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ABDALLAH IBN AL-FADL  
EXPOSITION OF THE ORTHODOX FAITH

BY  
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## PREAMBLE

This paper intends to introduce the reader briefly to the book شرح الامانة المستقيمة وابانة غلط اليعاقبة والنسطور على سبيل الايحاز written by one of the most important Christian Arab writers of the Melkite Orthodox Church in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, namely Abdallah Ibn al-Faḍl. After a short introduction to his Biography, this presentation will shed a light on the content of this text rather than dealing with the editorial methods. This article is a modified section of a Ph. D. dissertation at the University of Marburg (Germany) which will be published later comprehensively including the edited text.

## A. ABDALLAH IBN AL-FADL: BIOGRAPHY

Although Abdallah Ibn al-Faḍl was by far one of the most prolific writers of the Melkite Orthodox Church<sup>1</sup>, oddly enough, there is not even a single comprehensive work on him or on his works, therefore, pointing a serious gap in the scholarly literature. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn al-Faḍl was known in the European West and in the Christian East mostly for his Arabic translation of the Psalms. H. Hyvernats<sup>2</sup> mentioned Ibn al-Faḍl in this context. It was G. Graf who first published a short treatise on Ibn al-Faḍl and his works in 1905<sup>3</sup>. Like Hyvernats, Graf thought that Ibn al-Faḍl was a bishop. Graf's attempt was only the beginning of his work on Ibn al-Faḍl. In the following decades he published more treatises on Ibn al-Faḍl<sup>4</sup>. His first treatise, however, is important for two reasons: 1. it showed the magnitude of Ibn al-Faḍl's literary heritage; 2. it apparently drew attention to Ibn al-Faḍl in the Christian East. A year later C. Bacha and L. Cheikho<sup>5</sup> published a detailed treatise on Ibn al-Faḍl and his writings. They shed more light on the date of Ibn al-Faḍl's activity (11<sup>th</sup> century) as well as his clerical rank, showing that Ibn al-Faḍl was only a deacon<sup>6</sup>. The results of their research in this regard still apply today as a basis research on Ibn al-Faḍl, and since then, interest in Ibn al-Faḍl has increased in the Christian East. However, after the

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1) See Georg GRAF, *Geschichte der Christlichen Arabischen Literatur* II, p. 52.

2) Henri HYVERNAT, «Arabes (Versions) des Écritures», in *Dictionnaire de la Bible* I, Paris (1895) 846-856, here p. 850.

3) Georg GRAF, *Die christlich-arabische Literatur bis zur fränkischen Zeit*, Freiburg (1905), pp. 68-71.

4) Georg GRAF, «Christlich-Arabisches», in *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Tübingen (1913), pp. 186-192.

5) Constantin BACHA / Louis CHEIKHO, «'Abdallah Ibn al-Faḍl al-Anṭākī», in *al-Mašriq* 9 (1906), pp. 886-890 and pp. 944-953.

6) *Ibid.*, p. 888.

publication of the Bacha and Cheikho article, interest in the study of Ibn al-Faḍl's vita subsided. The subsequent contributions – also in the West – focused on Ibn al-Faḍl's bibliography and works. Graf showed that Ibn al-Faḍl is not to be recognised only as a translator of liturgical books, but also as a translator and author of theological and philosophical works. Thus Graf translated sections of Ibn al-Faḍl's work *Kitāb al-manfa'a al-kabīr* and introduced him to the German reader<sup>7</sup>. Graf further examined his literary heritage in his main work *Geschichte der christlich-arabischen Luteratur*<sup>8</sup> and constructed an important base for further research on Ibn al-Faḍl's bibliography. Unfortunately, western interest in Ibn al-Faḍl and in his writings diminished in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until 1988 Graf had remained the only one who had dealt with Ibn al-Faḍl<sup>9</sup>. J. Nasrallah conducted further research on the topic<sup>10</sup>. He also tried to expand the historical framework of Ibn al-Faḍl's vita. However, he didn't add anything new to the results of Bacha and Cheikho. His two treatises on Ibn al-Faḍl are similar and largely repetitive. Nevertheless, he added new bibliographical data to those of Graf. This area of research must be more examined as Nasrallah's results are unfortunately not always accurate<sup>11</sup>.

Ibn al-Faḍl's translations of several patristic works, such as those of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Isaac the Syrian and many others, as well as his own works, show that he had a very good theological background. He translated liturgical, theological, ethical and philosophical books, as well as exegetical commentaries<sup>12</sup>.

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7) Georg GRAF, *Psychologische Definitionen aus dem «Großen Buch des Nutzens» von 'Ab-dallāh Ibn al-Faḍl (11. Jahrh.)*, Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie, Festgabe zum 60. Geburtstag Clemens Baeumcker, Münster (1913), pp. 55-78. Later he translated another work of Ibn al-Faḍl. See Georg GRAF, *Widerlegung der Astrologen in philosophischer Betrachtungs-weise*, hrsg. und übers. v. G. Graf, in *Orientalia* NS 6 (1937), pp. 337-346.

8) *GICAL* II, pp. 52-64.

9) Abdallah Ibn al-Faḍl is to be found just merely in some Dictionary entries. Michael TILLY, «Abdallah Ibn al-Faḍl», in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* II. (1990), col. 1237-1238. Floris Sepmeijer's contribution was an introduction into one the works of Ibn al-Faḍl. See Floris SEPMEIJER, «The Book of the Splendor of the Believer by 'Abdallāh Ibn al-Faḍl», in *PdO* XVI (1990-1991), pp. 115-120.

10) Joseph NASRALLAH, «Abdallah ibn al-Faḍl», in *POC* 33 (1983), pp. 143-159; and Joseph NASRALLAH, *Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l'Église Melchite du V<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, III, I (1983), pp. 191-229.

11) See below.

12) See G. GRAF, *GICAL* II (1947), 52-64; and J. NASRALLAH, *HMLEM*, pp. 193-229.

B. "EXPOSITION OF THE ORTHODOX FAITH AND THE REFUTATION OF THE ERRORS OF THE JACOBITES AND NESTORIANS IN BRIEF"<sup>13</sup>

### 1. Manuscripts

According to Nasrallah, copies of this text are to be found in Orientale 541, 543 and 549; collection héritiers R. Anṭākī; Léningrad, collection Grégoire IV, 16; 18; Vat. arab. 560, Ma'lūf 1; Moscou and Sin. ar. 452<sup>14</sup>. Nasrallah adds two other copies which Graf hadn't mentioned<sup>15</sup>. These are Ma'lūf 1 and Sin. ar. 452. The latter is believed to be the earliest, dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Unfortunately, after examining the whole manuscript, which is hard to be read, we found that Nasrallah confused Ibn al-Faḍl's *Exposition of Faith* and another work with a similar title; the second work includes a very brief exposition of the Nicene Creed supposed to be written by John of Damascus on the *Orthodox Faith*<sup>16</sup>, which Ibn al-Faḍl had translated as well. Therefore, most of the copies that we have date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In our research, we are using the three copies of *Oriental* copies and one Vatican copy.

### 2. Purpose of Writing this Book

This work consists of an introduction and of seven chapters (ابواب). Parts of the introduction will be mentioned because, in our view, they shed a new light on what has been argued regarding the reason behind this work. Cheikho, Bacha, Graf and Nasrallah all assumed that Ibn al-Faḍl I wrote this *Exposition of Faith* at the request of the bishop of Manbiḡ and Dulūk<sup>17</sup>. However, the introduction, which is written in a very good Arabic style, points in a different direction. Ibn al-Faḍl begins by praising the Orthodox Faith and by stressing the importance of having the Orthodox Faith in order to be saved<sup>18</sup>. He goes on saying<sup>19</sup>:

[...] وامامًا يدعو الى ما يجدي جسيم الخيرات واعظم البركات ومصباحًا ينشئ من

13) Mss Orientale 541, 142; 543, 3; 549, 345. شرح الامانة المستقيمة وابانة غلط اليعاقبة والنسطور على سبيل الايجاز

14) J. NASRALLAH, *HMLEM*, p. 226.

15) G. GRAF, *GCAL* II (1947), pp. 62-63.

16) P.G. 94, 1421-1432.

17) The old city Dloiche in North Syria. See *EI* 2 (1965), p. 624.

18) Orientale 541, 142; 543, 3-4; 549, 345-346: الماثور الى الخلاص الماثور: لما ان كانت الامانة مهيمًا يقود الى الخلاص الماثور... وينقذ من العذاب المخدور...

19) *Ibid.*

معاثر الظلام وطيباً يرحض درن الذنوب والاثام رايت انا المسكين والعبد المهين... ان  
اسطر ما اعتقده قبل الرحيل من العالم المحسوس الى منزل النفوس.

[Because the orthodox faith is] an Imam (preacher), who calls us to do *what is* right, and a lamp, which saves us from the sins of darkness, and an ointment, that washes the sins and faults, that is why I, the poor and indigent servant, resolved to write what I believe before I leave the sensual world to the dwelling of souls...

He continues saying that whosoever relies on God will reach his aim. Finally he writes:

لاسيما وقد انضاف الى ذلك سؤال سيدي الاب الحير القديس الباذل اجمل نية واحسن  
طوية يوحنا مطران منبج ودلوك.

Especially now that the generous and holy father, my lord Yūḥannā, the bishop of Manbiḡ and Dulūk, asked me to carry it out.

Hence, the request of the bishop was not the reason why Ibn al-Faḍl wrote this work, or at least not the only reason. It is, in our opinion, of minor importance, for had it indeed been so, Abdallah would have mentioned it at the beginning and not in a short sentence at the end of his introduction. Besides, had the demand of bishop Yūḥannā been just to have an Exposition of the Faith, then Ibn al-Faḍl would have given him many patristic works on this topic, which he has already translated such as "Exposition of the Orthodox Faith"<sup>20</sup> by John of Damascus, or *Kitāb al-burhān fī taṭbīt al-ʿīmān*, supposedly written by Sophronios of Jerusalem<sup>21</sup> (we will refer to this work later), or he may have translated another patristic work.

Moreover, the phrase "*I resolved to write what I believe before I leave the world of the senses for the dwelling place of souls*" indicates that Ibn al-Faḍl might have written this work at an old age, since he never uses a similar phrase in his other works, which we have examined. For these reasons, we suggest that Ibn al-Faḍl wanted to leave the believers of his Church a book, which would enable them to stay on the right path and protect them from the teachings of the Jacobites and Nestorians. This means we are dealing with Ibn al-Faḍl's own dogmatic synthesis. Ibn al-Faḍl wanted to write a brief Exposition of the Orthodox Faith from his point of view, though he says in the introduction that he is referring to the works of some Church Fathers.

20) P.G. 94, col. 1421-1432.

21) See GCAL II (1947), p. 57.

The demand of the bishop can thus be understood as an encouragement, or he may have financed the project, as the sentence *ادام الله كفايته آيائي في هذا الباب* (*May God prolong his<sup>22</sup> support of me in this regard*) indicates.

### a. Content

We read also in the introduction that Ibn al-Faḍl had written this work first in Greek, and he then translated it into Arabic. This should not to be understood as if there were a Greek copy, which was lost, but rather that he compiled the texts in Greek and then translated them into Arabic.

As mentioned above, this work consists of seven chapters: 1. On defining what should be known regarding the faith; 2. On the Holy Trinity; 3. On the Incarnation of the Eternal Son; 4. On what the Church Fathers said on this topic; 5. On the Divine Names; 6. Disputation with the Jacobites and the refutation of their weak arguments; and 7. Disputation with the Nestorians and the refutation of their foolish arguments, and on defining other things, from which this work profits. Ibn al-Faḍl clarifies the basic Christian dogmas in the first 5 chapters and uses them as a basis for chapters 6 and 7. In some parts of this work Ibn al-Faḍl follows some Greek Fathers by using the question and answer style.

### b. Chapter One

In this chapter Ibn al-Faḍl establishes his metaphysics, and defines basic theological and philosophical notions like, nature (طبيعة), substance (جوهر) and its different forms, hypostasis (قنوم), property (خاصة), the difference between substance and hypostasis, accident (العرض), will (المشيئة), energy (القوة) etc. He further elucidates these notions in the final two chapters. Ibn al-Faḍl refers in this chapter to two major works: John of Damascus' *Dialectica* and Porphyrius' *Esagoge*, though he does not name his sources. One notices directly the wide syntactic difference between the introduction and the other parts of the book. There Ibn al-Faḍl is translating a Greek text, sometimes word for word, which makes his syntax difficult to understand, whereas in the introduction he is using his own words.

### c. Chapter Two

In this chapter Ibn al-Faḍl uses several works from Church Fathers, like John of Damascus, Basil the Great, in addition to the aforementioned work

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22) sc. Bishop Yūḥannā.

*Kitāb al-burhān fī taḥbūt al-ʿīmān*, which is incorrectly attributed to Sophronios of Jerusalem<sup>23</sup>. Ibn al-Faḍl will further refer to this work more in chapters Three to Five without mentioning the source. In chapter Two, he follows the patristic orthodox dogma of the Holy Trinity: God is one but also three hypostasis. Ibn al-Faḍl stresses the centrality of the Father as the begetter of the Son and the origin of the procession of the Holy Spirit, but all share one Substance and one divine Nature. There is no mention of the *Filioque*, and so he does not try to explain this dogma. Both the Son and the Holy Spirit are consubstantial with the Father. The three hypostasis have the same Godhead, energy, will and power. No one can perceive the Holy Trinity, for God is above any perception or understanding. Both Basil the Great and Dionysios the Areopagite are used by Ibn al-Faḍl in order to clarify the teaching on the unity of the Holy Trinity. He also explains to his Arabic readers the etymology of the word “Allah” in Arabic, as he had done in his translation of *Kitāb al-burhān fī taḥbūt al-ʿīmān*<sup>24</sup>.

#### d. Chapter Three

The Eternal Logos, the Only Begotten, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary because of His love for us. He became a man but remained God. Ibn al-Faḍl stresses in this context that the Logos did not dwell in a pre-existent body, but rather He was born in the flesh. He shared with us everything except sin. He is perfect God and perfect man. He has two natures but one hypostasis. The Son has two “births”: the first is eternal from His Father while the second is in time from the Virgin Mary. Therefore, He is, simultaneously, sensed and not sensed, created and uncreated, restrained and unrestrained, heavenly and earthly. In this context Ibn al-Faḍl attacks the Manicheans, Valentians, Paul of Samosata and Nestorius.

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23) According to Graf and Nasrallah, Abdallah Ibn al-Faḍl is the translator of this work. Actually the Balamand manuscript 126 mentions Ibn al-Faḍl as the translator of this work, and in the body of this mentioned script Ibn al-Faḍl himself writes his name after adding a private note to the text, where he explains the meaning of the word «Allah» in Arabic. In Migne’s PG we do not find this text, thus, we have only an Arabic version. In fact, it is impossible that Sophronios had written this treatise simply because this book summarises the teachings of the six ecumenical councils. Sophronios died on March 13<sup>th</sup> 638, so it is obvious that he is not the author of this work, since the sixth ecumenical council was held in 680/1. It is worth noting that this text actually consists of two works namely the summary of the six ecumenical councils and an Arabic version of *De Sectis*, which is attributed in this text to Leontios of Byzantium. More about this work, see Alois GRILLMEIER, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, Vol. 2/2, Freiburg, 2004, pp. 514-523.

24) Ibid.



Ibn al-Faḍl copied this whole chapter from the aforementioned Pseudo-Sophronios work in addition to some parts of John of Damascus' *Exposition of Faith*.

#### e. Chapter Four

This chapter is nothing more than quotes from some Church Fathers like Basil the Great, Ephrem the Syrian, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and Dionysios the Areopagite. He arranges this chapter largely in a questions-and-answers style.

#### f. Chapter Five

According to Ibn al-Faḍl, the Divine Names do not tend to describe the Holy Nature, because there is no name for the substance of God. Ibn al-Faḍl refers to John Chrysostom's commentary on the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, which he knows very well as he had translated it into Arabic<sup>25</sup>. He also cites extensively Gregory of Nazianzus' *Theological Orations*, in which he divides the attributes of the Son into those related to the Son before the Incarnation and those after the Incarnation. He then elucidates why the Son is called God, Son, light, justice, Son of a Man, way, shepherd, sheep, High Priest and so on. Ibn al-Faḍl ends this chapter by referring to Dionysios the Areopagite in order to explain why the Son is called the "cause" or the "principle" of everything.

#### g. Chapter Six

Without any doubt, one can say that Ibn al-Faḍl's main concern in this book is the refutation of the beliefs of the Jacobites and Nestorians. Therefore, the last two chapters cover more pages than the first five chapters.

The Jacobites, according to Ibn al-Faḍl, believe that Christ has one nature – composed of a divine and a human nature – and one composite hypostasis. They came to this conclusion because they believed that the substance is the same as the hypostasis. Furthermore, he mentions that they believed that Christ has one energy and one will. Thus, Ibn al-Faḍl accuses them of being monotheletic and monoenergetic, though he does not call them as such. Ibn al-Faḍl divides this chapter into two parts: 1. The arguments of the Jacobites and the refutation of their teachings; and 2. Defining *will* and *en-*

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25) *GCAL II* (1947), p. 57.

ergy. All these arguments are of a philosophical nature. That is where Ibn al-Faḍl's language becomes more complex.

In part 1, he lists seven arguments, on which the Jacobites base their beliefs. Then he starts refuting them one by one. We will state the first argument:

“As the human being is a composition of body and soul, but neither the soul changed and became body nor the body changed and became soul, rather the two natures remained unchanged and unmixed. Likewise Christ is one nature, composed of His divine and human natures. However, the two natures remained unchanged and unmixed and undivided, but rather they exist in one compound hypostasis and in one compound nature”.

In his refutation of their beliefs, Ibn al-Faḍl relies on John of Damascus *Contra Jacobitas*, whom he mentions at the end of this part, but without mentioning the work. After refuting the seventh argument, he starts exposing the topics of *will* and *energy*. The Jacobites believe that because Christ is one hypostasis, He has, consequently, one will, which they call hypostatic and not natural. Ibn al-Faḍl refers in his explanation to the teachings of the Sixth Ecumenical Council as well as to Maximus Confessor's *Disputation with Pyrrhus*. He explains the dogma of the Will and Energy of Christ extensively<sup>26</sup>.

#### *h. Chapter Seven*

The Nestorians or النسطور, as Ibn al-Faḍl calls them, believed that Christ has two natures and two hypostases (طبيعتان وقنومان) because they held “hypostasis” and “substance” to mean the same thing. The Nestorians denied any single composition in Christ and insisted that Christ has only one will and one energy. God, the Logos, is united with the body واديا (in a friendly manner) and not hypostatically. They also refused to refer to the Virgin Mary as “Theotokos”, calling her only “Mother of the human” or “Christotokos”. Ibn al-Faḍl lists the arguments of the Nestorians in fifteen points. Like in the previous chapter, the arguments are of a philosophical nature. Before embarking on the refutation of their teachings, he begins by defining several notions like: The One (الواحد), the Unity (الوحدة), the Whole (الكل), the Part (الجزء), Union (الاتحاد), Hypostatic Union (الاتحاد القنومي), Enhypostasis (ذو القنوم), Anhypostasis (غير المتقنم) and so on.

26) The three *Orientalis* Mss are missing the beginning of the second part.

Ibn al-Faḍl relies once again on John of Damascus, this time on his work *Contra Nestorianos*, also without mentioning it by name.

### C. CONCLUSION

Ibn al-Faḍl's *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* is mostly a compilation and a translation of some Church Fathers, as he himself mentions in the introduction of this work. Nevertheless, he succeeded in providing a unified text out of various works and introduced it to the Christian Arab reader. Since he did not always mention his sources, it is sometimes hard to tell what is Ibn al-Faḍl's own original writing and what is citation. Even when he did name his sources, he mostly paraphrased them and did not feel restricted by the original text.

This work shows how good Ibn al-Faḍl's knowledge of the Greek Fathers and of Greek philosophy was. Yet, it is not clear whether he knew Greek philosophy from its original sources or via the Church Fathers. This work is, in our opinion, not only a small theological and philosophical lexicon in Arabic, but also a historical witness of its era. It provides us a window into the theological discourse of the Melkite Orthodox Church in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Ibn al-Faḍl's harsh and aggressive tone against the Jacobites and Nestorians can be understood as due not only to the fact that Antioch was in the 11<sup>th</sup> century once again under Byzantine rule, but also to Ibn al-Faḍl's strong belief that only the true faith, which he represents, can guarantee us salvation.

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