

Naṣr ibn Yaḥyā

Naṣr ibn Yaḥyā ibn ʿĪsā ibn Saʿīd al-Mutaṭabbib
al-Muhtadī

DATE OF BIRTH Unknown; late 11th or early 12th century
PLACE OF BIRTH Basra
DATE OF DEATH September 1193 or possibly 1163
PLACE OF DEATH Basra

BIOGRAPHY

In the opening of *Al-naṣīḥa al-īmāniyya* the author refers to himself as Naṣr ibn Yaḥyā ibn ʿĪsā ibn Saʿīd al-Mutaṭabbib (p. 48). The work also reveals that he was a Christian doctor who later converted to Islam. In classical biographical dictionaries, however, one can detect hardly any information about a Christian doctor called Naṣr ibn Yaḥyā. Despite the confusion concerning the identity of this author (see Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur*, pp. 105-6), recent scholarship has tentatively identified him as Yaḥyā ibn Yaḥyā, suggesting that in the biographical sources the first name was misspelled as Yaḥyā instead of Naṣr (see Sharqāwī's introduction to his critical edition of *Al-naṣīḥa*, pp. 17-18).

Yaḥyā ibn Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd, known as Ibn Mārī al-Masīḥī is described as a Christian doctor from Basra by his biographers, with the exception of Ibn Taghribirdī, who calls him 'al-Baghdādī' (*Al-nujūm*, p. 346). Yaḥyā ibn Yaḥyā was also a man of letters, an author, poet, linguist and grammarian, as well as being distinguished in the science of the ancients (*ilm al-awā'il*). In the field of literature, he was known for his *Al-maqāmāt al-sittīn*, in which he attempted to imitate al-Ḥarīrī. Most of his biographers record that he died in Ramadan 589 (September 1193), while Ibn Taghribirdī (*Al-nujūm*, p. 346) and Ibn al-ʿImād (*Shadharāt*, p. 185) suggest that he died in 558/1163.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, aw: *Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb*, 6 vols, Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1991-94, v, pp. 637-38

- Ibn al-Qiftī, *Kitāb ikhbār al-‘ulamā’ bi-akhbār al-ḥukamā’*, [Cairo]: Maṭba‘at al-sa‘āda, 1326 AH [1908], p. 236
- Al-Zawzanī, *al-Muntakhabāt al-multaqaṭāt min Kitāb ikhbār al-‘ulamā’ bi-akhbār al-ḥukamā’*, ed. J. Lippert, Leipzig, 1903, pp. 320-21
- Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-nujūm al-ẓāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, ed. M.Ḥ. Shams al-Dīn, 16 vols, Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1992, v, p. 346
- Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab*, 8 vols, Cairo: Maktabat al-quḍsī, 1350 AH [1931], iv, p. 185
- Aḥmad ‘Īsā, *Mu‘jam al-aṭibbā’*. *Min sanat 650 h. ilā yawminā hādihā (Dhayl ‘uyūn al-anbā’ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā’ li-Ibn Abī ‘Uṣaybi’a)*, [Cairo]: Maṭba‘at Faṭḥ Allāh Ilyās Nūrī wa-awlādihi, 1942, pp. 517-18

Secondary

- Y.I. Sarkīs, *Mu‘jam al-maṭbū‘āt al-‘arabiyya wa-l-mu‘arraba*, [Cairo]: Maṭba‘at Sarkīs, 1928, p. 1858
- Brockelmann, *GAL* S ii, p. 145
- M. Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache, zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden, nebst Anhängen verwandten Inhalts*, Leipzig, 1877, pp. 105-6
- I.B. al-Bābānī al-Baghdādī, *Hadiyyat al-‘arīfīn asmā’ al-mu‘allifīn wa-āthār al-muṣannifīn*, ed. K.R. Bilge and I.M.K. İnal, 2 vols, Istanbul, 1951-55, ii, p. 492
- Ḥajjī Khalifa, *Kashf al-ẓunūn ‘an asāmī l-kutub wa-l-funūn*, ed. Ş. Yaltkaya and K.R. Bilge, 2 vols, Istanbul, 1941-43, ii, pp. 1957-58

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Al-naṣīḥa l-imāniyya fī faḍīḥat al-milla *l-Naṣrāniyya*, ‘Faithful counsel concerning the ignominy of the Christian religion’

DATE Unknown; mid or late 12th century

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

DESCRIPTION

The work is an example of a convert’s assessment and critique of his former religion, penned as an act of gratitude to God for granting him the opportunity to find the true path.

The book comprises four chapters covering various topics concerning Muslim-Christian relations, entitled respectively: on the Christian sects and doctrines; Christian claims, incoherencies in theology,

and differences of opinion; the miracles of Jesus, the Christian claim regarding the divinity of Jesus and the miracles of other prophets; biblical prophecies concerning the prophethood of Muḥammad.

The text examines and criticizes varying Trinitarian and Christological formulas and views as represented by three Christian denominations: Melkites, Jacobites and Nestorians. In addition to attacking the doctrinal contentions related to the Trinity and Incarnation, the author vehemently rejects the Christian veneration of the cross, the use of icons and the eucharist (ed. al-Sharqāwī, pp. 56-77; see also Sepmeijer, *Een weerlegging*, pp. 125-31).

Focusing on the allegorical meaning of the title 'Son of God', the author suggests, like many other Muslim authors writing on Christianity, that Jesus never claimed to be divine and that he is no different from other prophets (ed. al-Sharqāwī, pp. 78-103; see also Sepmeijer, *Een weerlegging*, pp. 131-43). Moreover, there is no difference between his miracles and those of the other prophets, and none of them was declared divine. The Gospel itself reveals Jesus' humanity and prophethood, but instead of following the teachings given there, Christians have introduced innovations, which have ultimately led them to polytheism (*shirk*), error (*ḍalāl*) and unbelief (*kufr*). Furthermore, the Trinity equals tritheism (ed. al-Sharqāwī, pp. 104-37; see also Sepmeijer, *Een weerlegging*, pp. 143-62).

Finally, the last chapter focuses on biblical predictions concerning the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad. Examining various passages, the author shows how Moses and Isaiah, as well as Jesus, all brought good tidings concerning his prophetic ministry (ed. al-Sharqāwī, pp. 138-50; see also Sepmeijer, *Een weerlegging*, pp. 162-67).

As demonstrated by Sepmeijer's careful study, the author incorporates into his treatise the entire work of al-Ḥasan ibn Ayyūb (q.v.), the 10th-century Christian convert to Islam, which is preserved in Ibn Taymiyya's *Al-jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*. Not only the contents of *Al-naṣīḥa*, but also its structure and even the titles of the chapters are completely identical to those of al-Ḥasan ibn Ayyūb's *Risāla* (see Sepmeijer's *Een weerlegging*, where he reconstructs Ibn Ayyūb's work relying on Ibn Taymiyya's *Al-jawāb* and Naṣr ibn Yaḥyā's *Al-naṣīḥa*).

Moreover, as Sharqāwī points out, one may also find many parallels between *Al-naṣīḥa* and 'Abd al-Jabbār's (q.v.) exposition and refutation of Christianity in his *Tathbūt* as well as his *Mughnī*. These similarities may lead one to conclude that both Naṣr ibn Yaḥyā and 'Abd al-Jabbār benefited from 'Alī l-Ṭabarī's *Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*

and *Radd 'alā l-Naṣārā*, or else that Naṣr ibn Yaḥyā may have quoted from 'Abd al-Jabbār who had had access to 'Alī l-Ṭabarī's work (see Sharqāwī's introduction to *Al-naṣīhā*, pp. 30-31).

SIGNIFICANCE

Although the entire work is built upon a substantial number of quotations from an earlier source without any acknowledgment, its significance lies in the fact that it represents another contribution to the genre of polemical writing by religious converts, intended to offer justification for their conversion and to refute their former beliefs.

The existence of a great number of manuscripts of the work, as well as the copy owned by the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, all attest to the repute this work has enjoyed among its Muslim readership, both the commonality and the elite.

MANUSCRIPTS

MS Istanbul, Topkapi Palace Library – Ahmed III Kit. 1883, 92 fols (probably copied sometime between 1494 and 1566, during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, for his private library; possibly the oldest surviving manuscript)

MS Amsterdam, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences – Oriental Manuscripts, Acad. 7, 101 fols (1579)

MS Istanbul, Köprülü – Ahmed Paşa 158, 36 fols (possibly 1585 or earlier)

MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek – 2208, 28 fols (c. 1591)

MS Istanbul, Süleymaniye – Reisülküttab 586, 220r-231v (most probably 1703)

MS Tokyo, University of Tokyo, Institute of Oriental Culture – Daiber Collection MS 65 [134], 47 fols (possibly 18th century)

MS Princeton, Princeton University Library – Garrett Collection of Arabic Manuscripts 1537 (305L), 60 fols (1861)

MS Cairo, Khudaywiyya Library – 325/16405 (1877)

MS Princeton, Princeton University Library – Garrett Collection of Arabic Manuscripts 1538 (975H), 24 fols (1880)

MS New Haven, Yale University Library – 1062 (L-35), fols 13-36 (1880)

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

Naṣr ibn Yaḥyā ibn 'Īsā ibn Sa'īd al-Mutaṭabbib, *Al-naṣīḥa l-īmāniyya fī faḍīḥat al-milla l-Naṣrāniyya*, ed. M. 'A.-A. al-Sharqāwī, Cairo: Dār al-ṣaḥwa, 1986

Naşr ibn Yaḥyā ibn ʿĪsā ibn Saʿīd al-Mutaṭabbib, *Al-naṣīḥa l-īmāniyya fī faḍīḥat al-milla l-Naṣrāniyya*, Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-ʿāšima, 1312 AH (1894; apparently a very poor edition)

STUDIES

- H. Lazarus-Yafeh, 'Some neglected aspects of medieval Muslim polemics against Christianity', *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996) 61-84, pp. 75, 78
- F. Sepmeijer, *Een weerlegging van het Christendom uit de 10e eeuw. De brief van al-Ḥasan b. Ayyūb aan zijn broer ʿAlī*, Kampen, 1985 (Diss. Free University of Amsterdam)

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