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

Nikolai N. Seleznyov
Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies, National Research University
Higher School of Economics
nikolai.seleznyov@hse.ru

Abstract

The following article examines the structure of a remarkable Christian Arabic treatise from the eleventh century, the heyday of Arabic culture: the Book of Sessions (Kitāb al-majālis) of Elias of Nisibis (975-1046), metropolitan of the Church of the East. In this treatise, Elias presents his discussions with his Muslim interlocutor, the vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī (981-1027). The article compares the Book of Sessions with Elias’ Epistle to the vizier, taking into consideration some further documents that shed new light on the genesis of the Book of Sessions.

Keywords

Muslim-Christian dialogue – Arabic manuscripts – Elias of Nisibis – Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī – Book of Sessions – Kitāb al-majālis

Metropolitan Elias of Nisibis and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī

The following postscript to the old manuscript containing the Chronography, Elias of Nisibis’ principal historical work¹, provides basic biographical information about this author:

¹ London, BL add. 7197, fol. 41r.

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On the birth of Mār Eliaś, metropolitan of Nisibis, who wrote this book: He was born on the eve of Thursday, the 11th of the month Shbaṭ of the year 1286 of the Greeks, which was the 26th of the month of Jumāda I of the year 364 of the Arabs [=11 February 975 CE]. Then he was ordained a priest by Yūʿānis, bishop of the town of Shena, who later became catholicsos. [Yūʿānis] appointed him as a senior priest at the monastery of Abba Shemʿon opposite Shena, on Saturday, the 15th of the month of Elul of the year 1305 of the Greeks, which was the 7th of the month of Shaʿbān of the year 384 of the Arabs [=15 September 994 CE]. He was appointed, by the same catholicsos Yūʿānis, as a senior bishop of the diocese of [our?] Bēth Nūhadra on Sunday at the beginning of the Great Lent, the 15th of Shbaṭ of the year 1313 of the Greeks, which was the 29th of Rabiʿ I of the year 392 of the Arabs [=15 February 1002 CE]. The same Yūʿānis appointed him metropolitan of Nisibis on Sunday, the 26th Kānūn I of the year 1320 of the Greeks, which was the 24th of Rabiʿ 11 of the year 399 of the Arabs [=26 December 1008 CE].

Another biographical detail: in the fourth majlis of the Book of Sessions, Eliaś mentions that “at the monastery of Mār Michael in Mosul, there was a monk, a venerable old man named Yūḥannā, known as the Lame (al-ʿArāj),” and that he (Eliaś) “was one of his close disciples.”

Eliaś occupied the metropolitan see of Nisibis until his death. According to Ṣalībā ibn Yūḥannā (fourteenth century), whose testimony in the Book of Secrets (Asfār al-Asrār) has been accepted by modern scholars as trustworthy, Eliaś of Nisibis died on 10 Muḥarram 438 AH (which corresponds to 18 July 1046 CE). He was buried in the church of Mayyāfāriqīn, next to the grave of his brother Abū Saʿīd, mentioned at the end of the Book of Sessions.

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2 V.V. Bolotov, Ἰς ιστορία Πόλεως και του ναού της Ιερού Μονής Πατρολίων (On the History of the Syro-Persian Church), Χριστιανόσ και κοσμοσ 6 (1899), pp. 1196-1197 (repr.: V.V. Bolotov, Ἰς ιστορία Πόλεως και του ναού της Ιερού Μονής Πατρολίων. Saint Petersburg, 1901, pp. 126-127).

3 In the manuscript: Bēth Nūhadran.

4 Eliaś metropolitan Nisiben Opus chronologicum, ed. E.W. Brooks, I.-B. Chabot (cSCO 62-63; Syr, Ser 3, 7-8), Rome–Paris, 1909-1910, pp. 228-239.

5 Kitāb al-majālis li-Mār Iliyyā, muṭrān Nuṣaybīn, wa-risālatuhu ilā l-wazir al-kāmil Abī l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿĀli al-Maghribī, taḥqīq Nikūlāy Silžnyūf [Book of Sessions by Mār Eliaś (Iliyyā), Metropolitan of Nisibis, and his Epistle to the Perfect Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿĀli al-Maghribī, ed. N. Selezniov], Moscow, 1439H/2017/8, p. 89.

6 Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Selezniov, p. 157.

7 S.Kh. Samir, Foi et culture en Irak au xi* siècle: Elie de Nisibe et l’Islam (Variorum), Aldershot, 1996, Essay II, pp. 124-125.
The written heritage of Elias of Nisibis is extensive and multifaceted. His most popular works were the Sessions with the vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī and the treatise *Dissipation of Sorrow and Elimination of Anguish* (Kitāb Dafʿ al-hamm wa-muzīl al-ghamm), written at this vizier’s request. In addition to Elias’ preoccupation with practical philosophy reflected in the Kitāb Dafʿ al-hamm, one can also notice his interest in apologetics attested in the Book of the True Faith (Kitāb al-burhān ʿalā šaḥīḥ al-īmān) and the epistles. Besides, he composed treatises on such diverse subjects as history (his aforementioned *Chronography* – Maktbānūṯā d-zaḇnē or Kitāb al-azmina – written in both Syriac and Arabic), grammar, lexicography, canon law, and hymnography. The literary opponent of Elias, the vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Maghribī was born in 981 CE. His family had served the Fāṭimids, but most of its members were killed in 1010 on the orders of the mentally unstable caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amri Llāh. Abū l-Qāsim was the only survivor of this massacre. He fled to Palestine and attempted to start a rebellion, but with no success.
Thereafter, he fled again, this time to northern Mesopotamia, where he was granted asylum by Naṣr al-Dāwla Ahmad ibn Marwān, the emir of Diyarbakır and Mayyāfāriqīn, known for his patronage of intellectuals.19 There, Abū l-Qāsim took up the post of a minister (wāzīr), which he occupied until his death in 1027 CE.20 He is known as the author of several works: on the correctness of speech, genealogy and history of Arab tribes, and state administration,21 His treatise on state administration is, in fact, mentioned by Elias of Nisibis.22 He also authored a commentary on the Qurʿān.23 The famous Syrian poet Abū l-ʿAlāʾ Aḥmad al-Maʿarrī (973-1057), the vizier’s younger contemporary, dedicated to him the final lines of his poetry collection Necessity of What Is Not Necessary (Luzūm mā lā yalzam).24

The Book of Sessions and the Epistle

The content of the debates that took place between Elias and Abū l-Qāsim is transmitted in two substantially different versions: one of them is presented in

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19 Ibn Challikani Vitae illustrium virorum, fasc. 1, p. 139; Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary, vol. 1, p. 454.

20 Samir, Foi et culture en Irak au xiie siècle, fasc. 1, p. 139; P. Smoor, “Al-Maghribi, 4,” Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition, Leiden, 1986, vol. 5, pp. 1211:2-1212:2.

21 Morteżā Karīmī, The Vizier al-Maghribī and the Methodology of His Lamps of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān, PhD dissertation, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran, 2014, p. 52; cf. Ibn Challikani Vitae illustrium virorum, fasc. 1, p. 139; Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary, vol. 1, p. 454.

22 Morteżā Karīmī, The Vizier al-Maghribī and the Methodology of His Lamps of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān, PhD dissertation, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran, 2014, p. 52; cf. Ibn Challikani Vitae illustrium virorum, fasc. 1, p. 139; Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary, vol. 1, p. 454.

23 Morteżā Karīmī, The Vizier al-Maghribī and the Methodology of His Lamps of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān, PhD dissertation, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran, 2014, p. 52; cf. Ibn Challikani Vitae illustrium virorum, fasc. 1, p. 139; Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary, vol. 1, p. 454.

24 Morteżā Karīmī, The Vizier al-Maghribī and the Methodology of His Lamps of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān, PhD dissertation, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran, 2014, p. 52; cf. Ibn Challikani Vitae illustrium virorum, fasc. 1, p. 139; Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary, vol. 1, p. 454.
the *Book of Sessions*, the other, in Elias’ *Epistle* to the vizier. The *Book of Sessions* was first published in an abridged and uncritical edition by Louis Cheikho in 1922. Afterwards, several sections of it were published by Samir Khalil Samir. A complete critical edition of the *Book of Sessions*, along with an edition of Elias’ *Epistle* to Abū l-Qāsim and some additional material, has been recently published by the present author. It seems appropriate to offer a comparative survey of these texts here.

The first session (*majlis*) of the *Book of Sessions* consists of three main parts: a story about the healing that the vizier received in a monastery; theological and philosophical discussion in which Elias asserts that the confession of God as “one substance in three hypostases” contains no contradiction since his Word and Spirit are not accidental; and, finally, the explanation of the Christian doctrine characteristic of the Church of the East which distinguishes two entities in Christ: the divine (eternal, uncreated) and the human (created).

The first part of the first *majlis* – the vizier’s healing story – is missing in the *Epistle*. One can only find allusions to this story in the following impersonal phrases of Elias: “If something happens to one of them [non-Christians] or he suffers any evil, such as illness or something else, then he appeals to them [Christians] for help and benefits from this” and if he “enters a monastery, he will live.”

The second, theological and philosophical part of the first *majlis* is presented in the *Epistle* with the same argument: the confession of God being “one substance in three hypostases” contains no contradiction, because substance (*jawhar*) ought to be understood as “that which subsists in itself” (*qāʾim bi-nafsihi*), while hypostases (*aqānīm*) should be interpreted in the sense that God is “living by a life and speaking by speech,” and since “the Creator’s self does not admit of accidents,” His Word (speech) and Spirit (life) are not accidental. To the vizier’s objection that such an imagery is anthropomorphic, Elias responds that, similarly, many Qur’ānic verses contain anthropomorphic imagery.

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25 L. Shaykhū, “*Majālis Īliyyā, muṭrān Nuṣaybīn,*” *al-Mashriq* 20 (1922), pp. 34-44, 112-122, 267-272, 366-377, 425-434.
26 See bibliography in Monferrer Sala, “Elias of Nisibis,” p. 732. 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 (2017): 493-514 (on p. 513, Diez thanks Samir for providing him with a typewritten copy of the *Majālis*).
27 *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 216-217.
28 *Kitāb al-majālis*, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 28-29, 174-175; 261-262.
The third part of the first majlis is presented in the Epistle in an abridged form: the history of the condemnation, by the catholicos of the Church of the East Ṭīmātēʾōs I, of the mystics who argued that the human hypostasis of Christ could see His divine hypostasis is omitted.³⁰ To the mystics, vision of God implied transformation of the visionary into divinity (what one might call “deification”), for only God sees Himself. Paradoxically, based on the same assumption – that vision of God is available only to God Himself – Ṭīmātēʾōs and the mystics’ other opponents denied the possibility of a human vision of God, because they rejected as impious the idea that a created being could be transformed so as to become uncreated. In the Epistle, we find only a few quotations from the New Testament pertaining to the invisibility of God (including “No one has ever seen God”).³¹ On the basis of these quotations, Elias argues that Christians do not associate God with “anything but Himself” and are, consequently, entirely committed to monotheism (tawḥīd).

It is noteworthy that in Louis Cheikho’s abridged edition of the Book of Sessions, based on inferior manuscripts, the whole section emphasizing the distinction between the created and the uncreated and the story of Ṭīmātēʾōs’ condemnation of the mystics were omitted.³²

In the second session (majlis), the theme of Christology is developed further. The main subject is the concept of indwelling (ḥulūl) of divinity in humanity and the special character of God’s indwelling in Christ. This section of the disputation with some differences (notably, the presence of Christian apocryphal legends in quotations from Ibn al-Kalbī’s Tafsīr³³ in the Epistle) is present in both the Book of Sessions and the Epistle. However, the problem of a theologically motivated removal of a part of the text is also manifest in this

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³⁰ Болотовъ, Изд стории Церкви сиро-персидской [Bolotov, On the History of the Syro-Persian Church], p. 1185 (repr.: p. 115); A. Treiger, “Could Christ’s Humanity See His Divinity? An Eighth-Century Controversy between John of Dalyatha and Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East,” Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies 9 (2009), pp. 3-21.

³¹ 1 John 4:12; كاب المجئ: تهیه نکولا سلیمانوف [Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 199.

³² لباس شیخو (تهیه: مجلل ایبا مطران نصیبین, Shaykhū, “Majālis İlyyā, muṭrān Nuṣaybīn,” pp. 33-44. A critical edition of the first majlis was published by Samir Khalil Samir: Kh. Samir, “Entretien d’Elie de Nisibe avec le vizir al-Maghribi sur l’Unité et la Trinité,” Islamochristiana 5 (1979), pp. 31-117; French translation based on good manuscripts: E.-K. Delly, La Théologie d’Elie bar-Šénaya. Etude et traduction de ses Entretiens, Rome, 1957, pp. 65-78; Spanish translation: F. del Río Sánchez, “Un debate entre Elias de Nisibe y el visir Ibn ‘Ali al-Magribi (417H-1026 d. C.),” Collectanea Christiana Orientalia 1 (2003), pp. 163-183.

³³ كاب المجئ: تهیه نکولا سلیمانوف [Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 185.
case: the discussion of God’s indwelling in Christ is omitted both in a number of manuscripts of the Book of Sessions and in Cheikho’s edition.34

It is worth mentioning that in Christian theological terminology, the concept of indwelling is based on the following words from the prologue of the Gospel of John: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt in us” (John 1:14). In some Arabic translations used at that time, the words καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν (“and dwelt in us”) were translated as wa-halla finā. This translation can also be found in the commentary on John 1:14 by Elias of Nisibis’ contemporary Abū l-Faraj ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Ṭayyib al-‘Irāqī (d. 1043).35 The image of the indwelling of God’s Word in mankind similar to His dwelling in the temple (cf. John 2:19) was frequently used by Syrian authors, both in Syriac and in Greek (in particular, Theodore of Mopsuestia).36 Subsequently, opponents of the Antiochene Christological tradition found this indwelling imagery to be “Nestorian” and renounced it.37 Evidence of this can be seen in the text of the second majlis: according to Elias, it is only the Church of the East, but not the other two Christian denominations (the Jacobites and the Melkites) that uses the concept of indwelling (ḥulūl). This is because it is only the Church of the East that draws a consistent distinction between the divinity and the humanity of Christ; for this reason, the concept of indwelling is appropriate for it, while the other two denominations emphasize Christ’s divinity to such an extent (“Christ is God”) that the concept of indwelling is no longer acceptable for them. There is no doubt that the omission, in some manuscripts of the Book of Sessions and in Cheikho’s edition, of precisely this section of the second majlis, in which Elias

34 Н.Н. Селезнев, “И вселился въ ны”: Боговселение (al-ḥulūl) в мусульманско-хрис- тианском диалоге – Илия Нисивинский и Абу-л-Касим ал-Магрибий” [N.N. Seleznyov, “And Dwelled in Us’: Divine Inhabitation (al-ḥulūl) in Muslim-Christian Disputation – Elias of Nisibis and Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī”], Христианский Восток 8 (14) (2017), pp. 297-312.
35 يوسف مقارييوس, Tafsīr al-Mashriqī, ay al-qass Abū [sic] l-Faraj, li-l-arba‘at anājīl [A Commentary on the Four Gospels by the Oriental <Author> i.e. Priest Abū l-Faraj], Cairo, 1910, vol. 2, pp. 387-388; see also manuscripts: Cairo, St. Mark Cathedral Library, يهوت لا 28, fol. 259v-260r (sub loco); Cairo, St. Mark Cathedral Library, يهوت لا لا 29, fol. 261v-262r (sub loco).
36 Н. Селезнев, Христология Ассирийской Церкви Востока [N. Seleznyov, The Christology of the Assyrian Church of the East], Moscow, 2002, pp. 31-32, 39, 47, 56-57, 63-64, 84-86, 88; A. Treiger, “Al-Ghazālī’s ‘Mirror Christology’ and Its Possible East-Syriac Sources,” Muslim World 101.4 (2011), pp. 698-713, esp. p. 704 (the article also traces the idea of ḥulūl in Muslim sources).
37 A. Treiger, “The Christology of the Letter from the People of Cyprus,” Journal of Eastern Christian Studies 65.1-2 (2013), pp. 21-48.
clearly subscribes to the doctrine of indwelling, is due to theologically moti-

In his emphasis on the duality in Christ – or, in other words, on the total “otherness” of the created in relation to the uncreated – Elias likely pursued two goals at once. First, by drawing an emphatic distinction between the humanity of Christ on the one hand and God the Word on the other, the latter dwelling in the former with an excellent “dignity, contentment, and will” (“and holiness,” according to the Epistle), he seeks to justify, in the eyes of his Muslim interlocutor, not only the confession of his Church, but also the very concept of God’s indwelling, often deemed suspect in Islamic thought. Second, Elias seeks to present his own denomination in a favorable light as compared to the Christology of his theological opponents: the Jacobites and the Melkites. His po-

The third session (majlis) – “Concerning the Proof of the Monotheism of the Christians from the Qurʾān” – is found, with some discrepancies, both in the Book of Sessions and in the Epistle. In the Epistle, it is preceded by an argument that the Qurʾānic accusation that Christians are polytheists is either meant liter-

Following this argument, New Testament quotations are adduced to confirm the monotheistic belief of the Chris-

Both the argument and the quotations are omitted in the Book of Sessions. Also in the Epistle, Elias quotes several state-

The following two sections in the Epistle concerning the Chris-

Anti-Jewish polemical passages, both in this section of the text and in many other places, were removed and are mostly absent from the Book of Sessions.

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38 Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 195-196.
39 Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 197-200.
40 Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 203.
41 Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 226-228.
They were evidently intended for the vizier himself, who was interested in the subject,42 but were no longer useful in the Book of Sessions.

The fourth majlis of the Book of Sessions – “On the Confirmation of the Christian Faith by Both Intellectual [Argumentation] and the Divine Miracle[s]” – is not found in the Epistle. The first section seems to be an abridgment of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq’s (809-873/7) treatise How to Comprehend the Truth of a Religion (Kayfyyat idrāk ḥaqīqat al-diyyāna).43 Elias’ acquaintance with Ḥunayn’s works is evidenced by the text of the sixth session, where Elias mentions Ḥunayn’s Kitāb al-nuqāṭ.44 The second section of the fourth majlis is a story about Elias’ teacher Yūḥannā, a clairvoyant elder. This story was evidently designed to show that the events in a Christian’s life are governed by God’s providence.

In the fifth majlis of the Book of Sessions Elias outlines his creed as well as lists theological views rejected by the Christian community that he represents. Both elements are found also in the Epistle, except that Elias’ emphatically monotheistic creed is located at the very beginning of the Epistle, whereas the list of rejected views is provided considerably later, approximately in the middle of the text.

The sixth majlis, containing a comparative analysis of syntax, lexicography, calligraphy, kalām (‘ilm al-kalām), i.e., the art of argumentation, and logic among the Arabs and the Syrians, is completely absent from the text of the Epistle. This “debate” looks like an artificial addition – the vizier would have hardly endorsed a conversation about the Syriac language, especially given that Elias insists on the superiority of Syriac over Arabic.45

In the seventh majlis of the Book of Sessions, Elias refutes the validity of the “decrees of the stars” (aḥkām al-nujūm, i.e., astrology), examines the issue of...
Christian-Muslim relations, and offers an account of the nature of the soul. In the *Epistle*, the anti-astrological section is expanded, and the discussion of Christian-Muslim relations is incorporated in the third *majlis*, in the section on the obedience of Christians to Muslims and the mutual conformity of Muslim and Christian laws. The *Epistle* contains no detailed discussion of the soul; it mentions only that the view that the soul is an accident and not a substance is characteristic of the Jews, whereas the opposite view is characteristic of the Sabians.\(^46\)

Finally, at the end of the *Book of Sessions*, the vizier asks Elias to call on the monks to pray for him. Subsequently, an account of subsequent meetings and communications between the metropolitan and the vizier is provided. It also includes details of a conversation between Elias and his brother (who was a doctor who looked after Abū l-Qāsim) and of the vizier’s death (on 15 October 1027). It is mentioned that the *Book of Sessions* was approved (effectively, given the “*nil obstat*”) by Abū l-Faraj ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Ṭayyib.\(^47\) None of this, of course, is found in the text of the *Epistle*.

**The Sevenfold Structure of the *Book of Sessions***

In the *Book of Sessions*, the debates between Elias and the vizier are presented as having taken place in the summer 1026, immediately following their initial meeting in Nisibis. The encounters are presented as a series of seven extensive dialogues, and the *Book of Sessions* itself is supposed to be a transcript of these dialogues, which is why it comprises seven “sessions.”

However, when one reads Elias’ *Epistle* as well as the vizier’s letter that preceded it\(^48\) and the vizier’s subsequent response,\(^49\) the picture appears in a completely different light. The anonymous Coptic scribe who authored an abridged version of the *Epistle*\(^50\) has reconstructed the events as follows. In this introduction, he writes, following the structure of the *Book of Sessions*, that after the initial meeting between the metropolitan and the vizier in Nisibis,

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\(^46\) Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 239.

\(^47\) The see of the Catholicos of the East was vacant at the time (Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 159-160), and thus the approval was given by the highest authority: the catholicos’ secretary; Болотовъ, Изъ истории Церкви сиро-персидской [Bolotov, On the History of the Syro-Persian Church], p. 1197 (repr.: p. 127).

\(^48\) Sbath, *Bibliothèque de manuscrits*, vol. 3, pp. 10-12.

\(^49\) Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 255-259.

\(^50\) Published in: Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 260-263.
they held several meetings, “up to seven sessions.” “Then,” he continues, “the aforementioned vizier left Nisibis for his residence and pondered over what he had talked about with the aforementioned metropolitan; and [because] some things from the discussion were difficult for him [to accept], he sent him a letter,” asking for clarification. In response, Elias sent him the detailed Epistle.

This purported reconstruction, however, proves to be inadequate, since large sections of the Epistle and the Book of Sessions are identical. Given that the Epistle repeats sections of the Book of Sessions verbatim, it was certainly not intended as a clarification of the Book of Sessions. Moreover, it is evident from the vizier’s first letter to the metropolitan that the vizier was dissatisfied with what he had previously heard about Christianity from some (other) learned Christians, whereas from Elias, on the contrary, he expects to receive satisfactory responses to his perplexities; he also expresses his desire that these responses be as brief as possible. It is obvious that by the time of writing he had already communicated with Elias. For example, he asks Elias to send him “what he had written in refutation of al-Jāḥiẓ” (mā ‘amilahu fī l-radd ‘alā l-Jāḥiẓ) and expresses a desire to read Elias’ Dissipation of Sorrow, which Elias had promised to send the vizier because of the latter’s anguished state of mind, as becomes clear from the vizier’s subsequent letter.

It seems more plausible that after Elias’ initial meeting with Abū l-Qāsim, they did not have the kind of long and sophisticated discussions of theological and ethical matters that we find in the Book of Sessions, but rather touched on a number of topics of interest to the vizier. Subsequently, the metropolitan would have promised to respond to the vizier in writing in further detail. The vizier must have departed to his residence in Mayyāfāriqīn. Soon thereafter, he would have received a gift from Elias – a kind of “calculator of feast days and the beginning of years and months.” Intrigued by this and wishing to hear more, the vizier replied by expressing gratitude and requesting both additional information about the calculation system and answers to the questions previously touched upon. This was followed by Elias’ Epistle with the promised answers. Neither the treatise on the dissipation of sorrow nor the “refutation of al-Jāḥiẓ” seems to have been ready at the time. Nevertheless, as can be seen

51 كَابُ الْمَجَالِسِ. تَعْمِيقُ نِيْكَلاَي سِيْلِيْزِيْتُوْفُ Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 260.
52 كَابُ الْمَجَالِسِ. تَعْمِيقُ نِيْكَلاَي سِيْلِيْزِيْتُوْفُ Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 165.
53 كَابُ الْمَجَالِسِ. تَعْمِيقُ نِيْكَلاَي سِيْلِيْزِيْتُوْفُ Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 258-259.
54 كَابُ الْمَجَالِسِ. تَعْمِيقُ نِيْكَلاَي سِيْلِيْزِيْتُوْفُ Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 104.
55 كَابُ الْمَجَالِسِ. تَعْمِيقُ نِيْكَلاَي سِيْلِيْزِيْتُوْفُ Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 165.
56 كَابُ الْمَجَالِسِ. تَعْمِيقُ نِيْكَلاَي سِيْلِيْزِيْتُوْفُ Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 164-165.
57 كَابُ الْمَجَالِسِ. تَعْمِيقُ نِيْكَلاَي سِيْلِيْزِيْتُوْفُ Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, pp. 252-253.
from Abū l-Qāsim’s response, the Epistle pleased him, and he immediately shared it with some of his co-religionists. Elias, too, shared it with his own co-religionists, and it is in this way that the Epistle, together with the vizier’s preceding and following letters, became an important event in the history of Christian-Muslim polemical literature. Subsequently, additional meetings and conversations must have taken place. Elias mentions the subjects discussed at these meetings towards the end of the Book of Sessions. A year after their initial meeting, the vizier Abū l-Qāsim died. After his death, Elias created a new version of the disputations, omitting what was no longer relevant and adding elements that would not have been appropriate before: “self-narratives” – i.e., personal stories of various kinds – and emphatically apologetic texts. The result was a new work, arranged in a more orderly way and divided into seven sessions, an arrangement in which influence of the maqāma genre with its literary reworking of actual life situations can be recognized.

Being a historian who authored the Chronography, Elias keyed each majlis to the actual chronology of his meetings with the vizier. It is in this way that having been reworked according to the laws of literature, the Epistle was transformed into the Book.

58 “A group of scholars, experts in the Qur’ān” is mentioned in the vizier’s second letter (Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 255), and “Qāḍī Abū Ya’lā al-mutakallim” is mentioned in the introduction to the fifth majlis (Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 94).

59 Al-Mu’taman Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn al-ʿAssāl mentions that “this Epistle is widespread and well known” – see Māṣūma Abū l-Qāsim, Majmūʿ uṣūl al-dīn wa-masmūʿ maḥṣūl al-yaqīn [Summa of the Foundations of Religion and of the Traditions (lit. What was Heard) of Reliable Knowledge], ed. A. Wadi [=W. Abullif] (Studia Orientalia Christiana; Monographiae, 6a-9), Cairo–Jerusalem, 1998, vol. 6a, p. 309.

60 The words “May God have mercy on him!” following the vizier’s name in the Book of Sessions also point to his death (Kitāb al-majālis, ed. Seleznyov, p. 2).

61 D.F. Reynolds [et al.], Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition, Berkeley, 2001.