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Elias of Nisibis and his Book of Demonstration: An East Syriac Identity in Arabic Language

📅 April 26, 2024 • 📖 Arabic Christianity • ⌚ 16 min read

In his Book of Demonstration, Elias of Nisibis (d. 1046) presents the identity of the Church of the East, from doctrinal, historical, liturgical, and ethical perspectives, in an attempt to distinguish it from the rest of the Christian Churches living in the Abbasid Caliphate and beyond.

Elias was born on February 11, 975, in a Mesopotamian village called Šena (in Arabic, al-Sinn), therefore he is known as “Elias bar Šenayā” in Syriac, or “Elias ibn Sīnā” in Arabic, meaning Elias, the son of Šena (Sīnā). In 1002, the Catholicos of the Church of the East, John V Ibn ‘Īsā ordained him as the Bishop of Bēth Nuhādrē (Bayt Nūhadrā) in Adiabene. On December 3, 1007,

he was elected Metropolitan of the city of Nisibis. His enthronement occurred one year after his election, on December 26, 1008. The most important information about his life comes from his time as Metropolitan of Nisibis. In this period, he met with the Muslim vizier Abū al-Qāsim al-Mağribī, with whom he engaged in discussions on various topics. This encounter led to a correspondence between the two men and, after the vizier's death, the composition of *Kitāb al-Mağ'ālīs*, i.e., the *Book of Sessions*. In this work, Elias recounts, with some omissions and additions, his discussions with al-Mağribī. The Metropolitan passed away at the age of 71 on Friday, July 18, 1046, and was buried in the Church of Mayyāfāriqīn (the present-day Turkish city of Silvan in the province of Diyarbakir).

Elias of Nisibis is widely regarded as one of the most important and influential East Syriac authors of the 11th century. His reputation extended not only among Christian scholars and theologians of his era but also Muslim *mutakallimūn* and intellectuals. This recognition stemmed not only from his profound knowledge spanning medicine, mathematics, philosophy, Arabic and Syriac philology, ethics, Christian theology, and Islamic Kalām, but also from his adeptness at enculturating his philosophical and theological doctrines within the Islamic world through the adoption of Islamic language and terminology. By doing so, in fact, he was better understood, especially by his Muslim opponents in dialogue. He primarily wrote in Arabic, but also in Syriac, covering a wide range of theological subjects. His oeuvre includes debates with Muslims, Jews, and scholars from other Christian denominations, treatises on ethics and morals, church history, canon law, as well as a Syriac grammar, a Syriac-Arabic lexicon, and spiritual writings.



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The *Book of Demonstration*: structure and content

One of Elias of Nisibis' significant works is his *Kitāb al-Burhān 'alā Ṣaḥīḥ al-Īmān*, i.e. the *Book of the Demonstration of the Correctness of the Faith*. However, it appears that this book did not achieve the same level of dissemination as, for instance, his *Kitāb al-Mağ'ālīs*. To the best of my knowledge, it was copied just in two manuscripts. Nonetheless, its importance is underscored by the fact that the entire first chapter was copied

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into the 14th-century East Syriac theological encyclopaedia *Asfār al-Asrār*, the *Book of Mysteries*, authored by Ṣalībā Ibn Yūḥannā al-Mawṣilī.

It can be argued that *Kitāb al-Burhān* was not initially conceived as a single and cohesive treatise. Instead, an examination of its structure and the style of its different chapters reveals that its

various parts were composed at different times, only to be later assembled and consolidated by the author into a unified text. This work is divided into four sections, each containing several chapters, arranged according to a specific logic employed by the author. He begins with the doctrine on the Trinity, proceeds to expound upon Christology, then delves into various Christian (mainly East Syriac) virtues and duties, and ultimately concludes with discussions on liturgical and ecclesiological topics pertinent to his Church:

- Section A
 1. Chapter I: On Monotheism and Trinity
 2. Chapter II: On the Lord Christ and a refutation of the Jews
- Section B
 1. Chapter I: That Melkites and Jacobites are two innovating sects
 2. Chapter II: Refutation of Cyril and his followers with regard to passages from the Gospel
 3. Chapter III: Refutation of the Jacobites
 4. Chapter IV: Refutation of the Melkites
- Section C
 1. Chapter I: On the virtues of the Easterners
- Section D
 1. Chapter I: On rejecting to take the Eucharist of the Melkites and the Jacobites
 2. Chapter II: On the Fathers and relics of the Easterners
 3. Chapter III: On the meaning of the book

The author's primary objective is to articulate, in a clear manner, the doctrinal, historical, liturgical, and ethical identity of the Church of the East, also known as the Nestorian Church. To accomplish this, he utilizes historical arguments and biblical evidence. This identity is often depicted in

comparison, typically in a polemical tone, with that of the Jacobites, i.e., the Miaphysite Church, and the Melkites, i.e., the Chalcedonian Church.

Reading *Kitāb al-Burhān*, one can discern the Bible as one of the principal sources of the author. He employs it in two ways: by directly quoting verses from the New and Old Testaments and specifying the precise book from which they derive, or by alluding or referring to certain Biblical passages or doctrines without providing specific references. Analysis of the direct Biblical quotations reveals that the author draws from more than one source for his Biblical material. He seems to utilize some existing collections of Biblical verses (testimonies), often employed as proof-texts, mainly for Trinitarian and Christological doctrines.

The purpose of these Biblical testimonies is principally to demonstrate to his Christian readers the correctness of Christian faith, particularly in its East Syriac expression. One may speculate whether the author already had an Arabic translation of the Bible in hand, or he translated the verses from Syriac. Regarding the direct Biblical quotations, it is plausible that the author used a written Arabic version of the Bible. However, it is also likely that at times he quoted from memory rather than from a written text. Thus, he sometimes quoted the same verse(s) in different wordings. What is evident and certain is that the Arabic version of the Biblical quotations aligns with the Syriac version of the Peshitta, the official Syriac translation of the Bible adopted by the Syriac-speaking Churches.



MS BNF arabe 6744, 74v-75r: parts of chapter one of Elias of Nisibis' Book of Demonstration, as copied in Asfar al-Asrar

In his *Book of Demonstration*, Elias typically abstains from explicitly citing his sources. However, he mentions Eutychius, the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria (d. 939/40), known by his Arabic name Sa'īd Ibn Baṭrīq, and references his historical chronicle. Ibn Baṭrīq's *Annals* constitute a historical work falling under the category of "universal historiography," which spans from the creation of the world to the time of its author. Consequently, Elias utilized this work as one of his historiographical sources. At times, he directly cites the *Annals*, mentioning the work and its author by name. However, in other instances, the *Annals* serve as an indirect source, providing the basis and backdrop of some of our author's historical narratives. The use of a Melkite source in an East Syriac work functions as evidence, deriving from

an adversary, to validate the correctness of one's own doctrine and position, be it historical or doctrinal.

If in his other writings, particularly those addressed to Muslims, like his *Kitāb al-Magʿālis*, Elias quotes from the Qurʾān and other Islamic sources, in his *Kitāb al-Burhān* such an element is notably absent. This can be attributed to its primary audience being Christians, particularly East Syrians. However, it also serves as an apology to Miaphysites and Chalcedonians, seeking to elucidate and defend the correctness of the East Syriac Christian faith to these audiences. Nonetheless, Elias employs Islamic terminology and Kalāmīc doctrines of the Muʿtazilah, and of their opponents.

For instance, when explaining the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, our author uses the Islamic teaching on the divine attributes, to explain the Trinitarian dogma of Christians and also to affirm its correctness and emphasize that the Trinity should not be

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misunderstood as Tritheism. However, even if our author employs the doctrine of the divine attributes, which ascribes qualities to God that humans can comprehend to some extent, such as God being wise (wisdom) and God being living (life), he further elaborates and develops it, providing it with a metaphysical foundation adequate to his Trinitarian doctrine. Therefore, one might argue that while Islamic terminology and Kalāmīc doctrines are indeed employed in this work, the focus remains on presenting a defence of East Syriac Christian beliefs and practices to a diverse readership, i.e. Christians of other denominations.

Furthermore, the author's favourable stance and respectful view towards Muslims are clearly articulated in the *Book of Demonstration*, especially in regard to their treatment of East Syrian Christians in comparison with that of the Byzantines:

From the Book of Demonstration

And we, Easterners, did not receive from the Muslims (may God protect them!) since they began to reign anything but good, honour and security. Our churches in their countries are many and the state of affairs of our denomination is plain to see and goes according to our preference (with praise to God!). Therefore, we presume to seek their advice and continue to give them their due supplication in our prayers because they are our sovereigns who enjoin supplication for them, not

like Byzantines who have in their country many Jews, who crucified Christ, whom they preserve and allow to openly profess their religion and build their synagogues, where they gather together to blaspheme Christ and calumniate him with terrible things. We have neither teaching nor church in any of their regions. And this is like their rudeness, the incivility of their morality and the antipathy of their characters. Even if Muslims did not also have evident justice and beautiful action –no intelligent person from among the Byzantines or anyone else is heard to deny or refute their excellence in it – they, [Muslims,] do not force anyone at all to convert to their religion, and they consider this to be a prohibited offense. In their countries, there is multitude of persons, from among them [i.e. Muslims] and from others, of different opinions and creeds. Each of them openly practices his teaching, his opinion, his feasts, and his prayers according to his will and, for the most part, he practices this openly and not in a hidden way, without being prohibited [from doing so] or there being any intervention in his affair. And when they began to rule the Levant, Upper Mesopotamia, and the rest of the countries they snatched from the hands of the Byzantines, they did not prohibit them from it but rather, they permitted them to stay among them according to their regulation and allowed them to have churches there and to openly practice their religion and they did not interfere with them in any of the regulations of their denomination. (*Book of Demonstration*, section B, chapter I, verses 239-254)

The *Book of Demonstration*: Articulating an East Syriac Identity

As mentioned earlier, we can consider *Kitāb al-Burhān* an attempt by its author to articulate an East Syriac identity that distinguishes it from the rest of the Christian confessions and Churches. The virtue of faith is the first and most significant aspect of this distinct identity. East Syrians have upheld the Christian faith in its pure form, that is, in accordance with the Scriptures, apostolic tradition, and free from corruption by external influences. By faith Elias means mainly the Christological doctrine since, in more than one passage of this book, he asserts that the major Christian confessions, East Syrians, Miaphysites, and Chalcedonians, agree on the Trinitarian doctrine.

In addition to the virtue of faith, the author delineates a set of virtues that characterize East Syrians and distinguishes them from other Christians. These virtues encompass asceticism, the chastity of their leaders, the practice of monogamy, and the retention of circumcision.

East Syrians also stand out for their distinctive practices of prayer and fasting, as well as various liturgical elements. These practices are consistently presented by our author in comparison with the customs and traditions of the Miaphysites and Chalcedonians. Indeed, the *Book of Demonstration* serves as a significant source in this regard, since it provides important liturgical details not only about the author's own Church but also about the rest of the Christian Churches and denominations in the East.

For instance, Elias furnishes information concerning the differences in the melodies used in the East Syrian Church and in the Melkite tradition. This detail provides an insight into how Melkite and East Syriac chants in Syria and Mesopotamia sounded like in the 11th century:

From the Book of Demonstration

They [the Apostles] also commanded us to use melodies in prayers and doxologies. The Melkites prefer charming melodies and are inclined to them. We ourselves are inclined to the plaintive and sorrowful melodies, because they better resemble self-abasement and devotion, and elicit more tears. And they made the prayer before the Creator (may He be praised!) like the lamp that reaches what one seeks to attain in this world and the next, since one does not reach the light of the hereafter and our Lord's good pleasure (may He be exalted!) except through prayer. And they commanded us to kneel and prostrate, because by this our self-abasement, our obedience to God (may He be mighty and majestic!), and our acknowledgment of his lordship and greatness are made evident, and by kneeling down, our fear, fright, and dread at the multitude of our sins are demonstrated. (*Book of Demonstration*, section C, verses 77-83)

Another intriguing detail found in *Kitāb al-Burhān* pertains to how different Christians made the sign of the cross, directly correlating with their respective Christological doctrines. The Miaphysites were noted for making the sign with one finger, indicating their belief in the one nature and hypostasis of Christ. On the other hand, the Chalcedonians made the sign with two fingers, expressing their doctrine on the two natures of Christ. In contrast, the East Syrians were observed making the sign with the whole hand, which the author identifies as the most ancient method of making the sign of the cross.

While it is important to approach such information critically, recognizing potential biases or interpretations, these details serve as valuable historical and liturgical insights our author provides. They enrich our understanding of the period in which Elias lived and wrote.

One final element of the East Syriac identity our author delineates, and that I would like to highlight here is the significance of the “East” as opposed to the “West,” which represents the land of the Byzantines. According to Elias, the East holds special importance as it is associated with the location of paradise and because it is the homeland of the Fathers and Prophets, like Adam, Noah, and Abraham. God honoured the Easterners when He directed prostration towards the East rather than the West. Additionally, the sun, which symbolizes the life of the world, and all other lights rise from the East, indicating how God preferred the East. Therefore, we find our author asserting that the Angel appeared to the Virgin from the East, the Apostles of the Lord, who hailed from the tribe of Abraham, were all from the East, and the Magi who brought gifts to the Lord came from the East. Moreover, the East, being the place where paradise is located, is believed to be also the dwelling place of Enoch and Elijah, who did not experience death, as well as the souls of Peter, Paul, and all the Prophets, Apostles, and righteous persons. It is certain that this emphasis on the importance of the East serves to strengthen the East Syriac identity and underscores its unique spiritual and even historical significance. Thus, Elias asserts that

the body of the Prophet Ezekiel at al-Zāb, the body of the Prophet Daniel at Susa (al-Sūs), the body of the Apostle Mār Thomas in India, Mār Addai in Edessa, Nathaniel in Armenia, the Apostle Mār Mari at the Monastery of Qunnī (Dayr Qunnī), and others whose names I do not remember [are in the East]

(Book of Demonstration, section D, chapter II, verse 75-76).

This last piece of information is indeed of great historical importance since through it *Kitāb al-Burhān* can be regarded as a witness of a potential pilgrimage to the tombs of the aforementioned Prophets and Apostles, particularly in the vicinity of Nisibis. The *Book of Demonstration* serves as one of the earliest known sources to transmit local and popular traditions concerning the tomb of Ezekiel on the Zab River, also known as the Tomb of Hazana or Be Hazane, situated in the Iraqi Kurdistan city of Amadiya (al-‘Imādiyyah). Additionally, it transmits a Judaic tradition, which was spread among Syrian Christians and also accepted by Muslims, regarding the location of the tomb of the Prophet Daniel in the city of Susa, where a synagogue is also found. These details not only shed light on the religious

and cultural traditions of the region but also contribute to our understanding of some pilgrimage practices and beliefs during that era.

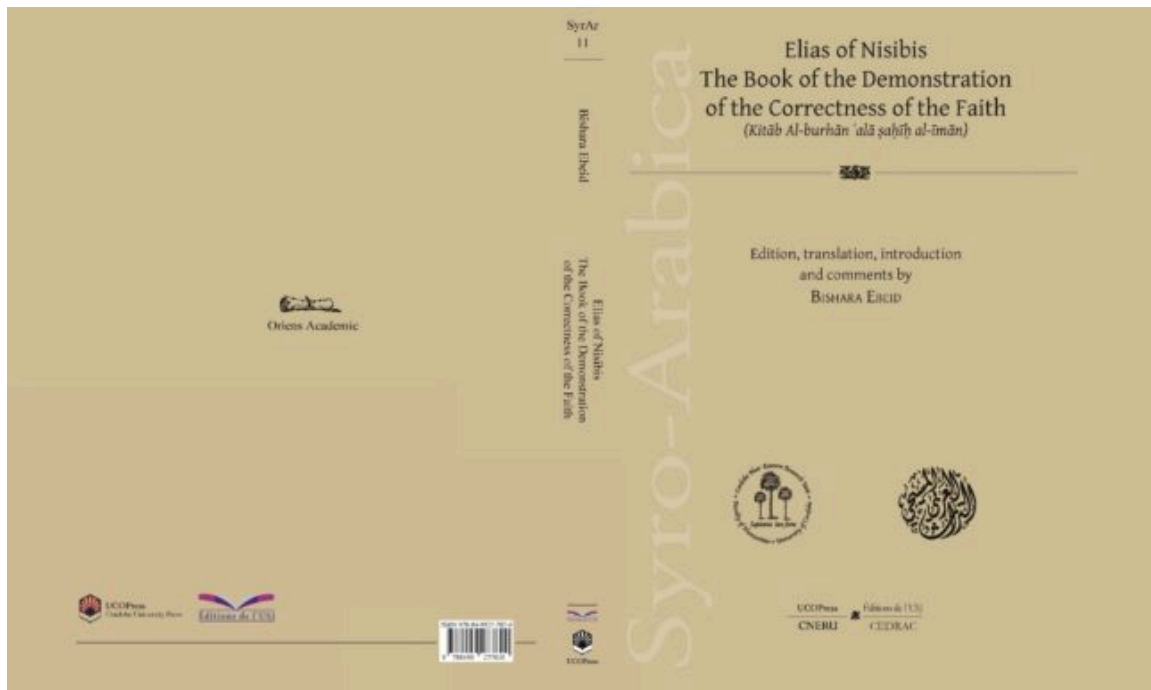
Elias of Nisibis, his writings, and his doctrine were known to numerous authors and scholars in subsequent centuries. For example, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) quoted Elias' *Kitāb al-Mag'ālīs* and polemicized with it. Similarly, the Maronite *Kitāb al-kamāl* (1058-1059) and the Coptic scholar Mu'taman al-Dawlah Ibn al-'Assal (d. 13th century) in his *Mag'mū' uṣūl al-dīn wa-masmū' maḥṣūl al-yaqīn* referenced and quoted some passages from Elias' writings and used his teaching attributing all this to him by name.

Elias of Nisibis, his writings, and his doctrine were known to numerous authors and scholars in subsequent centuries.

As mentioned earlier, Ṣalībā Ibn Yūḥannā al-Mawṣilī copied in his work the first chapter of *Kitāb al-Burhān*, explicitly mentioning Elias of Nisibis by name. Additionally, in other passages, al-Mawṣilī used this same work of Elias as a source, though he did not openly cite or refer to it. The same thing is observed with other East Syriac sources, such as *Kitāb uṣūl al-dīn* of the

Catholicos Elias II (d. 1131), the works of 'Abdisho bar Berīkā (d. 1318), and certain anonymous writings from the 11th and 12th centuries, namely the *Treatise on Prayer* and the *Treatise on Fasting*. All these examples illustrate the enduring influence of Elias of Nisibis and his *Book of Demonstration* on subsequent generations of scholars, as well as his significance to writers of his own Church, and those of other religions and Christian denominations.

In conclusion, considering that all the sources that were based indirectly on Elias of Nisibis' *Kitāb al-Burhān*, aimed, in some way, to emphasize the distinctive elements of the East Syriac ecclesiastical and doctrinal identity, one might understand the importance of this source not only for the Church of the East, its doctrine, and its identity but also its significance for understanding the context and period in which Elias of Nisibis lived. The *Book of Demonstration* serves as a valuable window into the theological, liturgical, and cultural landscape of the East Syrian Church during Elias' time, shedding light on its beliefs, practices, and interactions with other Christian denominations, doctrines, customs and traditions.



Critical edition of Elias of Nisibis, *The Book of the Demonstration of the correctness of the faith* (Kitāb al-burhān ‘alā ṣaḥīḥ al-īmān), with English translation and comments, CNERU-CEDRAC, CORDOBA-Beyrouth, 2024

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This post was updated on May 6, 2024 to include the image MS Ar 318 (Sbath 1131) HMML Pr. No. GAMS 01131 f. 28r.



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