Science, syntax, and superiority in eleventh-century Christian–Muslim discussion: Elias of Nisibis on the Arabic and Syriac languages

David Bertaina

To cite this article: David Bertaina (2011) Science, syntax, and superiority in eleventh-century Christian–Muslim discussion: Elias of Nisibis on the Arabic and Syriac languages, Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, 22:2, 197-207, DOI: 10.1080/09596410.2011.560433

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2011.560433

Published online: 19 Apr 2011.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 301

View related articles
Science, syntax, and superiority in eleventh-century Christian–Muslim discussion: Elias of Nisibis on the Arabic and Syriac languages

David Bertaina*

Department of History, University of Illinois, Springfield IL, USA

Elias of Nisibis, an eleventh-century bishop of the ‘Nestorian’ Church of the East, was a Christian author fluent in Syriac and Arabic. Elias composed works on a variety of topics including theology, history, grammar, and lexicography. His Arabic work the Book of sessions (Kitāb al-majālis) relates discussions that he had with the Muslim vizier Abū al-Qāsim al-Maghribī on seven different occasions. The sixth discussion focuses on the merits of Arab and Syriac sciences and compares their languages with reference to syntax, lexicography, and written script. This article contextualizes and outlines the sixth dialogue, arguing that the text does not accurately reflect Elias’ understanding of Syriac and Arabic grammar and sciences. Rather, the discourse has three purposes: to recognize scientific achievements by Syriac scholars, to strengthen the rational arguments for the Christian faith, and to recommend that Muslims should evaluate matters, including their interpretation of the Qur’an, through the use of scientific knowledge. The article offers conclusions on Elias’ understanding of the relationship between reason and revelation, his views on language, and scientific learning in the Syriac tradition.

Keywords: dialogues; disputations; refutations; apologies; comparative religion; ethnography; grammar; language; Christian exegesis of the Qur’an; textual analysis of the Qur’an; social interaction; Nestorians; Church of the East

Biography and works of Elias of Nisibis

During the eleventh century, Metropolitan Bishop Elias Bar Shīnāyā of Nisibis was a significant figure in the so-called ‘Nestorian’ Church of the East. As a Christian writer who was proficient in both Syriac and Arabic, Elias wrote on a variety of religious and philosophical topics, as well as letters and commentaries. He was noted as a theologian, historian, grammarian, and lexicographer (Samir 1977). While Elias was known as a ‘Nestorian’, he and his fellow Christians did not identify themselves by this polemical term but called themselves simply the Church of the East (Brock 1996; Baumer 2006). They are also referred to by scholars as ‘East Syrians’ in contrast to the West Syrian ‘Jacobite’ Christians. Following the school of Antioch led by Greek theologian Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) and the later Syriac theologians Narsai (d. 503) and Babai the Great (d. 628), the Church of the East taught that in Jesus Christ, two natures and their two essences (hypostases) were united in one person. In terms of geography, the eleventh-century Church of the East had communities in the Middle East, including Greater Syria, Iraq, Arabia, and Central Asia, as well as India and China. It is clear from his writings that Elias thought of Syriac Christianity as a significant part of the social fabric of northern Mesopotamia and the wider Islamic world (Conrad 1999).

Elias was born into a Christian family in 975 in the town of Shīnā, located on the Tigris River, a little below the mouth of the River Zab (Chabot 1902, 683; Assemani 1725, 226). He was ordained a priest of the Church of the East in 994 by Bishop Nathaniel, who would later...
become Patriarch John ibn ‘Īsā (Brooks 1910, 228–9). Within a short period, Elias was made an arch-priest at the monastery of St Simeon, which was near Shīnā. Between 996 and 1000, Elias served at the monastery of St Michael on the Tigris River near Mosul in present-day northern Iraq. He concluded his education under the direction of the monk John al-A‘rāj, whom he mentions in his writings. According to his biographers, Elias was noted as a priest of sincere piety, exceptional intelligence, and keen judgment. These qualities led Elias to be consecrated as Bishop of Bēt Nūhadrā by Patriarch John ibn ‘Īsā (Samir 1977, 257–8). Following the death of Metropolitan Yahbalâhâ of Nisibis on 3 December 1007, the Patriarch named Elias for the vacant position. Elias was made Metropolitan Bishop of Nisibis on 26 December 1008 (Brooks 1910, 225, 229). During the next 40 years, Elias would produce a number of works while serving the Church of the East until his death at the age of 71. According to the medieval chronicler Șaflîbî ibn Yūḥannā, Elias of Nisibis died on 18 July 1046:

And in those days, the Father Holy Mar Elias Metropolitan of Nisibis died, known as Ibn al-Sînîya, author of the Book of sessions and the Book on the dissipation of sorrows and The homilies. And that was on the day of Friday, 10 Muḥarram, the year 438 of the crescent. He was interred in the Church of the Mayyāfāriqin [modern Silvan, Turkey], next to the tomb of his brother, Abū Sa‘îd, may God be pleased with them. (Samir 1988, 124–5, my translation)

From this account, we learn that Elias was dedicated to his family. His brother Abū Sa‘îd Maṣnûr ibn ‘Īsā, surnamed Zâhid al-‘Ulamā, was a well-regarded physician. He served under the Muslim emir Naṣr al-Dawlat Aḥmad ibn Marwān (d. 1061), leader of the eleventh-century Kurdish Marwanid dynasty at Dîyârbakîr (Amîd). With the help of his Muslim patron, Zâhid al-‘Ulamâ‘ constructed a hospital in Mayyāfāriqin, donating much of his fortune and many of his own instruments to the clinic. Elias’ brother also composed five books, including The book of hospitals, The book of aphorisms, questions and responses, and The book of songs and visions, as well as a book on essentials for medical students, and a book on the maladies of the eyes and their treatment (Samir 1985). The fact that Elias was buried next to his brother indicates the close relationship between the two men. In addition, Elias corresponded frequently with his other brother, Abū al-‘Ulā’ Sa‘îd ibn Sahl. This brother was a physician to the Muslim vizier Abū al-Qâsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alî al-Maghribî, and he was the recipient of many of Elias’ writings. With two brothers being influential physicians, and Elias a bishop, it is clear that they held a place among the educated elite in ecclesiastical and political life under eleventh-century Marwanid rule.

Elias was a productive scholar over the course of his time as bishop. Samir Khalîl Samîr has provided an updated summary of his works and catalogued the texts attributed to him (Samir 1977). According to Samir, we can identify at least 24 works with Elias. In the area of theology, he composed the Kitāb al-majâlis, or Book of sessions, which recounts the meetings between Elias and the vizier Abū al-Qâsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alî al-Maghribî in Nisibis over the course of two years. This seven-part work will be discussed below. Elias also wrote a number of letters to al-Maghribî, although they are not yet available in print. He wrote a ‘Letter on the Unity and the Trinity of the Creator’ to a Muslim judge while in Mosul in 1029, in which he justifies the use of the language of three hypostases to describe God and argues that the Arabic word for ‘substance’ (jawhar) is an acceptable term for use in Christian theology. In a ‘Letter on the Creator’, Elias responds to a number of objections concerning Trinitarian theology. His ‘Letter on the Creation of the World, Unity, and the Trinity of God’ deals with the existence of God, the unity of God, and Trinitarian doctrine. The ‘Treatise on the Sense of the Words kiyyānâ (Nature) and Alāhâ (God)’ is a response to a question from his brother on Trinitarian theology and the certainty or uncertainty of the word ‘God’. His Book of proof on the true faith (Kitâb al-burhân) is a longer work on Christian monotheism, objections to Christian theology, and biblical sources confirming the truth of Christianity. In a ‘Treatise on Eternal Bliss’, Elias opposes the
materialist conception of Paradise. It seems to have been directed at Christians who were influenced by Muslim conceptions of Paradise, but also at Muslims.

Besides his theological works, Elias was also interested in practical matters related to the philosophical life. In this vein, Elias wrote a response to the five doubts of a certain Ibn Buṭlān, in which he explained Christian conceptions of perfection, forgiveness, judgment, sinful intent, anger, the virtues, and the Resurrection. Elias composed a ‘Letter on Chastity’ as a defense of the Christian practice and a refutation of the critiques made by the ninth-century Muslim author al-Jāḥiz. Elias argues that there are nine important motives for choosing celibacy, including the elimination of the passions, and that celibacy is even preferable to marriage. In his popular Book on the dissipation of sorrows (Kitāb daf’ al-hamm), Elias describes the vices and how one can avoid them through the acquisition of virtues to discipline the body and soul. By combining the theological and rational virtues, one can take control of the passions.

Elias is remembered as a historian for his Chronography, which was written in Syriac and Arabic and listed historical events, calendars, conversion charts, and other useful information. Since Elias mentions many of his sources, it reveals the texts and processes by which Christians and Muslims shared and transmitted knowledge in the eleventh century (Witakowski 2007). Elias also composed several miscellaneous works, including a collection of maxims that were considered helpful for the soul and body. He composed a canticle-hymn on God, and a theological commentary on the Nicene Creed. Since Elias was also a bishop, he was involved in canon law. He composed a ‘Letter on Inheritance’ concerning East Syrian church law. In addition, Elias of Nisibis was deeply interested in the Syriac language. The fruit of his work was the production of a treatise on Syriac grammar, and a Syriac–Arabic word gloss. The following sections will detail and contextualize Elias’ works.

**Syriac grammar in an Islamic context**

Medieval Syriac Christians were quite interested in the Syriac grammatical sciences because of the contested legacy of the Syriac language in relation to Arabic and Islamic culture. In the pre-Islamic Middle East, Syriac grammarians were often regarded as the guardians of the literary language. Their teachings in the monastery schools were meant to preserve and transmit not only the intellectual heritage of the Syriac tradition, but also the elite literary style and culture of their predecessors (Albert 1986; Aziz 1910; Balzaretti 1997; Briquel-Chatonnet 1991; Contini 2000).

During the ninth century, Arabic-speaking Muslims demonstrated an increased interest in translating the Hellenistic intellectual heritage into Arabic. One of the results of the translation movement was the development of a polemical message among Muslims that emphasized the superiority of Arabic. The corollary to the Arabic superiority argument was the inferiority of other languages such as Syriac. In particular, ninth-century Muslims based their judgments upon linguistic and religious claims that the Qur’an’s ‘clear Arabic speech’ (Q 29.195) was the sole criterion for the merit of a language. Syriac grammarians prior to Elias were well aware of these critiques. For instance, the West Syrian Jacobite Antony of Tagrit complained that Arabic speakers thought the honor and beauty of their own works not enough, and chose to humiliate Syriac Christians by calling their language meager, narrow, stunted, and feeble, and criticizing Syriac literature as poor and beggarly (Watt 2007, 138). Within this fractious context, Elias of Nisibis was interested not only in the Syriac grammatical sciences, but also in the debate about linguistic superiority and the defense of Syriac against the claims of arabophone Muslims.

We know that Elias was interested in language for its own sake, for he composed a treatise on Syriac grammar during his time as Metropolitan of Nisibis (Gottheil 1887). Consisting of 13 chapters, his grammar compares the Syriac alphabet with others, including Greek, Coptic,
Armenian, and ‘Hindu’ writing (Sanskrit). While these languages have a fully vowelled system, Syriac (like other Semitic languages) uses a system of vowels based on diacritical points (Segal 1953). According to Elias, the 22 letters of the Syriac alphabet are arranged in an order that is convenient for pronunciation. These letters then have vowels attached to them to indicate how they should be vocalized. Elias explains the East Syrian forms of vowel pointing (zqāpā for ā, rbāṣā for e, ptāḥā for a, rwāḥā for o, ’elāṣā for ı, and ḥbāṣā for i), radical and weak letters (such as adding wāw to a verbal root to create a substantive, or adding yād to create a passive form), the four cases in Syriac (the function of the proclitic letters bēt, dālat, wāw, and lāmad), the method of spirantization (the fricative or plosive pronunciation of a consonant known as rukkākā and qushshāyā), the elision of vowels in certain words, the gemination (doubling) of certain consonants in words, the use of syāmē in Syriac (two dots placed over plural nouns and adjectives to distinguish their form from the singular), and the four punctuation marks. His Syriac grammar is free from overt polemical critique, and was written for a deacon (doubling) of certain consonants in words, the use of weak letters (such as adding wāw to a verbal root to create a substantive, or adding yād to create a passive form), the four cases in Syriac (the function of the proclitic letters bēt, dālat, wāw, and lāmad), the method of spirantization (the fricative or plosive pronunciation of a consonant known as rukkākā and qushshāyā), the elision of vowels in certain words, the gemination (doubling) of certain consonants in words, the use of syāmē in Syriac (two dots placed over plural nouns and adjectives to distinguish their form from the singular), and the four punctuation marks. His Syriac grammar is free from overt polemical critique, and was written for a deacon who was a scribe. Most likely he intended this work for dissemination among those who were learning Syriac to preserve their identity among a Muslim majority population.

Another example of Elias’ interest in the grammatical sciences is his Syriac–Arabic dictionary, Kitāb al-tarjumān fi ta’lim lughat al-Surīyān (Obiciini 1636; de Lagarde 1879; Gottheil 1888–1889; Weninger 1994). Elias does not follow the alphabetic dictionary construction of his Syriac predecessors, such as the tenth-century writers Ḥasan bar Bahlūl or Ḥishū bar ‘Alī (Duval 1893), which included glosses and commentaries. Instead, Elias’ dictionary is a word list divided into 30 subject groups belonging to similar themes. For instance, Elias devoted the first 27 sections to nouns, section 28 lists Syriac verbs, and section 29 deals with particles. In terms of themes, the first section lists words related to God. Sections 2–10 describe mankind. Sections 11–14 describe the environment of humankind, while sections 15–18 discuss the animal world. Section 19 lists sounds, such as laughing, sneezing, and snorting. The non-living part of the world is listed in sections 20–24. Categories 25–29 deal with other subjects not previously included, such as colors. According to Stefan Weninger, there is evidence to suggest that Elias borrowed this structure for his work from a ninth-century Muslim lexicographer, Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 838), who borrowed the structure directly from the second-century Greek scholar Julius Pollux (Weninger 1994). Elias adopted the pagan and Muslim structures, but refashioned them to suit his needs as a bishop in the Church of the East. This important difference yielded two results: a particular emphasis on Christian theological terms, and an emphasis on medical terms. This second result is probably related to the fact that his brothers were prominent physicians. In summary, both the treatise on grammar and the Syriac–Arabic dictionary demonstrate that Elias was deeply interested in the study and teaching of Syriac language within his community.

The Book of sessions (Kitāb al-majālis)

Elias’ grammatical interests merged with his apologetic interests in his dialogue with the local Muslim leader. The Book of sessions, or Kitāb al-majālis, was written in Arabic some time after the years 1026–1027. During those two years, Elias held several discussions with the local Muslim vizier, Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Maghrībī. Originally from Cairo, al-Maghrībī’s family had served under the Fatimids until the time of the caliph al-Ḥākim, who had his family killed. Al-Maghrībī fled and found refuge under the Marwanid Kurdish emir Naṣr al-Dawlāt Ahmad ibn Marwān, who granted him a post as vizier in Nisibis. Until al-Maghrībī’s death in 1027, he and Elias engaged in a number of dialogues and correspondences. Soon afterward, Elias wrote these conversations down as seven separate dialogues, which together make up the Book of sessions (Samir 1996). This article focuses on the sixth of these seven
discussions, which is said to have occurred on 27 July 1026. It was composed in the form of a letter addressed to Elias’ brother Abū al-‘Ula’ Saʿīd ibn Sahl, who was a private physician to the vizier al-Maghribī (Samir 1985). According to the letter, the discussion occurred in the vizier’s quarters, when Elias was 51 years old and al-Maghribī was 45.

The sixth discussion is devoted to the merits of Arabic and Syriac grammatical sciences and compares the two languages on the basis of syntax, lexicography, and written script. It is important to note that the relationship between the two men in all of the sessions is cordial and polite, and the exchange appears authentic at first glance. But while the discussions definitely took place (we have the letters between the two men to confirm this fact), it is far less likely that the preserved conversations represent the exact content in every detail. Although the discussion does not concentrate on theology, the sixth dialogue can be read through the lens of Syriac Christianity and the Syriac identity. At the outset, Elias explains that his main goal is to commend the importance of grammar. However, reading between the lines of the text makes it clear that Elias’ explicit goal in the text does not accurately reflect his understanding of Syriac and Arabic grammar. Rather, the dialogue recommends that Muslims evaluate issues through the use of scientific knowledge, strengthens Syriac Christian accounts of their faith, and promotes the scientific achievements of Syriac scholars.

The dialogue consists of a discussion about syntax, lexicography, metaphor, and written Arabic in comparison with Syriac and begins with the Muslim vizier al-Maghribī asking about the sciences in Syriac tradition:

[Al-Maghribī] said to me: Do you have sciences like those of the Muslims?
I said: Yes, and much more!
He said: What proof do you have of that?
I said: The proof is that the Muslims have many beneficial sciences that were translated from Syriac, while Syriac has no sciences that were translated from Arabic, because they have no science that would be beneficial if it were translated into another language. (Samir 1975–1976, 635, 637; my translation)

Elias’ tone with al-Maghribī is forceful, particularly because of his familiarity with grammar and because the issue touched upon ethnic and cultural issues as well as religious factors. Nevertheless, al-Maghribī seems unperturbed by his response and he asks if Syriac Christians have the sciences of syntax, lexicography, calligraphy and dialectical theology (kalām) like the Muslims. First, they compare Syriac syntax with Arabic syntax, with Elias claiming that Syriac syntax does not allow ambiguity, while this is not always the case in Arabic. In Syriac, Elias argues, the particle lāmad (l-) distinguishes between object and subject, and therefore does not need nominative and accusative markers like Arabic:

Also, it is possible in some cases that the object belongs to a different genus than its subject, but the occurrence of action could be applicable to each one simultaneously. For example, we say: ‘He hit, Zayd, the horse. This sentence might mean that Zayd hit the horse, or it might mean that the horse hit Zayd. For every object in such cases, Syriac speakers add lām to it, in order to distinguish between [the object] and its subject. The Arabs simply put the subject in the nominative and the object in the accusative, in order to distinguish between them. But Syriac speakers have a sign which indicates to them the difference between the subject and the object, clarifying what is in the nominative and the accusative. They do not need a nominative case for the subject and an accusative case for the object as the Arabs require.

[The vizier] said: What is the proof that introducing the particle lām for the object clarifies the nominative case of the subject and the accusative case of the object in order to distinguish them?
I said: Because the particle lām distinguishes between the entire subject and object, while the nominative and the accusative cases do not do that. For example, if we say: ‘She hit, the pregnant woman, the drunk woman’, and ‘It broke, the staff, the millstone’, or ‘He killed, Sibawayhi, Khālawyhi’, the nominative and the accusative cannot distinguish between the subject of these actions and their objects. The same situation occurs with the rest of the indeclinable nouns. (Ibid., 647, 649; my translation)
In response, the vizier asks Elias about the problem of oral ambiguity in the two languages. Elias responds that inflection does not remove all ambiguity in Arabic, while Syriac has external markers indicating the meaning of a sentence. For instance, Elias argues, the sentence ‘I met Zayd content’ in Arabic does not reveal to the listener whether it is the speaker who is content or Zayd. In an example from the Qur’an, Elias shows how Arabic can cause confusion between the subject and the predicate:

> It is for this reason that there is disagreement between Muslim scholars about a sentence that is found in the Qur’an: ‘No one knows its interpretation except God and those who are rooted in knowledge, they say we believe’ [Q 3.7]. Some of them say: ‘God and those who are rooted in knowledge know its interpretation’, while others say: ‘Those who are rooted in knowledge do not know its interpretation.’ The syntax of Arabic does not indicate the real meaning of this sentence as the Syriac language would if the sentence were in Syriac. (Samir, 1991–1992, 265, 267; my translation)

Neither can Arabic clearly distinguish between indirect discourse and questions, commands and requests, indirect discourse and petition, interrogatives and exclamations, and other sentences in the examples that Elias uses during the dialogue. In his view, Syriac syntax is able to remove ambiguity in many cases where Arabic syntax cannot.

In response, the vizier al-Maghribī argues that inflection can properly remove ambiguity in Arabic. Using an example from the Qur’an, he argues:

> The syntax of the Arabs is useful for us in order to know the many cases of ambiguity, such as the sentence that is found in the Qur’an [Q 9.3]: ‘God is free of obligation to the idolaters and his messenger.’ In fact, without the inflection, the listener would think that God is free of obligation to the idolaters and to his messenger [rather than that God and his messenger are free of obligation to the idolaters]. Another example: the sentence [Q 35.28]: ‘Among the servants of God, only the knowers believe.’ In fact, without the inflection, the listener would think that God believes the knowers. There are many of these examples. Without the inflection, they would be ambiguous to the listener and the reader. (Ibid., 277, 279; my translation)

Elias is unconvinced by this argument, and notes that inflection removes the ambiguity in these two sentences by chance, but fails to do so in many other instances. He then uses several examples to illustrate this, such as ‘But God punishes the idolaters and his messenger’: since the sentence begins with ‘but’, Arabic syntax puts the subject of the sentence [God and his messenger] in the accusative, the same case as the object, so that, according to Elias, ‘his messenger’ could belong either with ‘God’ as the subject or with ‘idolaters’ as the object.

Next, Elias points out the challenge that arises from the lack of punctuation in Arabic. According to Elias, Syriac scholars had consolidated and perfected their language by speaking it orally and then ensuring the written text avoided any possible confusion by adding punctuation. He alludes to the diacritical points, punctuation marks, and other additions to the letters that guarantee the intelligibility of Syriac. In contrast, Elias cites other Muslim and Christian grammarians to confirm his view that Arabic syntax lacks important punctuation. He notes that the Persian scholar Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (d. 925), in the fifth chapter of his Book of spiritual medicine, claimed that the syntax of the Arabs is an arbitrary science rather than a necessary one (ibid., 295). Elias also quotes an unnamed Muslim scholar on the subject of syntax in Arabic, saying: ‘It is a science that has no science, rejoicing in that which is without reason.’ Then Elias quotes the ninth-century Syriac Christian translator and grammarian Hunayn ibn Ishāq, saying:

> Hunayn ibn Ishāq has also shown in the third chapter of his book on The syntax of the Arabs, that the Arabs do not have any syntax in order to know the meaning of ambiguous cases comparable to that of Syriac. And this book notes that it is possible to decide that the syntax of the Arabs is insufficient, and not convincing, for what is required of it. I have not said all of this with the intention of criticizing the syntax of the Arabs, or of denying its quality and its excellence. Rather, I have intended in that to show that if the syntax of the Arabs is compared with the rational sciences, it appears as quite inferior. And if
it is compared with the syntax of Syriac, Syriac syntax appears more useful and of superior quality. (Ibid., 295, 297; my translation)

In the next portion of the dialogue, al-Maghribī and Elias discuss the science of lexicography and vocabulary. Elias points out that this is a significant science since it consists of knowing nouns and their structures, verbs and their conjugations, particles and their meanings, augmentation and ellipsis, appositional substantives and assimilation, and other topics relevant to conjugation. So al-Maghribī asks whether Syriac employs metaphor (al-majāz) in the same way that Arabic does. Elias argues that Syriac utilizes metaphor only in cases of necessity, since the use of metaphor is a flaw. For Elias, a language with greater precision has greater quality, and metaphors can only lead to imprecise formations of thought. In other words, discourse consists of real or metaphorical types, with real discourse requiring more of an effort on the part of the speaker since the speaker must be unambiguous. The vizier al-Maghribī believes metaphors are a virtue, while Elias claims they are a deficiency in a language since they obscure the precise meanings of sentences. Metaphor is difficult for a listener to comprehend, and non-metaphorical language is more precise. Thus, language should have precision as its highest goal. But the vizier insists that if metaphorical language were a flaw, then the Qur’an would not be composed mostly of metaphors. In response, Elias asks that he be excused from being questioned on the use of metaphor in the Qur’an.

Al-Maghribī changes the subject from discussion of metaphor to discussion of the richness of the Arabic language, insisting that ‘we find, for a single subject among the Arabs, a number of terms, while Syriac speakers and others have only a single term and perhaps none original to their language’ (ibid., 307; my translation). However, Elias argues that Arabic does not have a greater depth of vocabulary, since the multiplicity of words simply points to the large number of Arab tribes, each with their own dialect. Elias only accepts that Arabic has more coarse words. Rather than using his own authority, Elias cites Hunayn ibn Ishāq again, quoting from his Book of diacritical points (Kitāb al-nuqat) to show that no suitable Arabic words exist for a number of things, such as the names of medicinal plants, medicines, medical instruments, and things in the culinary arts. Rather, Arabic has adopted terms from Greek, Syriac, and Persian to convey these meanings in its vocabulary.

In the following section, al-Maghribī asks Elias to compare the written script of Syriac with that of Arabic, concerning its beauty, precision and usefulness. Not surprisingly, Elias finds the Syriac script more beautiful, more precise, and more useful than the Arabic script. According to Elias, there are two problems with the Arabic script. The first is the similarity of the characters and the need to point the text. Elias provides several examples in this section to demonstrate the possible confusion between letters in the Arabic script, such as bāʾ, tāʾ, and thāʾ, or ʾīm, ḥāʾ, and khāʾ, and so forth. Their resemblance to each other opens up the possibility of confusion in reading and writing. Then, Elias demonstrates his awareness of variant readings of the Qur’an because of difficulties in reading or writing the diacritical points and the Arabic script:

Even in the Qur’an, which is memorized through study, and vocalized and mastered, there are a number of differences between readers, on account of the difficulty in pointing and the similarity of the characters. For example in Sūrat al-Baqara [Q 2.259], some have read nunshiruḥā with an ‘r’ and others with a ‘z’ (nunshizuhā). In Sūrat Taha [Q 20.96], ‘what they/you did not perceive’ some have read it with ‘y’ (yabsūrā) and others with ‘t’ (tabsurā). And in that [verse] as well, some people have read it fa-qabadtu qabdatan with ‘d’ and others with ‘ṣ’ (fa-qabastu qabsatan). In Sūrat al-Anbiyāʾ [Q 21.80], some have read it li-yuḥsinukum with ‘y’, others with ‘r’ (li-yuḥṣinukum), and others still with ‘n’ (li-nuḥṣinukum). In Sūrat al-Hajj [Q 22.73], some have read ‘you call besides [God]’, with ‘t’ (tadūna), and others ‘he calls besides [God]’, with ‘y’ (yadūna). There are many examples of this in the Qur’an, and readers disagree about them. And it is obvious that if these characters were not similar, there would not be any disagreement about the Qur’an. (Ibid., 321, 323; my translation)
With regard to the joining of letters in Arabic, Elias argues that it does not provide any superiority. Sometimes joined letters prevent correct vocalizations, particularly of foreign names and terms. Al-Maghribī disagrees, claiming that joining letters is advantageous, since it makes the script more beautiful, faster to write, and clearer to read. In this section, we see the Muslim vizier’s close association of Arab ideals with an imitable Arabic Qur’an. For al-Maghribī, the question of the Arabic script is also a theological issue. Elias gives an example showing that joining letters is not necessarily helpful in writing, quoting a Greek who constructed an entire paragraph using unjoined Arabic letters. Elias also points out that foreign proper names are not always correctly written with vowels because the letters are joined. He concludes their discussion of purely grammatical issues, and the conversation shifts to an examination of language utilized for theology (‘ilm al-kalām).

The form of the sixth discourse between the Muslim vizier al-Maghribī and the Metropolitan Elias of Nisibis is consistent with the tone and style of the other sessions, despite its lack of overt theological argument. In his conclusion, Elias points out that Syriac existed in written form well before Arabic. According to Elias, Syriac grammarians had already adapted their theories to the norms of Greek grammar. In his view, the Syriac appropriation of helpful aspects of Greek grammar had allowed Syriac to develop more than Arabic. Thus, Elias argues that aspects of a language’s grammar and script should accord with logic, rather than being based on theological justifications such as those proposed by al-Maghribī.

Elias’ principle is that language should be logical and clear, and there should be no ambiguity in its spoken or written forms. Rational discourse reveals the merits and shortcomings of the Syriac and Arabic languages. For Elias, there is harmony between these academic disciplines and his Syriac Christian faith. As in the other discussions, Elias consistently presents reason and revelation as complementary and the sixth dialogue thus conforms with the broader framework of the whole.

As regards depicting religious others, the vizier al-Maghribī and the bishop Elias have different roles in the discussion. The vizier takes the initiative, asks questions and demands proofs for Elias’ assertions. He is in a comfortable position, certain of the merits of the Arabic language. His contribution to the text is minimal, since he is in the role of questioner. He listens to the answers given by Elias, often without interruption. The vizier does interrupt when something is an affront, and he shows his emotions. He demands justifications for Elias’ statements, but does not limit his freedom of expression. The vizier respects his Christian discussion partner and allows him to present his explanation, even if he finds the arguments unconvincing, or simply ignores the point altogether.

Elias discusses the grammatical material as a master rhetorician. He accepts a question, then explains his own view and that of the Christian faith, even on a cultural level. However, he rarely asks questions, and he does not use the second person pronoun to address the vizier. Elias identifies himself as Arab as well as Syriac by virtue of his bilingual ability and Syriac Christian faith. Elias was living between two cultures, expressing himself in both Arabic and Syriac. This discussion is thus closely linked with the linguistic and cultural parameters that shaped the communal memory of the Syriac Christian scientific tradition in the eleventh century (Samir 1975; 1976).
Conclusion

There are a number of possible ways in which scholars can read Elias’ dialogue with al-Maghribī in the *Book of sessions*. First, we can read the dialogue as a neutral argument about the merits of grammar. Since Elias had written a Syriac grammar and compiled a Syriac–Arabic dictionary, the work would seem to be in line with his interests and convey what Elias actually thought about the Syriac language. However, upon closer inspection, it does not appear that Elias actually believes what he says in the discussion. For instance, his arguments in the dialogue are in conflict with his treatise on grammar. During his dialogue with al-Maghribī, Elias never mentions the problem of *resh–dalat* confusion in Syriac (the consonants ‘*r*’ and ‘*d*’ in Syriac are distinguished only by a single point), while he takes ample time to point out the challenges of confusing diacritical points in Arabic. In his Syriac grammar, however, Elias acknowledges the difficulties of mastering diacritical points in Syriac. In other words, we must look elsewhere for an accurate view of the grammatical sciences as Elias understood them.

Second, we can read the dialogue as an argument about the superiority of Syriac over Arabic with regard to both the written and spoken language. Elias makes this argument explicit at several junctures in the dialogue, including the conclusion. His examples in the discussion often revolve around shortcomings in Arabic, but he only mentions Syriac in passing. Elias rarely uses specific examples from Syriac with al-Maghribī, and this would not in fact have been useful since al-Maghribī did not know Syriac. The contrived nature of the discussion leads me to believe that we should not take Elias at his word and read the dialogue as an argument for the superiority of Syriac over Arabic. Rather, we can read between the lines of the dialogue and look for implicit rather than explicit points being made in the discussion. One reason for taking this approach is that Elias never alludes to the superiority of Syriac in his other writings. These arguments may very well have been rhetorical devices, and so we should at least look at other alternatives for a possible subtext.

Third, we can read the dialogue as a polemical critique of the Islamic tradition, and of Qur’anic Arabic in particular. From this perspective, one of the latent purposes for which Elias wrote his dialogue was to recommend Muslims to evaluate their use of scientific knowledge. If they applied the grammatical sciences correctly, they would be more critical of their own doctrines such as the inimitability of the Qur’an. Elias quotes the Qur’an on several occasions to illustrate difficulties in reading the text, while subtly critiquing claims to its divine origin. Another reason for Elias’ analysis of the Arabic language may have been to encourage Muslims to reconsider their triumphal narratives vis-à-vis the Christian communities living around them.

Fourth, we can read the dialogue as a theological apologetic for Syriac Christianity. For instance, the dialogue has some characteristics of the literary genre of ‘questions and answers’ (*masa’il wa-ajwiba*) which is a didactic literary form also found in Byzantine and Islamic literature. One could argue that, using the style of other compositions in this genre, Elias sought to substantiate his Syriac Christian worldview by means of grammar and by refuting claims that Arabic is superior. He had done similar work using a theological approach in his *Book of proof*, or *Kitāb al-burhān* (Horst 1886). Elias was constructing a memory for the Syriac tradition in a dialogue that presents a narrative for how Christians can respond to Muslims about their faith, history, and language. From this perspective, Elias composed his dialogue to offer a rational account of the Christian faith and to invite his readers to explore logically the truth of the Syriac Christian narrative.

Fifth, we can read the dialogue as part of the legacy of Syriac grammarians who took the time to recognize the scientific achievements of earlier Syriac scholars while defending that legacy as equal to the Greek and Arabic scientific traditions. In the ninth century, Antony of Tagrit composed a work on the use of grammar in rhetoric; his agenda was to safeguard the Syriac language
in an Arabic environment, as John Watt has argued in an article on the topic (2007). Moreover, we see that Elias of Nisibis quotes from a lost treatise on Arabic syntax by the ninth-century East Syrian Christian Hunayn ibn Ishāq. Based upon the quotations preserved by Elias in this dialogue, we can see that Hunayn ibn Ishāq was also concerned with the Syriac heritage in its relation to Greek Hellenistic learning and the Arabic language. After all, he spent much of his time translating works between the three languages, and his concern for correct translations may also have fueled his pride in the merits of Syriac (Brock 1991; Strohmaier 1991). From this perspective, Elias’ sixth dialogue with the Muslim vizier al-Maghribī follows a trend among Syriac grammarians to consciously assert the significance of Syriac scientific learning within the wider scope of world history and to present their contributions to scientific and literary matters as equal to those of the Greeks and Arabs. Following this reading, Elias is not interested so much in superiority as he is in preserving and transmitting the memorable achievements of Syriac language and culture.

References


