

A theological work by Severus ibn al-Muqaffa'
from Istanbul: MS Aya Sofia 2360

by

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An important work for the understanding of mediaeval Coptic theology is the *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* ('The Book of Exposition') of the tenth-century Bishop of al-Ashmūnain, Severus ibn al-Muqaffa'. Severus wrote this book to combat the doctrinal ignorance of his fellow Copts, which he doubtless correctly ascribed to the extinction of the Coptic language and the consequent incomprehensibility to believers of the language of the liturgy and the Bible. The contents of the *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* have been analysed by Graf, who gives a short indication of the subject-matter of each of its various chapters¹.

The *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* has survived in two recensions, one consisting of twelve chapters², and a shortened one, which excludes the last four chapters. Of the MSS listed by Graf³ as containing all or part of this work, eight MSS contain the shortened recension of eight chapters.

The catalogue of manuscripts of the Library of Aya Sofya⁴ lists under the number 2360⁵ an anonymous Arabic work entitled *Mu'allim fī Bayān*

¹ G. Graf, GCAL II [Studi e Testi, 133 (Vatican, 1947)], pp. 309-310. The importance of *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* is pointed out by K. Samir, 'Un traité inédit de Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffa, (10^e siècle): "Le Flambeau de l'Intelligence"' in *OrChrP* 41 (1975), p. 165.

² An unsatisfactory edition of this recension was published in Cairo in 1925 by Murqus Jirjis under the title *Al-Durr al-Thamīn fī Īdāḥ al-Dīn* ('The Precious Pearls on the Exposition of Religion'). A second equally unsatisfactory edition, omitting Chapter Nine, but otherwise based on the edition of 1925, was published in Cairo in 1971, in the series *Min Turāth al-Ābā'*, by the Coptic *Madāris al-Tarbiyah al-Kanasiyyah* of Shubra. As far as we are aware the *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* has never been translated into any European language, although a version in Ge'ez does exist.

³ GCAL II, p. 311.

⁴ *Defter Kutubhane Aya Sofya: Tarih Tasisi* (Istanbul, A.H. 1304 = A.D. 1886). The Aya Sofya collection of manuscripts now forms a section of the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul.

⁵ To be found in the section 'Kutub 'Aqā'id wa-Kalām' (p. 141). The MS contains 188 folios of thick paper, and is now worm-eaten in many places. The script is a bold *naskhī*, and there are an average of 10 lines to a page. The pagination is in Coptic characters throughout. Fol. 1r has a note stating that the MS was donated as a *waqf* by the Sultan Maḥmūd Khān. It reads as follows:

*Madhāhib al-Naṣārā*⁶ ('Teacher of the Explanation of the Doctrines of the Christians'), of which the end is missing. The catalogue gives no information beyond this. However, fol. 1v of the MS unambiguously ascribes the work to Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', and an examination of the list of contents (fols. 1v-2v) clearly shows that this is in fact a copy of the shorter, eight-chapter, recension of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa's *Kitāb al-Idāh*.

The contents of the work are given as follows :

(١) فى ايضاح تثليث أقانيم الله وتوحيده.

(On the exposition of the Trinity and Unity of the Persons of God).

(٢) فى ايضاح السبب فى تأنس ابن الله وصلبه.

(On the exposition of the reason for the incarnation and crucifixion of the Son of God).

(٣) فى معنى تفسير كلام الله من أسفار التوراة.

(On the significance of the interpretation of the word of God in the books of the Pentateuch).

(٤) فى ايضاح تفسير الفصح والخروف ويصير الخبز والخمر لحم (sic).

(On the exposition of the interpretation of Easter and the Lamb and [how] the Bread and Wine become flesh).

(٥) بيان القتال الذى تقااتل به المؤمنين (sic).

(Explanation of the fight which the believers fought).

«قد وقف هذه النسخة سلطاننا الأعظم والحافل المعظم، مالك البرين والبحرين، خادم الحرمين الشريفين، السلطان بن السلطان، السلطان الغازى محمود خان، وفقاً صحيحاً. حرره الفقير أحمد شيخ زاده المفتش بأوقاف الحرمين، غفر لها».

('This copy has been validly donated as a *waqf* by our most mighty Sultan, and August Ruler, Possessor of the Two Continents and the Two Seas, Servant of the Two Noble Sanctuaries, the Sultan, son of the Sultan, the Warrior Sultan Maḥmūd Khān. Indited by the poor man Aḥmad Shaykh Zādah, Inspector of the *waqfs* of the Two Sanctuaries. May they both receive forgiveness.')

This is presumably a reference to Maḥmūd I (Ottoman sultan, ruled 1730-1754), and the MS Aya Sofya 2360 must therefore have been written at some time before the latter date. We are greatly indebted to Miss Emine Gürsoy for her help in obtaining a microfilm copy of the Aya Sofya manuscript.

⁶ This title has been taken by the cataloguer from a note at the top of fol. 1v which reads as follows : هذا كتاب المعلم فى بيان مذاهب النصارى. It is in a later hand than that of the rest of the MS.

(٦) فى بيان فضل يوم الأحد المقدس.

(On the explanation of the merit of holy Sunday).

(٧) فى معنى صومى يوم الأربعاء والجمعة.

(On the significance of the Wednesday and Friday fasts).

(٨) فى بيان الصوم وكيف يجب.

(On the explanation of fasting, and how it should be conducted)⁷.

These chapter titles correspond (with minor variations in wording) to the titles of the first eight chapters of the *Kitāb al-Idāh*, as given in the two Cairo editions of this work.

After some brief introductory remarks, which appear to have been put together by the writer of the MS (fols. 3r-3v), Aya Sofya 2360 begins with Chapter One, as follows :

*Fol. 3v

* الباب الاول

وهو ايضاح تثليث أقانيم الله وتوحيدها

أيها الأخ الحبيب. الرب يسوع المسيح يضى عيني عقلك بنور روح قدسه المعزى لتفهم سر لاهوته. ذكرت فى كتابك الذى أرسلته الىّ انك فى حيرة عظيمة من تثليث أقانيم الله تعالى وتوحيدهم. * لا تعلم كيف يمكن ان يكونوا ثلاثة، *
وان يكونوا واحدا. وسألتنى أن أوضح لك حقيقة تأنس ابن الله وصلبه، وما سبب ذلك. وقد أجبته الى ما سألت، وأوضح لك فى هذا الكتاب تحقيق التثليث والتوحيد على نوعين : نوعاً أولاً لقليل⁸ الفهم والعلم، ونوعاً ثانياً للفهاء والعلماء لينتفع به من يقرأه، أو من قرئ عليه من الفريقين جميعاً، أعنى القليل⁹ الفهم والفهاء.

*Fol. 4v وابتدئ بايضاحه اولاً¹⁰ * فأقول أن سبب كتان بيان هذا السر فى هذا الزمان

⁷ As mentioned in the Aya Sofya catalogue (see above), MS 2360 has some folios missing at the end, breaking off with fol. 188v towards the end of Chapter Six. The table of contents, however, which is in the same hand as the rest of the MS, makes it clear that we are here dealing with the shorter, or eight-chapter, recension of the *Kitāb al-Idāh*.

⁸ MS للقليلين.

⁹ MS القليلين.

¹⁰ This word is repeated in the MS.

عن المؤمنين، اختلاطهم مع الحنفاء، وكونهم قد ضاعت منهم لغتهم التي¹¹ يعرفون منها حقيقة مذهبهم، وصاروا لا يسمعون ذكر الثالوث بينهم إلا قليلا، ولا لابن الله بينهم ذكر¹² إلا على سبيل المجاز¹³. بل أكثر ما يسمعون أن الله جل اسمه صمد، وبقية هذا الكلام الذي تقوله الحنفاء، فتعَوِّد به المؤمنون وتربوا عليه، حتى صاروا يصعب * عليهم ذكر ابن الله جل اسمه، ولا يعرفون له تأويلا ولا معنى. ثم ان أكثرهم اذا سمع انه ابن الله وابن مريم العذراء¹⁴ يظن ان بدءه من مريم العذراء¹⁵ كان، كما تظن بنا الحنفاء في قولنا، ولا يعلمون انه كان ازليا مع الله عز ذكره، مولودا منه لم يزل¹⁶ قبل مريم وقبل آدم الذي مريم من ذريته وقبل كل الدهور، لأن الله لم يكن قط بغيره، لأنه ابنه وكلمته الأزلى معه لم يزل.

*Fol. 5r

(Chapter One, being an exposition of the Trinity and Unity of the Persons of God. Oh dear brother, may the Lord Jesus Christ illumine the eyes of your intellect with the light of his consoling Holy Spirit, that you may understand the mystery of his divinity. You have mentioned in your epistle which you have sent to me that you are greatly perplexed in regard to the Trinity and Unity of the Persons of God Most High. You do not know how it is possible for them to be both three and one, and you have asked me to explain to you the true nature of the incarnation and crucifixion of the Son of God, and the reason for it. I have acceded to your request, and have expounded to you in this book the definition of triunity in two ways, in one way for persons of little understanding and knowledge, and in another way for persons of discernment and learning, so that the person who reads it, or has it read to him, in either group, i.e. both persons of little understanding and discerning persons, may benefit from it.

I shall begin with the clarification [of this matter] first by saying that the reason for the difficulty of explaining this mystery to the faithful in the present age is their mingling with the heathen¹⁷, and their having lost

¹¹ MS الذي.

¹² MS ذكرأ.

¹³ As in *Al-Durr al-Thamīn* (2nd edition), p. 14; MS المحابة.

¹⁴ MS العذرى.

¹⁵ The phrase العذراء يظن is here supplied from *Al-Durr al-Thamīn* (2nd edition), p. 14, as these words seem to have been omitted from our MS by a scribal error.

¹⁶ This word has been added in the margin.

¹⁷ I.e. the Muslims. Ibn al-Muqaffa' has in mind here the prevailing Muslim dogma of the unity of God, and the negative effect this was having on belief in the Trinity among the Christian laity.

their own language, by means of which they would have been able to understand the truth of their doctrine; and they have come to a point where they only rarely hear the Trinity mentioned among them, and only hear the Son of God mentioned among them by way of metaphor. Indeed they usually only hear that 'God', Whose name is glorious, 'is eternal', and the rest of this statement which the heathen utter¹⁸. Thus the faithful have become accustomed to it and have been brought up with it, until it has become difficult for them to mention the Son of God, Whose name is glorious, and they do not know any interpretation or meaning for [this term]. Then again, when they hear that he is Son of God and Son of the Virgin Mary, most of them believe that he had his beginning in the Virgin Mary, as the heathen assert that we say. They are not aware that he is coeternal with God, Whose name is mighty, and born of Him, and that he existed before Mary and before Adam, of whose progeny Mary was, and before all ages, because God was never without him, for he is His Son and Word, coeternal with Him, without end.)

This is substantially identical with Chapter One of *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* as given in the 1971 Cairo edition (pp. 14-15), although there are small differences in some words.

The MS now ends towards the end of Chapter Six of the work, as follows :

*والآن يا حبيب فافهم أن قول الله تعالى يستريح الإنسان في يوم الأحد *Fol. 187v

يعنى بذلك : ملازمة تسبيحه وتقديسه وساع كلامه النهار جميعه. وان هو اشتغل عن ذلك بمعيشة الجسد البهيمى، واتفق موته قبل يوم الأحد هلك من أمة الله، ولم ينفعه ما قد حصله * لجسده البهيمى من الرزق الفانى لانه أراد ان

*Fol. 188r

يحيى دابته ويقتل نفسه، فإت هو ودابته التى اختارها واختار حياتها على حياة نفسه. وان هو ندم على ما فعل وتاب أحياه¹⁹ الله إلى يوم الأحد، وان لازم²⁰ ما قد أمر به عاشت نفسه واستراحت من الخطية التى كانت وجبت عليه ما دام ملازماً عمل الرب فى يومه الذى اختصه لنفسه دون الستة الأيام الأخر. قال الله فيه يستريح بملازمة التسبيح والتقديس والقراءة ولا يشتغل عنه بالمعاش

الفانى. فان تكسل عنه هلك من أمة الله. * كما قال الله تعالى كل نفس لا *Fol. 188v

¹⁸ Ibn al-Muqaffa' here refers to Sūrah 112 of the Qur'ān, which consists of four short verses refuting the doctrine of the Trinity: 'Say: "He is God, One; God the eternal; He neither begat nor was begotten; and has no equal" '.

¹⁹ وأحياه MS.

²⁰ ولازم MS.

تستريح في ذلك اليوم تفرز من أمتي، يعني بذلك ان نصيبها يكون مع المخالفين. فمن أجل ذلك يجب علينا نبكر في الأحد الى الكنيسة، فردوس الله تعالى، ونلازم التسبيح والتقديس بغير فكر²¹ ولا اشتغال بالمعاش الفاني. فاذا فرغت الكنيسة تلازم القراءة في كتب الله عز ذكره النهار جميعه لأنه يوم الرب. قال الله في مزمور مائة وسبعة عشر على لسان داوود النبي ان هذا هو يوم الرب الذي صنعه الرب فلنفرح ونسر فيه ...

(And now, oh beloved, understand that the words of God Most High that man should rest on Sunday²² mean that one is to praise and hallow Him and listen to His word throughout the day. If a man does not do this through preoccupation with the livelihood of the animal body, and his death occurs before the [next] Sunday, he will perish from God's community, and the ephemeral sustenance which he has acquired for his animal body will not benefit him, because he desired to give life to his riding-beast²³ and to kill his soul. Thus he will die together with his riding-beast, which he chose, whose life he preferred above the life of his soul. If he regrets what he has done and repents, God will cause him to survive until the [next] Sunday, and if he adheres to what He has commanded him to do his soul will live and will be relieved of the sin which had clung to him, as long as he adheres to the work of the Lord on His day, which He set aside from the other six days for Himself. God says concerning it that we should rest by cleaving to praise and hallowing and reading, and should not be preoccupied with a livelihood that passes away. If he is too idle to do so, he will perish from God's community. As God Most High has said, the soul which does not rest on that day will be excluded from His community. He means by this its portion will be among the transgressors.

Therefore it is incumbent upon us to go early on Sunday to church, the paradise of God Most High, and to cleave to praise and hallowing without thought for, or preoccupation with, a livelihood that passes away. When church is over you should read the scriptures of God, Whose name is glorious, throughout the day, because it is the Day of the Lord.

²¹ MS مكر.

²² Ibn al-Muqaffa' is thinking of the Christian Sabbath rest as transferred from Saturday to Sunday.

²³ Sc. his body.

God says in the 117th Psalm through the mouth of the Prophet David that this is the Day of the Lord which the Lord hath made; so let us rejoice and be glad in it...)

This passage corresponds to the later portion of Chapter Six of *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ*, as given in the Cairo edition of 1971 (pp. 152-153), of which about a third has been lost from our MS (see note 7 above).

The foregoing shows that MS Aya Sofya 2360 is a copy of the shorter recension of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa's *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ*, but the problem remains of the status of the title *Kitāb al-Mu'allim fī Bayān Madhāhib al-Naṣārā*. As indicated above (note 6), this title has been written on fol. 1v of the MS in a later hand; the title given the work by the copyist (also on fol. 1v) appears as *Kitāb al-Mu'allim wa'l-Tilmīdh*. This is followed by the ascription to Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', as follows:

«كتاب المعلم والتلميذ تأليف الأب القديس أنبا سويرس ابن المقفع، أسقف
الأشمونين، بركة صلاته تحفظنا آمين ابداً».

(Book of the Teacher and the Pupil, composed by the Holy Father Anba Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', Bishop of al-Ashmūnain, may the blessing of his prayers preserve us. Amen for aye).

The title *Kitāb al-Mu'allim wa'l-Tilmīdh* is not listed as being one of the works of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' by Abū'l-Barakāt ibn Kabar in his *Kitāb Miṣbāḥ al-Zulmah fī Īdāḥ al-Khidmah*, and no other authority, as far as we have been able to ascertain, mentions a work of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' bearing this title. However, at least two other Coptic authors are known to have written books with the title *Al-Mu'allim wa'l-Tilmīdh*, namely Cyrillus ibn Laqlaq²⁴ and Murgus ibn al-Qanbar²⁵ (the *Mu'allim wa'l-Tilmīdh* of the latter, like the recension of Ibn al-Muqaffa's work discussed here, contains eight chapters). For some reason this title has been wrongly applied in MS Aya Sofya 2360 to a work of Ibn al-Muqaffa'. This is a further instance of the confusion which exists in regard to the titles of the books of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', to which Samir has drawn attention²⁶.

²⁴ The seventy-fifth Patriarch of Alexandria (1235-1243). For his book *Al-Mu'allim wa'l-Tilmīdh* (or *Kitāb al-I'tirāf*), see Graf, GCAL II, p. 365.

²⁵ Died 1208. For his book *Al-Mu'allim wa'l-Tilmīdh*, see Graf, GCAL II, pp. 328f.

²⁶ OrChrP 41 (1975), pp. 167-168. The *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* is also known as *al-Durr al-Thamīn fī Īdāḥ al-Dīn*, as mentioned above (see note 2). Graf in his *Catalogue de Manuscrits Arabes Chrétiens Conservés au Caire* [Studi e Testi, 63 (Vatican, 1934)], p. 124, records another copy of this work under the title *Īdāḥ Tathlūth Aqānim Allāh al-Muwaḥḥad bi-Jawharīh* (MS No. 336). Ibn al-Muqaffa's short exposition of the main doctrines of Christianity, *Kitāb Miṣbāḥ al-'Aql*,

It is clear that a final solution of the problem of the two recensions and the multiplicity of titles of the *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ* must await the much-needed critical edition of this important work of mediaeval Coptic theology.

is given an alternative title, *Kitāb al-Istibṣār*, in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris) MS Arab. 212. See R. Y. Ebied and M. J. L. Young, *The Lamp of the Intellect of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', Bishop of al-Ashmūnain* [CSCO, vol. 365 (Script. Arab., Tom. 32), Louvain, 1975], p. 1. Cf. also K. Samir, OrChrP 41 (1975), p. 183.