

Ktābā d-‘al-ida‘tā da-shrārā

Unknown author

DATE OF BIRTH Unknown; possibly 11th century
PLACE OF BIRTH Unknown
DATE OF DEATH Unknown; possibly 11th century
PLACE OF DEATH Unknown

BIOGRAPHY

This author was an otherwise unknown West Syrian (Jacobite) Bishop of Edessa.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary —

Secondary —

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Ktābā d-‘al-ida‘tā da-shrārā aw d-‘Elat d-kull
‘ellān*, ‘The book of knowledge of the truth or of
the Cause of all causes’

DATE Probably 11th century
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Syriac

DESCRIPTION

This work, originally divided into nine *memrē* (discourses), the last two of which are lost (the work ends at *memrō* 7, ch. 2), is a reflection and meditation on God’s creation, based on the reading and interpretation of the ‘Book of nature’, nature being the father and teacher of the human race, and on the study of scripture, especially the ‘Book of Moses’. In the introduction, the author explains that with this work he intends to bring the reader to the perfect knowledge of Truth or God, the Cause of all causes.

The intended readership is not only the members of his own community, but all peoples, more specifically Christians of all denominations, Jews and Muslims (*Ishma‘lōyē*, *Ṭayyōyē* or *Mahgrōyē/Mhaggrōyē*). This explains his choice of the ‘Book of Moses’, accepted by all members of these three religions. The general Islamic context in which the author lived (he refers several times to the ‘Arabs, Turks and Kurds’) explains a number of allusions to Islamic theology scattered throughout his technical explanations of the wonders of creation, which make this work an encyclopaedia of natural science.

The book of nature shows that there is one God, who in an allusion from the Qur’an is said to be ‘without partner or companion’ (p. 39/50). But, in an important step, nature also teaches about the Trinity. From both the general creation (*makrokosmos*) and also human nature (*mikrokosmos*), one can learn that God is Intellect (*Hawnō*), Word (*Melltō*) and Living Spirit (*Ruḥō ḥaytō*), which have the individual characteristics (proprieties) of paternity (the Intellect is the source of the Word), being born (*ylidō*) and life. The author also finds in nature some Trinitarian analogies, which are comparable to those found in earlier apologetic works addressed to Muslims, such as ‘sun, light and strength’ (p. 77).

Other themes that possibly reflect an awareness of the Christian intellectual debate with Muslim scholars are the issues of liberty, free will and providence (pp. 276-79), and of astrology.

Despite the declaration of universality in the introduction of this book, where the author emphasizes that all peoples are brothers and sons of the same race, it appears from his natural demonstration of the Trinity that his true intention is to show the superiority of the religion of the Christians, who are the only ones to possess truth in its fullness.

This work was popular, especially in East Syrian circles, and it was even translated into Arabic.

SIGNIFICANCE

The author exhibits a positive and irenic attitude towards all peoples, including Muslims. The work is no straightforward refutation of the beliefs of the adherents of other faiths, but an attempt to bring them from ‘natural knowledge’ to accept the truth of Christianity.

MANUSCRIPTS

See A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, Bonn, 1922, p. 280

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

- G. Furlani, ‘Estratti del Libro della Causa delle Cause in un manoscritto Vaticano’, *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 23 (1948) 37-45 (edition)
- C. Kayser, *Das Buch von der Erkenntniss der Wahrheit oder der Ursache aller Ursachen*, Strasbourg, 1893 (German trans.)
- C. Kayser, *Das Buch von der Erkenntniss der Wahrheit oder der Ursache aller Ursachen*, Leipzig, 1889 (edition)

STUDIES

- G. Reinink, ‘Communal identity and the systematisation of knowledge in the Syriac “Cause of all causes”’, in P. Binkley (ed.), *Pre-modern encyclopaedic texts. Proceedings of the second Comers congress Groningen, 1-4 July 1966*, Leiden, 1997, 275-88
- G. Klinge, ‘Die Bedeutung der syrischen Theologen als Vermittler der griechischen Philosophie an den Islam’, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 58 (1932) 382-86
- Baumstark, *Geschichte*, pp. 280-81
- T. Nöldeke, Review of Kayser’s edition, in *Literarisches Centrallblatt für Deutschland* 30 (1889) 1001-4
- A. Pohlmann, ‘Über die syrische Schrift: Liber generalis ad omnes gentes in einer Hdschr. der Bibliothek der Propaganda zu Rom’, *ZDMG* 14 (1861) 648-63

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