

**MĪḤĀ'ĪL MISHĀQA**  
(b. 1800, d. 1888)

LIFE

Born in 1215/1800 in the village of Rashmayyā, 12 km southeast of Beirut, M.M. grew up in Deir al-Qamar, on Mount Lebanon. He was a descendant of Yūsuf Batrākī, a Greek Orthodox merchant from the island of Corfu who moved to Tripoli to take up the silk trade. There, in an allusion to his new profession, Yūsuf adopted the name “Mishāqa,” (a term used in reference to the process of filtering silk fibers). M.M.’s great-grandfather was a convert to Catholicism. His father, Jirjis, moved to Deir al-Qamar, the center of power of the Shihābī Emirate, to escape the oppression of al-Jazzār, the governor (*vālī*) of Sidon (r. 1190-1219/1776-1804). Though he initially embarked on a career as a goldsmith, Jirjis soon attracted the attention of the Amir of Mount Lebanon, Bashīr II (r. 1203-1256/1788-1840), who welcomed him into his household, first as a scribe and then as chief treasurer.

M.M. claimed to be self-taught, having received little or no formal education.<sup>1</sup> As a member of the Christian middle class, he alternated between commercial activities and intellectual endeavors throughout his life. At the age of 17, he was sent to Damietta (Damyāt) to learn the silk trade from his uncle. Three years later he returned to Mount Lebanon. In the 1820s (1236-46) and then again briefly ca. 1256/1840, he practiced the craft of silk weaving. In the 1830s (1246-56), following in his father’s footsteps, he, entered the service of Amīr Bashīr II, acting as his representative in the courts of the Amīr’s allies and as his tax collector on Mount Lebanon.<sup>2</sup>

In 1249/1833 the Amīr of Ḥāṣbayā, with the consent of Amīr Bashīr, appointed M.M. to be his representative (*wakīl*) in Damascus. By this time M.M. was highly regarded for his diplomatic skills as well as for his wide array of contacts. With the property he received as a result of this position -- lands in the region of the Hula valley and a small village near Qunayṭira -- his financial situation also improved.

In Damascus M.M. was able to extend his social and political connections beyond those he had established with the mid-level ruling classes of Mount Lebanon. He socialized with Muslim notables (*a‘yān*) as well as Damascus’ merchant class while also cultivating closer ties with various Western representatives. He studied astronomy, mathematics, geography and music with the renowned Muslim scholar °Allāma Muḥammad °Aṭṭār. He also undertook the study of medicine, for which he was awarded a diploma in Egypt in 1261/1845. Some time after receiving his medical diploma, he returned to Damascus where he was eventually appointed the chief physician of the municipality. Upon the conclusion of the rule of his patron, Amīr Bashīr II, M.M., finding the income from his medical career insufficient, became a dragoman, in the service of the British Consulate in Damascus. He soon befriended British Consul Richard Wood.<sup>3</sup> In the 1840s/ 1256-167, M.M. deepened his ties with

the American Mission,<sup>4</sup> converting to Protestantism in 1265/1848.<sup>5</sup> During these years he replaced his dear friend, the Arab Christian intellectual Buṭrus al-Bustānī, as the missionaries' Arabic teacher.<sup>6</sup> Between 1276/1859 and 1287/1870 M.M. served as deputy to the American Consul in Damascus.

By 1256/1840 M.M. was an active member of various Beirut cultural societies, such as *al-Jam'īya al-Sūrīya li-Iktisāb al-'Ulūm wa-l-Funūn* (The Syrian Society for the Acquisition of Sciences). Later, ca. 1277/1860, he joined *al-Jam'īya al-Ilmīya al-Sūrīya* (The Syrian Scientific Society), which was open to both Muslims and Christians. Significantly, both of these societies endorsed the idea of Syria as a unique geographical entity.<sup>7</sup>

During the civil war of 1277/1860, M.M. was seriously injured. His house and other property damaged, though not completely destroyed, he and his family found temporary shelter with a Muslim neighbor. He ultimately survived that tumultuous period and lived in Damascus until his death at the age of 88 in 1306/1888.

#### WORKS

##### ① *al-Jawāb 'alā Iqtirāḥ al-Aḥbāb*

M.M. is the author of this much-quoted work written in 1290/1873. A history of *Bilād al-Shām* from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century, the work is also autobiographical, providing a detailed account of his family background and as well as his own life's activities.

As he had been prompted by relatives and friends who repeatedly asked him for an account of his family's history, he called this manuscript "Reply to My Loved Ones' Request." M.M. also used this opportunity to record his profound knowledge of Mount Lebanon and the rest of *Bilād al-Shām*.<sup>8</sup> It quickly becomes apparent that M.M. had a first-hand familiarity with the people and events he describes in such great detail.

M.M. begins his historical review with a description of al-Jazzār's rule and a discussion of his own ties with Amīr Bashīr II. He alludes to Bonaparte's siege of Acre and Chaim Farhi's role in the city and depicts the various feuds among the Pashas of the regions, especially that between the governors of Damascus and of Sidon. He vividly portrays the Egyptian occupation of Syria<sup>9</sup> as well as the civil war on Mount Lebanon (ca. 1256/1840) and concludes the narrative with a detailed description of the civil strife of 1277/1860.

In M.M.'s *al-Jawāb* it is possible to trace several significant developments in the historiography of the region. Indeed, this work should be regarded as a genuine prototype for the burgeoning genre of Lebanese historiography, a genre that sought to cultivate a sense of community among the Lebanese based on their own unique local traditions. Broader in scope than the writings that preceded it, this new genre no longer referred to specific religious communities or "principalities" but to the Lebanese community as a whole. Similarly, M.M.'s work represents an innovation in

the interpretation of Syrian historiography. Whereas traditional historiography centered on a specific town or a limited part of a region, this new genre focused on a wider geographic area and introduced a new theme: Syria as a single territorial entity, a country with its own borders, history, people and manners. M.M. was one of the first historians to trace the history of Greater Syria in the nineteenth century, with Mount Lebanon included as an integral part of this new whole. M.M. thus fosters a territorial concept of Greater Syria, that regards the Syrian people as one entity.<sup>10</sup> In a larger framework, M.M.'s *al-Jawāb* may also be regarded as the precursor of modern Arab autobiographical literature, an important aspect of the Arabic historiographical tradition, which itself first emerged in the late 18th century.

The style of the work differs from classical chronicles in that it is a historical narrative embodying not only a linear account of events, but also an analytical interpretation of their significance, buttressed as it is by arguments and conclusions that often reveal the author himself as an active participant in his own narrative. In addition to describing and analyzing a train of events, M.M. levels criticisms, suggests models of commendable behavior, and questions why things were as they appeared to be. He also contemplates future societal progress. His analyses take into consideration a broad spectrum of economic, social and political viewpoints and supply pertinent background material to the topic at hand. Another virtue of the work is M.M.'s non-sectarian attitude, particularly in his accounts of the civil wars of 1256/1840 and 1277/1860. Unlike other Christian writers of his time who would portray the activities of their own sect in laudatory terms while summarily dismissing the value of the activities of their rivals, M.M. seeks to represent the Druses and Christians even-handedly, often casting a critical eye on the behavior and actions of both sides. For example, in his analysis of the causes for the civil war of 1277/1860, M.M. is very clear on the part the Christians played in aggravating the situation, though he also censures the actions of the Ottoman administration. Moreover, although he explicitly states that some Muslims in Damascus provided shelter and aid to many other Christians, including himself, thus saving their lives, he is also unflinching in his portrayal of the acts of cruelty perpetrated by the Druses and other Muslims against the city's Christians.

M.M.'s omission of any analysis of the rule of the Sublime Porte is one of the weaknesses of his account. For example, he nowhere mentions the establishment of the Syrian governorship (*vilāyet*) in 1282/1865 or the reforms of the *Tanzīmāt*, though he does reflect on how the interpretation of these reforms pertained to the events of 1277/1860. In addition, M.M. places the center of gravity of the region's history perhaps too firmly in the rule of Amīr Bashīr II. In the glowing portrait he paints of the Amīr, M.M. depicts the period of his rule as not only particularly blissful for his own family, but also prosperous for all of Mount Lebanon. Moreover, for M.M., the scope of Bashīr's power and influence extended well beyond Mount

Lebanon, his formal sphere of control, into the provinces of both Damascus and Sidon.

Two editions of the Arabic manuscript exist. The first is an unsatisfactory adaptation that M.Ḥ. °Abdū and A.Ḥ. Shaḥāshīrī included in their 1908 publication *Kitāb Mashhad al-A°yān bi-Ḥawādiṭ Sūrīya wa-Lubnān*. The second adaptation by Asad Rustum and Ṣubḥī Abū-Shaqrā in 1955, is more reliable, though the authors, wishing to avoid reviving ancient animosities, did not include pages 320-382, the section in which the civil war of 1277/1860 is described. This version contains a detailed index. A full English translation (with pictures and index) by W. M. Thackston Jr. was published in 1988.

② *Ta°rīḥ Ḥawādiṭ Jarat bil-Shām wa-Sawāḥil Barr al-Shām wa-l-Jabal*

This work was composed in 1259/1843 by a certain Mīḥā°il Dimashqī, an otherwise unknown historian, who may actually be M.M. himself. There are noticeable similarities between this work and *al-Jawāb °alā Iqtirāḥ al-Aḥbāb*, not only in content and style, but also in the biographical details of the author as well as in the slight slant to the left in the handwriting of both authors. The autograph copy of the work from 1259/ 1843, which is in good condition, can be found in the Oriental Room of the British Library. Its three parts deal with the years 1197-1257/1782-1841: the first part describes the governors of *Bilād al-Shām* and chronicles their respective rules; the second focuses on the coastal areas of Lebanon as well as on Mountain; the third details certain noteworthy events that occurred in Beirut and on Mount Lebanon during the latter part of the period under discussion. The manuscript concentrates especially on the reigns of al-Jazzār and Amīr Bashīr II and the Egyptian occupation, and highlights the administration of Damascus and Mount Lebanon as well as other developments in *Bilād al-Shām*. It depicts religious events and elaborates on the interrelationships between sects, particularly the debates between the Greek Catholics and the Greek Orthodox. The manuscript closely resembles a chronicle and, though parts are written in *fusha* (the canonical language), its overall language is closer to that of the °ammīya (common language) of Damascus.

Of the two editions of this manuscript, the first, by Lūwīs Ma°lūf (1912), is entitled *Ta°rīḥ Ḥawādiṭ al-Shām wa-Lubnān min sana 1197/1782 ilā sana 1257/1841*; the second, *Ta°rīḥ Ḥawādiṭ al-Shām wa-Lubnān wa Ta°rīḥ Mīḥā°il al-Dimashqī*, by Sabānū Aḥmad Ḡassān, was published in 1982. Both editions contain the actual text, along with an introduction, a list of major topics and explanations of various terms appearing throughout the work. Only the first edition includes an index.

In addition to his historical works, M.M. wrote treatises on medicine and Arabic music. He also completed a statistical report on mosques and other Muslim institutions in Damascus that serves to this day as a unique source for the study of Muslim urban history.<sup>11</sup> He is also the author of the following works on religious topics, the

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manuscripts of which can be found in the Oriental Room of the British Library: *Kashf al-Niqāb ʿan Wajh al-Masīh al-Kaddāb* (1860); *al-Dalīl ilā Ṭāʿat al-Injīl* (1860); *al-Barāhīn al-Injīliya Did al-Abāṭil al-Bābāwīya* (1864); *Kitāb Ajwibat al-Injīliyyīn ʿalā Abāṭil al-Taqlīdīyīn* (1867).

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<sup>2</sup> Mishāqa, *al-Jawāb ‘alā Iqtirāḥ al-Aḥbāb*, 207-211.

<sup>3</sup> Rustum and Abū-Shaqrā (eds.), *Muntaḥabāt min al-Jawāb ‘alā Iqtirāḥ al-Aḥbāb*, VI.

<sup>4</sup> Mishāqa, *al-Jawāb ‘alā Iqtirāḥ al-Aḥbāb*, 207; Houghton Library, Smith Papers, A.B.C.: 50, Box 3, Mishaqa to Smith, 18 July 1849.

<sup>5</sup> Houghton Library, Eli Smith Papers, A.B.C.: 50, Box 3, Mishaqa to Smith, 5 March 1849; A.B.C.: 50, Box 3, Mishaqa to Smith, 10 June 1851.

<sup>6</sup> Houghton Library, Smith Papers, A.B.C.: 60, Box 5, Whiting to Smith, 8 December 1847.

<sup>7</sup> Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: The Ideas of Butrus al-Bustānī,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 11 (1980), 287-304.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Philipp, “The Autobiography in Modern Arab Literature and Culture,” *Poetics Today*, 14 (1993), 581-583.

<sup>9</sup> Rustum and Abū-Shaqrā (eds.), *Muntaḥabāt min al-Jawāb ‘alā Iqtirāḥ al-Aḥbāb*, XI; Mishāqa, *al-Jawāb ‘alā Iqtirāḥ al-Aḥbāb*, 233-288.

<sup>10</sup> For examples see: Mishāqa, *al-Jawāb ‘alā Iqtirāḥ al-Aḥbāb*, 132, 231, 232, 280, 290, 295, etc; Fruma Zachs, “Mihā’il Mishāqa: The First Historian of Modern Syria,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 28/1 (2001).

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