two greet each other:

მაშინ მოიკითხა ამბა იოვანე ამირა მომლი და მოილო მანცა ამირა მომლისა-გან. დიდითა პატივითა მოკითხვად კეთილად. და ჰრქუა ამირა მომღმან იოვანეს. ბრძანებულ არს ჩემდა ღმერთისა მიერ. წინამიგებვად და პატივი შენი. და დიდებად. და უმრავლცსი შენი პატივი დგას ჩემ თანა. და ითხოვე ჩემ-გან ყოველი რაფცა გნებავს საქმც შენი. მაშინ ჰრქუა იოვანე ამირა მომლსა: აკურთხენინ ღმერთმან დღენი შენნი და ნაყოფიერ ყავნ დავლად შენი და განგიგრძელენ მზც შენი. დაამტკიცენ მეფობად შენი. მაშინ ბრძანა. ამირა მომღმან გარდაყვანებად ამბა იოვანცსი: და მისთანათად მათ. და მოცემად საჰმრისა მათისა. ფართოებით ფ[რია]დ. და ეგრცთ უყვეს მათ. ვ[ითარც]ა ბრძანა.

Then, Abba John greeted the *amīr al-mu'minīn*, who also greeted him magnificently and with great honour. The *amīr al-mu'minīn* said to John: 'I was ordered by God to meet, honour, and praise you. But you will enjoy even greater honour with me. Ask me whatever you want to do'. Then John said to the *amīr al-mu'minīn*: 'May God bless your days, make your wealth fructify, extend your sun,³⁵ and strengthen your kingship!' Then, the *amīr al-mu'minīn* ordered for Abba John and those who were with him to be led away and given in great

³⁴ *Life of John of Edessa*, ch. 5 (translation mine; Georgian text in 'Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna', ed. by Kekelidze, pp. 117-118).

³⁵ The sun is, here, a symbol of the caliph's power.

abundance everything they needed. And they treated them as he had commanded.³⁶

[p. 51] Reading these two passages, it is interesting to note, first, that the caliph's authority is of divine origin. Indeed, as the vision reveals, God can put an end to the caliph's rule at any time. God is actually the principle that establishes the caliph's 'power and kingship' (*zali da mepobaj*), as the Georgian text states. Though this may come across as a *topos*, the salient point here is that the caliph is viewed in this Christian text as a perfectly legitimate ruler. Like the Christian monarch, the Muslim sovereign derives his power and authority from God, thus appearing and acting as a new Constantine in the *Life of John of Edessa*. But, secondly, the strength of the caliph's authority, as an earthly monarch, closely depends on his behaviour towards bishop John, who is himself entrusted with God's authority. As the text states, 'God has given authority to the disciple of Christ, Abba John'. Thus, if the caliph wants to preserve his authority, he has to respect John's divine authority. On the other hand, John respects and praises the caliph's authority when he says, 'May God bless your days, make your wealth fructify, extend your sun, and strengthen your kingship!' It is worth emphasizing as well that the same word, *qelmčipebaj*, meaning 'authority' is used in the Georgian text to refer to both the caliph's and the bishop's authority, respectively. To sum up, the text presents both characters as invested by God with authority. But the caliph's authority, as established and maintained by God, can only be efficient and enduring if it respects the authority that God has bestowed on Christian officials, especially John of Edessa. As a consequence, in the eyes of the Christian author of the *Life*, a good Muslim caliph is one who complies with God's authority, heeds His warnings, and obeys His orders, particularly when it comes to Christians, the chosen people of God.

In a second passage, in chapter twelve, at the end of the debate involving John and Phineas, the caliph intervenes and concludes the dispute. He defends John's theological stance, which the bishop had earlier expounded upon in front of Phineas:

მაშინ ჰრქუა ამირა მომღმან ჰურიასა: ვაჟლაქ ფინებ: რად ემტერები ქრისტეანობასა. მე ვითარ ვხედავ: ნ[ინაას]ნ[არმეტ]ტყ[უე]ლნი მათ ენამებინ. და ეგრჭთვე დაბადებად დაამტკიცებს სიტყუათა და თქუმულთა მათთა. და დავითს ნ[ინაას]ნ[არმეტ]ტყ[უე]ლსაცა ჰრწამს. სარწმუნოებად მათი: და გონებადცა მენამების. ვ[ითარმე]დ კაცი სამი არს. გონებად ფარული უჩინოდ. და სიტყუად შობილი გონებისა-გან მსგავსად განგებულებისა. და სულითა იყნოსებს კაცი. და ცხონდების. ესე სამინი კაცებისა-გან რ[ად]ქ[ამ]ს ერთი ამათგანი: განქარდეს სამთა ამათგანი: კაცისა-გან ჳორციელისა მოკუდეს და განქარდეს. და

³⁶ *Life of John of Edessa*, ch. 6 (translation mine; Georgian text in 'Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna', ed. by Kekelidze, p. 119).

ამათ სამთა შ[ორი]ს. ვ[ითარც]ა თქუა არა რად არს მას შინა რად-მე სახც. მიმსგავსებული: ერთი ერთისა: რ[ამეთუ] არცა გონებად მსგავსი არს სიტყვსად. და არცა სული მსგავსი არს გონებისად. და არიან იგინი ერთი ბუნებითა და გამოცხადებულ არს ან. ვ[ითარმედ] სამებად ერთი არს. და ერთი სამი არს განუყოფელად [p. 52] და განუშორებლად: ურთი-ერთას: და არცა ნებად. განუყოფილ: და არცა განზრახვად მათი განწვალებით: ერთი ერთისა-გან. გარნი ერთი ბუნება არს: და რადღამცა იყო უნათლცს ამისა. და უსარწმუნოცს ამისა. ოდესღა საქმენი შეეწყოდინ და ეწამებოდინ: და ჩუენცა თუალითა ვხედავთ. ჭეშმარიტად: ვ[ითარმედ] ერთი ესე სამი არს. და სამი ერთ არს: ესე არს კაცი. და კუალად ვიქცეთ ან თქუმულსა მას ღმრთისასა: მსგავსებად კაცისად მისა. რომელსა იტყვს ვქმნეთ კაცი ხატად და მსგავსად ჩუენდა: მაშა არა ვხედავა: რ[ამეთუ] მსგავსებად კაცისად მისა. ესე სამნი არიან. რომელ ესე არიან კაცსა შ[ორი]ს. გონებისა-გან უჩინოვსა. და სიტყუად შობილი მის-გან. და სული რომლისაგან იყნოსებს კაცი და ცხოვნდების.

Then, the *amīr al-mu'minīn* said to the Jew: ‘Woe to you, Phineas! Why are you hostile to Christians? As I can see, the prophets testify about them. Likewise, the book of *Genesis* confirms their words and sayings, and David the prophet³⁷ believes in their faith. And his [John’s] reasoning also convinces me that man is made of three parts: the hidden and invisible mind, the word that is begotten by the mind according to one’s intent, and the soul through which man breathes and lives. These three things are in men. When one of those three disappears, a man’s body³⁸ dies and disappears. And among these three things, as he said, there is no likeness or resemblance whatsoever between one another, for the mind is neither like the word nor the soul like the mind. However, they are naturally united into one. It is now obvious that the Trinity is one. And one is three wholly and indivisibly. They are not divided with one another as far as will is concerned, nor are they split up in their thought. But there is only one nature between them. And it should be even clearer and more convincing when the facts are presented in orderly fashion and confirmed by testimonies. In truth, we see with our own eyes that one is three, and three is one. Such is man! And now we return to the word of God, which he says about man’s likeness to him: “Let’s make man in our image and likeness”.³⁹ Therefore, how could I not see that man’s likeness to God consists in these three things that are found in him: the invisible mind, the word that is begotten from it, and the soul through which man breathes and lives?⁴⁰

[p. 53] The caliph here plays the role of an arbitrator between the two contestants. The author of the *Life* shows that Harun al-Rashid is clearly endowed with rhetorical authority. Not only does he put an end to the debate and chooses John as the winner, but he also stands out as a staunch and persuasive advocate of the doctrine of the Trinity. The caliph’s apologetic performance, echoing John’s earlier theological demonstration, is part and parcel of the portrait that is drawn by the author of the *Life of John of Edessa*. Although the text does not specify that the caliph sincerely believes in the Trinity, he is undoubtedly convinced by the logical foundations that support this doctrine since he quotes the Scriptures and appears to be

³⁷ It refers to the Psalms, of which king David is viewed as the author in Jewish and Christian traditions.

³⁸ Literally, ‘the bodily man’.

³⁹ Genesis 1.26.

⁴⁰ *Life of John of Edessa*, ch. 12 (translation mine; Georgian text in ‘Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna’, ed. by Kekelidze, pp. 123-24). In the Arabic version, only the last sentence of this chapter has been preserved.

knowledgeable in such theological matters. Thus, for the author of the *Life*, a worthy caliph should use his full rhetorical abilities in favour of Christian doctrines and ideas, without necessarily adhering to their fundamental tenets as a matter of faith.

A third and last passage, from chapter eighteen, deserves mention here as well. It recounts the series of actions that the caliph took for the benefit of his Christian subjects after John had raised his daughter from the tomb:

მაშინ ბრძანა დაცადებად მტერობად ბერძენთა თანა: და ბრძანა გამოცხადებად შჯულისა და ყოველთა წესთა ქრისტიანეთაჲსა და სიხარულსა მათსა: და სამსახურებელთა მათთა უშიშად და უფარველად: და აღჰკადა ქრისტიანეთა-გან ყოველი ხარკი და ჭირი და წუნობა: რ[ამეთუ] ვერვინ იკადღებდა გამოცხადებად განსაცდელთა მათ-გან. რომელი შეემთხუეოდა ქრისტიანეთა სისხლისა მის-თვის: და წარწყმედისა კაცთაჲსა. მათ ჟამთა შინა: და ბრძანა აღშენებად ეკლესიათაჲ. ყოველსა საბრძანებელსა შინა მისსა. ხ[ოლო] ამბა იოვანწს-თვის. ბრძანა ყოველივე რაჲცა ინება მიმადღებად მისსა.

Then, he [the caliph] ordered all hostilities to cease with the Romans.⁴¹ He also ordered for the Christians' laws and all their customs to be made public, and for them to rejoice and gather for their services fearlessly and without hiding. He withdrew from Christians all taxes, burdens, and grievances for, in those days, nobody dared to denounce the hardships that befell Christians, because people feared for their blood and life. He ordered for churches to be built in all his realm and Abba John to be granted anything he desired.⁴²

The Arabic version presents here a noteworthy variant. It states that the caliph would have accepted to convert to Christianity but he feared his co-religionists' hostile reaction: 'He [the caliph] also lifted oppression from the people in general. [p. 54] Indeed, if it had not been that his co-religionists would have hated to hear it, he would have entered the Christian faith'.⁴³ Be that as it may, the caliph is presented in this short extract as a fully-fledged monarch, enjoying wide political and diplomatic powers. He ceases all his assaults against the Christians, enables them to practise their religion freely, and has many new churches built in his realm. The caliph is, thus, ideally portrayed as a courageous and strong sovereign, who easily institutes measures that may displease his co-religionists. Unimpeded by internal strife or opposition, the Muslim caliph, as described by the author of the *Life*, is characterized by his strong political will.

Having read and commented on these three passages, in which the caliph makes an appearance, we now have a better understanding of what the ideal Muslim sovereign in the

⁴¹ The term *berzenni* can also be translated as 'Greeks'. It refers to Melkite Christians. In the Arabic version, the word 'Romans' (*rūm*) is used (see 'The Arabic Version', ed. and trans. by Lamoreaux and Khairallah, p. 454 and p. 460).

⁴² *Life of John of Edessa*, ch. 18 (translation mine; Georgian text in 'Žitie i podvigi sv. Ioanna', ed. by Kekelidze, pp. 128-29).

⁴³ 'The Arabic Version', ed. and trans. by Lamoreaux and Khairallah, p. 454 and p. 460.

eyes of a Christian writer of the ninth or tenth century should be. Interestingly, these three passages highlight, above all, his authoritative dimension. He is first and foremost presented as a figure of power, entrusted with a multifaceted authority. First, he embodies *divine authority* since his kingship is established and confirmed by God, with one caveat: he should listen to His commandments and protect Christians' rights. Second, he embodies *rhetorical authority* insofar as his words are strong and persuasive enough to establish religious truth. Third, he embodies *political authority* because he is able to take unpopular but necessary measures to guarantee full freedom of religion for all his Christian subjects. Ideally portrayed, the caliph thus appears, in this text, as a literary invention. But by staging such a Christianized caliph, the *Life of John of Edessa* aptly expresses what Christians desired of the Muslim sovereign and what kind of authority they wished him to wield and apply for the benefit of his subjects, and particularly, his Christian subjects.

Expounding such a positive appreciation of the caliph, the *Life of John of Edessa* may be considered, thus, as a valuable witness to the 'Christian al-Ma'mūn tradition'. Transmitted and attested in Christian texts of the early Islamic period, such as the *Life of Theodore*, *Abū Qurrah's Prayer for al-Ma'mūn*⁴⁴ or the *Wisdom of the Sibyl*,⁴⁵ this tradition presents a very positive view of caliphs, especially al-Ma'mūn (813-33), who embodies all the virtues of the Muslim monarch and whose benevolent and fair attitude was cultivated and cherished in the memory of Melkite Christians.⁴⁶ Praised for his religious openness and his encouragement of inter-confessional debates, the caliph al-Ma'mūn figures prominently in these texts and acts as a protector of his Christian subjects against the assaults of Jews and Muslims alike. For example, striking similarities between the *Life of John of Edessa* and another text, the *Debate of Theodore* [p. 55] *Abū Qurrah at the Court of al-Ma'mūn*,⁴⁷ may be noticed. Belonging to the *majlis* genre, the *Debate of Theodore Abū Qurrah at the Court of al-Ma'mūn* is an important witness to the Christian al-Ma'mūn tradition. According to this text, the great theologian and controversialist Theodore Abū Qurrah is summoned by al-Ma'mūn in the year 829 to take part in a series of debates with Muslim scholars. Using quotations from the Qur'ān in his apology of the Christian faith, Abū Qurrah finally defeats his opponents and is then richly rewarded by the caliph. What is noteworthy is that Harun al-Rashid, in the *Life of John of Edessa*, shares many features with the figure of al-Ma'mūn as presented in the *Debate of Theodore Abū*

⁴⁴ See *Abū Qurrah's Prayer for al-Ma'mūn*, ed. by Swanson, pp. 87-90.

⁴⁵ See the third Arabic recension (Arab. III) in *Die Erzählung der Sibylle*, ed. by Schleifer.

⁴⁶ See Swanson, 'The Christian al-Ma'mūn Tradition', particularly, pp. 85-86.

⁴⁷ *La discussion d'Abū Qurra*, ed. by Dick.

Qurrah: both take the initiative of inviting the bishop to the debate, they are well-disposed towards the Christian contestant, both act as fair arbitrators and they kindly reward the Christians for their loyalty and unflinching faith. Furthermore, we should not forget that Harun al-Rashid is al-Ma'mūn's father and that John of Edessa and Theodore Abū Qurrah are both Melkite bishops from Syria, the former being, perhaps, the recipient of Abū Qurrah's *Treatise on the Veneration of Icons*.⁴⁸ Thus, though we cannot ascertain that the *Debate of Theodore Abū Qurrah* exerted any sort of influence on the redactor of the *Life of John of Edessa*, what is obvious is that Harun al-Rashid, in the *Life*, appears as an idealized figure filtered through the lens of the 'Christian al-Ma'mūn tradition'.

Concluding Remarks

A final feature needs further commenting. The caliph, though impressed by the Christian faith and doctrine, does not convert to Christianity. From this point of view, the *Life of John of Edessa* stands in stark contrast to the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, in which the caliph receives baptism in the Tigris, makes public profession of his faith and is ultimately martyred by the angered crowd.⁴⁹ John's victory could be said to be incomplete; though he elicited beneficial measures for his fellow Christians, he did not manage to convert the sovereign. Nevertheless, the author of the *Life of John of Edessa* seems to imply that the conversion of the caliph could lead to worse consequences for Christians. Because he remains Muslim, the caliph is unchallenged and does not run the risk of being overthrown and killed for his apostasy. In the eyes of the author of the *Life*, it is necessary for the caliph to cling to his native religion so that he may remain uncontested in his realm and enforce his political measures unimpeded. Wielding full [p. 56] authority, the caliph, then, may pursue his religious and political agenda, including the protection of Christians. As a consequence, the fact that the caliph should remain a Muslim is a necessary condition for the well-being of Christians. Though conveyed in a legendary narrative, this moderate view expresses a deeply realistic attitude toward the caliph. The author appears to be fully conscious of the limits of Christian proselytizing in a Muslim context. But these limits are not to be crossed if the Christians intend to live in safe conditions and under the protection of the caliph. Far from being a utopian revolutionary, like the author of the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, we may state that the author of the *Life of John of Edessa* stands out as a realistic conservative.

⁴⁸ See above, under the paragraph 'Date and Provenance'.

⁴⁹ See the *Life of Theodore of Edessa*, ch. 78-83 and ch. 107-111 (*Žitie*, ed. by Pomjalowskij, pp. 80-88 and 113-16). On the motif of the conversion of the caliph, see Binggeli, 'Converting the Caliph'.

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