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AN UNPUBLISHED SHORT ARABIC POEM OF  
A MEDIEVAL MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN POLEMIC

BY  
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The purpose of this paper is to draw the attention of scholars and colleagues to the existence of a hitherto unknown and unpublished short Arabic poem which deals with a question raised by a certain eminent Muslim Egyptian Shaykh regarding the Crucifixion. Zayn al-Dīn al-Ramlī addressed his question to the unnamed Coptic Patriarch of the time and the Christians in Cairo, requesting a response from them.

I first came across this poem in the course of an investigation of the contents of a manuscript which forms part of the Christian Arabic manuscripts preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris) and which also contains, inter alia, a copy of the *Letter from the People of Cyprus (Risālat 'Ahl Qubrus)* addressed to Ibn Taymiyyah<sup>1</sup>. This latter work has been edited with an English translation by myself and Dr David Thomas<sup>2</sup>.

#### A. THE MANUSCRIPT

Ms Arabe 215 comprises a number of pieces of varying content written in Arabic, including some anonymous theological treatises and extracts from various authors. It consists of 262 folios and was copied by an anonymous scribe in A.M. 1306/1307 = A.D. 1590/1591. It contains a collection of eleven different works, all of which have a bearing in one way or another on Christian theological and polemical matters, written in an oriental (Egyptian) script in black ink.

These can be summarised as follows:

- I. Fols. 2<sup>v</sup>-49<sup>v</sup>: an anonymous apologetical treatise in the form of responses to certain questions addressed by Muslim scholars.
- II. Fols. 50<sup>r</sup>-83<sup>r</sup>: a controversy between the monk Ibrāhīm and the Emir ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAbd al-Malik ibn al-Ṣāliḥ al-Hāshimī.
- III. Fols. 83-119<sup>v</sup>: an anonymous apologetical treatise entitled: "كتاب البرهان على بطلان الشريعة الموسوية وتحقيق الشريعة المسيحية"
- IV. Fols. 121<sup>r</sup>-154<sup>r</sup>: Response to questions put to Theodore Abū Qurra, Bishop of Harran, by the Caliph al-Ma'mūn.
- V. Fols. 154<sup>v</sup>-176<sup>r</sup>: Legend of the monk Baḥīra.
- VI. Fols. 176<sup>v</sup>-185<sup>v</sup>: Responses by Catholicos Timothy I to questions put by the Caliph al-Mahdī.

1) Ms Arabe 215. See TROUPEAU, *CMAC*, I, pp. 187-9.

2) Rifaat Y. EBIED and David THOMAS, *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades: The Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī's Response* [The History of Christian-Muslim Relations, volume II]. Brill, Leiden, 2005.

- VII. Fols. 186<sup>r</sup>-202<sup>v</sup>: a controversy between Joannes [John], Patriarch of Alexandria and a certain Jew during the reign of <sup>c</sup>Abd al-<sup>c</sup>Azīz.
- VIII. Fols. 203<sup>r</sup>-223<sup>r</sup>: the Letter from the People of Cyprus sent to Taqī al-Dīn ibn Taymiyya in Damascus in A.H. 716<sup>3</sup>.
- IX. Fols. 223<sup>r</sup>-228<sup>r</sup>: an extract from various ancient philosophers, entitled:  
 "الذي وجد من أقوال الحكماء الفلاسفة القدماء من الألفاظ المطابقة لأقوال الأنبياء على ورود السيد المسيح وتخصده وتصرفه في العالم وولادته من السيدة الطاهرة العذرى البتول".
- X. Fols. 228<sup>v</sup>-260<sup>v</sup>: a controversy between Theodore Abū Qurra, Bishop of Ḥarrān and Muslim theologians at the court of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn.
- XI. Fols. 261<sup>r</sup>-262<sup>r</sup>: a question and an answer regarding the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ, the present work<sup>4</sup>.

## B. THE POEM

### 1. Contents of the poem

The poem begins with a brief statement in prose stating the purpose of its composition. This is followed by the Muslim theologian's question in the form of a short poem consisting of seven verses rhyming in *hā'*. He addresses the recipients of the questions as follows:

أَعْبَاد الصليب ، لنا سؤالٌ                      نريد جوابه ممن وعاهُ

"O worshippers of the cross, we have a question for which we desire an answer from whoever discerns it".

This opening verse of the poem seems to be a set formula used in Muslim-Christian polemics. An example to this "formula" can be found in the poem composed by the sixteenth century Muslim author Šams al-Dīn al-Bakrī, in a manuscript copied in 1924 from a 17<sup>th</sup> century MS preserved in the Mar <sup>c</sup>Abdā Seminary, Lebanon<sup>5</sup>. This latter work bears the title: جدال في

3) TROUPEAU, *CMAC*, I, p.188, is mistaken in stating that the Letter is contained in fols. 203-228. In fact it ends on fol. 223<sup>r</sup> and is followed by a different piece (item IX below).

4) This work is not listed in the contents of the manuscript by Troupeau. It is only mentioned passingly in the concluding paragraph which contains the physical condition of the manuscript.

5) Ms 682. See Louis CHEIKHO, *Catalogue raisonné des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Orientale*, vol. IV, Philosophie et Écriture Sainte [*Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph*, Tome X, fasc. 5], Beirut, 1992, p. 54.

صحة الدين المسيحي (A Polemic on the authenticity of the Christian religion). Its *incipit* is identical with that of our poem. It reads as follows:

أعْبَادُ الصَّليْبِ ، لَنَا سَوَآلٌ      نرِيدُ جَوَابَهُ مِمَّنْ وَعَاهُ

There follow five verses which contain the substance of the polemic and raise a number of questions, including the contradiction between the divinity of Christ and his death and the notion of the existence of the universe without a “God” as a consequence of Christ’s death, etc.

These lines are followed by a statement in prose stating that when no one was found who could provide an answer to al-Ramlī’s question, it was given to the deacon (*Muʿallim*) Yūḥannā ibn Ġabīr who furnished a satisfactory response consisting of 24 verses, also rhyming in *ḥāʾ*. The choice of *Muʿallim* Ibn Ġabīr to formulate a response to the Theologian’s question is in itself a measure of his standing and erudite knowledge of deep and intricate theological matters.

The poem then proceeds to unfold the response in which the poet addresses the author of the question without naming him:

يَا مَنْ سَأَلَ عَن أَمْرٍ عَمِيقٍ      لَقَدْ أَتَاهُ الْعُقُولُ بِمَا عَانَهُ

O you who asked about a subtle (profound) matter which has confused (confounded) the intellects

This is succeeded by a meticulous refutation, point by point, of the allegations of al-Ramlī. Ibn Ġabīr deals with all the points raised in the addressed question and many others, including the Unity of God, the virgin birth, the divine miracles, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, etc. It is worth mentioning that his response is often couched in qurʿanic expressions and phraseology.

The poem concludes with a statement in prose commending the efforts of *Muʿallim* Ibn Ġabīr for providing such a satisfactory response for which he was thanked by the Christians for the clear exposition of the matter which in turn led to harmony prevailing between the Christians and the Muslims at the time.

The exact identity and time of the Muslim Theologian, the Patriarch to whom the question was addressed and the *Muʿallim* who composed the response cannot be determined with certainty. A plausible clue, perhaps, to the identity of the unnamed Patriarch can be gleaned from the context of the manuscript. As mentioned above, item VII consists of “a controversy bet-

ween Joannes [John], Patriarch of Alexandria, and a certain Jew during the reign of King ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz in Cairo”. In the list of Patriarchs of Alexandria we read about “John VI” [No. 74] who occupied the see of Alexandria from 1189 to 1216 and was contemporary of al-ʿAzīz ʿImād al-Dīn, one of the last Umayyad rulers (1193-1198)<sup>6</sup>. It is, therefore, possible that our Patriarch is identical with John VI.

## 2. Language of the poem

The language of the poem is in general classical Arabic. However, there are a few divergent features in the spelling of occasional words which suggest a slight colloquial or Middle Arabic influence on the language of the writer of the manuscript. These divergences consist mainly of variant spellings such as the substitution of *dāl* for *dhāl* and *Yā* for *hamzah*.

Among other variants one also finds *'alif ʿawīlah* for *'alif maqṣūrah*. *Tā' marbūʿah* is sometimes written without dots and the *hamzah* is omitted in medial and final positions.

The metre of the poem is *al-Baḥr al-Wāfir*, and the rhyme throughout is in *hā'*. The style is of a pleasing simplicity, with little resort to the rhetorical devices of *ḡinās*, *ṭibāq*, etc.

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6) See Aziz S. ATIYA, “Dates and Succession of Patriarchs”, in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6 (New York, 1991), p. 1917. For ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn ʿAbd al-Malik’s rule, see Philip K. HITT, *History of the Arabs* (London, 1979), pp. 279, 282.

## C. TEXT

[F. 261<sup>v</sup>] سؤال مولانا شيخ الإسلام قدوة الأنام الشيخ زين الدين الرملي إلى البطريرك وجماعة النصارى بمحروسة مصر يريد منهم جواباً<sup>7</sup>:

أعْبَاد الصَّالِبِ، لَنَا سَأَالٌ	نريد جوابه ممن وعاه
إِذَا مَاتَ إِلَهِهِ بِإِذْنِ عِبَادِهِ <sup>8</sup>	يهودي <sup>9</sup> ، فما هذا الإله؟
وَهَلْ بَقِيَ الْوُجُودُ بِإِلَهِهِ	سميع <sup>10</sup> يستجيب لمن دعاه؟
وَهَلْ هُوَ عَادَ لِمَا شَاءَ، حَيًّا	للإله، أم تولاه سواه؟
وَهَلْ رَضِيَ الْمَسِيحُ بِالْقَتْلِ صَلْبًا،	وسكن القبر؟ أم أوصى أباه؟
وَأَلَا (sic) عَبْدًا لَهُ، فَالْعَبْدَ أَقْوَى	من المعبود، يفعل ما يراه
فَمَنْ يَفْهَمُ لِمَا قُلْنَا جَوَابًا <sup>11</sup>	وإلا فليتب عمّا <sup>12</sup> جيناه.

كامل السؤال.

وقد أحضروه إلى أينا البطريرك وأكابر النصارى بالديار المصرية فلم يجدوا<sup>13</sup> من يكتب جوابه ثم أحضروه للمعلم يوحنا ابن غببر فكتب جوابه يقول:

يَا مَنْ سَأَلَ عَن أَمْرٍ عَمِيقٍ	لقد أتاه <sup>14</sup> العقول بما عناه
فَقَوْلِكَ إِنَّ عَبْدًا مَاتَ إِلَهُهُ	فهذا القول كفر لا نراه
فَسُبْحَانَ إِلَهِهِ، فَلَمْ يَنَلْهُ <sup>15</sup>	أيادي كفره أنجاس طغاه
F.261 <sup>v</sup> فَهُوَ الْبَاقِي بَعْدَ فَنَاءِ <sup>16</sup> خَلْقِهِ	سميعاً يستجيب لمن دعاه.
فَأَمَّا قَوْلُنَا نَحْنُ النَّصَارَى <sup>17</sup>	فإنَّ الله واحد، لا سواه
وَهُوَ الْقَائِمُ بِذَاتِهِ، لَا شَرِيكَ	له، المملك دائم في علاه

7) Ms: جواب

8) Ms: عبداً

9) Ms: يهودياً

10) Ms: سميعاً

11) Ms: جواب

12) Ms: عنما

13) Ms: يوجدوا (sic)

14) Ms: تاه

15) Ms: يناله

16) Ms: فنا

17) Ms: النصاره

بلا خوفٍ ولا صوتٍ نراهُ  
 بأنَّ اللّٰه لا أحدًا يراهُ  
 يكلم فيه مَنْ قد اصطفاهُ  
 وقد وردت به كتبُ انبياءه  
 من أشرف ما خلق وما اصطفاه  
 تظاهر فيه من أعلى سماه  
 سرًّا طاهرًا فخبأ سواه  
 ولا فوق ولا تحت الشراه (sic)  
 شياطينًا وأبرى العماه (sic)  
 وأظهر فعله بين العصاه  
 كما شهدوا عليها أوليائه  
 شرعهم فإنبتوا<sup>22</sup> عداه  
 حقيقًا للحجاب ولا الإلاه  
 ورفعهُ اللّٰه إلى أعلى سماه  
 ولا قتلوه أيادي الجناه  
 فإنَّ اللّٰه يفعل ما يشاه  
 حكيمٌ عليهم نافذ في قضاه  
 يروم الفنّ في ما قد عناه.

بوحى قد يخاطبُ مَنْ أراده  
 وإنه قد تكلم في كتابه  
 إلا من حجابٍ أو بوحى  
 وهذا القول لا ينكرهُ أحدٌ<sup>18</sup>  
 فشاء<sup>19</sup> اللّٰه أن يأخذ حجابًا<sup>20</sup>  
 أخذه من حسد عذريّ بكرًا  
 كنور الشمس أشرق في الوجود<sup>21</sup>  
 ولم يجويه (sic) أرضٌ أو مكانٌ  
 فخاطب خلقه منه وأخرج  
 وأقام الميتَ وأظهر معجزاته  
 هذه الأُمَّة المغضوب عليها  
 فلمّا أن رأوا فعله وأبطل  
 فوضعوا اليد عليه ثمّ صلبوا  
 وخلصه بغير إثمٍ<sup>23</sup> أقامه  
 ولا صلبوا الإلاه كما ذكر  
 وإن أجبت: لأيّ فعل هذا  
 F. 262<sup>f</sup> ولا تسأل عمّا<sup>24</sup> هو فاعل  
 فهذا مختصر يجواب سائل

وقد حصل للمعلّم يوحنا من مولانا الشيخ حظّ كبير من قبل ذلك وشكروا جميع  
 النصرارى ما فعل وسترهم كثيرًا بهذا الجواب، وكان إلهام من اللّٰه تعالى، وما لم يعاين ذلك  
 المعلّم يوحنا ويصلح أمر تسطيرها ويفهم المعاني بها فما يحصل فهم، ولا<sup>25</sup> يدخل بعقله  
 شرحها، والسلام على الدوام.

18) Ms: أحدًا

19) Ms: فشا

20) Ms: حجاب

21) Ms: الوجودي

22) Ms: فإنبتوا

23) Ms: إثما

24) Ms: عنما

25) Ms: وإلا



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