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- James Reilly - University of Toronto
- Sidney Griffith - Catholic University of America
- Paul-Hubert Poirier - Université Laval
- Robert Kitchen - Knox Metropolitan United Church
- Amir Harrak - University of Toronto
- Marica Cassis - University of Toronto

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**The Canadian Society for Syriac Studies
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Origins of Syriac Christianity

Papers presented at a Symposium on the
"Origins of Syriac Christianity"
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University of Toronto

The Canadian Society for Syriac Studies

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FROM THE EDITOR



The present volume contains papers presented at the Symposium organized on November 24, 2001 by the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto, and the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies. The symposium explored the "Origins of Syriac Christianity," a difficult subject because of the total lack of literary sources dated to the time when Christianity first expanded into the Near East. The quality of the papers, as well as the organization and strong participation of both the general public and the academy, contributed to the success of this symposium. It is now my pleasure to present to readers at large the papers presented by the five speakers whose research provided an important window into the origins and development of Syriac Christianity.

The conference was officially opened by Prof. James Reilly, Chair of the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, who rightly qualified Syriac Christianity as a bridge between two major eras, the Ancient Near East and the "Islamic" (medieval and modern) Middle East.

After reviewing early Syriac Christian sources, Prof. Sidney Griffith, of the Catholic University of America, stressed the role of Edessa as a frontier city between Roman Syria and Aramean Mesopotamia, then under Persian rule. The city where East and

West met witnessed allegiance struggles led by such 3rd century personalities as Bardaysan and Mani and the 4th century Ephrem. The first two were marked by their Aramean culture whereas the latter espoused Roman imperial orthodoxy, and hence the struggle was translated into one between orthodoxy and heresy.

No one can deal with early Syriac Christianity without discussing the second-century Syriac author Bardaysan of Edessa. Prof. Paul-Hubert Poirier of Laval University, who has published extensively on early Christianity and Gnosticism, discussed the philosophical background of a statement made by one of Bardaysan's disciples claiming that without faith no one can attain firm conviction. Prof. Poirier was able to find the echo of this claim in Coptic Gnosticism and ultimately in Greek philosophy. It even recalls Augustine's maxim *crede ut intellegas* "believe and understand."

One of the most important sources of early Syriac Christianity is a treatise called *The Book of Steps* (4th century), which Dr. R.A. Kitchen, of Regina, Saskatchewan, has translated into English and which is now in press. Thus, he is well-qualified to discuss one aspect of this work: the asceticism that so clearly characterizes the early Syriac church. Excesses in this domain are well known, but admirably, the *Book of Steps*

reflects the human experience of a community trying to reach evangelical perfection (ܚܘܒܝܢܐ). Rather than celebrating those who have achieved perfection, the *Book of Steps* accommodates those who are less-than-perfect within the community and attributes a dignified ministry to them. Here is an early document that provides an impression of asceticism “in the flesh,” appreciating its inadequacies as well as its accomplishments.

The lecture by the present writer dealt with two Syriac classical sources relevant to the general theme of the symposium. While the *Teaching of Addai* and the *Acts of Mār Mārī* suggest that Christianity entered Upper Syria and Mesopotamia triumphantly thanks to powerful signs and wonders performed by the two missionaries, the paper highlighted a few references made by them to merchants and trade, suggesting the following: Since several religions, sects, and philosophies were disseminated in foreign lands by merchants and trade routes, the missionaries of Mesopotamia and Upper Syria could well have done the same.

The last presentation was archaeological, focusing on the traces of the earliest Syriac churches in the ruins of Babylonia. Kokhe, the birthplace of the Church of the East, offers limited archaeological remains, but what was unearthed several decades ago is now better understood thanks to other Syriac remains recently uncovered in Sassanian Babylonia and the Arabian Gulf. Through comparison of building material, plans and motifs, Marica Cassis, a Ph.D. candidate in Syriac Studies at the University of Toronto, emphasized what made the remains at Kokhe unique.

Participants at the symposium also remember the pleasure and the fascination of

hearing a 4th century poem attributed to Ephrem the Syrian, whose name cannot be ignored in any discussion on the origins of Syriac Christianity. The poem was “On the love of learning,” the wording of which recalls ancient wisdom literature, namely that of Ahiqar. Part of the poem was sung by the excellent choir of the Assyrian Church of the East, Toronto Parish, led by Farida. Many thanks to Farida and everyone in the choir, as well as to His Grace Mar Emmanuel, who facilitated the task of the Choir singing in the auditorium of the University.

Participants also recall the presentation made by Dr. George Kiraz on the important project entitled *eBeth Arké*, or “The Syriac Digital Library.” Its aim is to make available on the Internet an *eLibrary* collection of out-of-print books, journal articles, pictures, and music recordings. Led by Beth Mardutho in partnership with major university libraries, *eBeth Arké* is the first collection of published material on Syriac studies in electronic form using the latest in *eBook* technology.

At the end of the Journal, the reader will find a report on the 5th International Congress of Syriac Studies, which took place in Kottayam, S. India, last September, as well as details about a new research project in Syriac Christianity that just started at Leiden University, the Netherlands. The project will investigate the development of an independent identity among the West Syriac people on the basis of the latter's historiographical, exegetical, and iconographical creations.

The organization of the symposium and the publication of its papers were made possible thanks to the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

A. H.

FORWARD



JAMES REILLY
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

The papers published here originated in a symposium at the University of Toronto in November 2001 on the origins of Syriac Christianity. This subject is of interest for a number of different reasons. First, it illuminates a key transition in history from the ancient world to one in which the Middle East and Europe would be dominated by one or another monotheistic faith. Second, it captures formative moments in the development of a Syriac identity that molded literary output and communal life in late antiquity and beyond. Third, it underscores the historical importance of Christianity in the region of its birth, and points to the unbroken presence of Middle Eastern Christian communities for whom the Syriac language is one element of their modern identities. Finally, in today's globalized world marked by massive population movements (whether voluntary or involuntary), a study of the origins of Syriac Christianity casts light on the heritage and history of communities that now form part of the North American social and cultural fabric.

From a scholarly point of view, the papers gathered here offer a bridge between two eras that too often are considered or treated in isolation from one another: the ancient Near East and the Islamic (medieval

and modern) Middle East. Can meaningful links and associations be drawn between these two eras which, on the face of it, share little more than a common geographic space? The answer to this rhetorical question is yes, but the question must be asked because of a bias common both to Islamists and Islamists, namely, that the advent of Islam as the governing and eventually majority faith in the region marked a major departure from earlier patterns. The study of Islam became the key, so it was believed, to understanding the history of the Middle East.

Obviously one cannot begin to grasp the historical Middle East without acknowledging Islam any more than one can grasp historical Europe without giving due weight to the development of Christianity. But just as a dispassionate approach to the Christianization of Europe will acknowledge the incorporation of earlier cultural patterns into what became Christendom, so too will a dispassionate approach to Islam and Islamization take into account the existence and influence of pre-Islamic cultures and belief systems that were variously refuted by or incorporated into the new Islamic synthesis. Studying the origins of Syriac Christianity potentially will allow us better to understand the historical development of Islam and the phe-

nomenon of Islamization. Indeed, the welfare of Syriac Christianity and the spread of Islam were not mutually exclusive phenomena. Though it is outside the scope of the papers published here, the Syriac church enjoyed one of its greatest periods of fluorescence in the early centuries of Arab rule.

In sum, a seemingly narrow and specialized topic like the origins of Syriac Christianity in fact touches on wide-ranging and still-pertinent questions about the manner in

which belief systems are propagated, take root and flourish; and about the formation of the modern world and its dominant religions. I thank my colleague Professor Amir Harrak for the initiative that led to the convening of the original conference and the publication of these papers. It is a fitting project to come out of a department like ours, which seeks to understand the Near and Middle East in the broad sweep of the region's millennia of history.

FAITH AND PERSUASION IN THE *BOOK OF THE LAWS OF COUNTRIES*:
A NOTE ON BARDAIŞANIAN EPISTEMOLOGY



PAUL-HUBERT POIRIER
UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL (QUÉBEC)

This paper has grown out of my teaching of the Syriac language over the last few years at Laval University, which gave me the opportunity to read and translate with my students the *Book of the Laws of Countries* (ܒܘܟܝܢܐ ܕܩܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܩܘܢܝܢܐ, hereafter *BLC*).¹ I have been interested in this work since I began my Syriac studies more than twenty-five years ago in Paris, but until now I have never had the occasion to seriously examine it. This examination was prompted by the fact that the first and last translation of the *BLC* into French was published over a century ago, in 1899!² This paper is therefore my first foray, a rather modest and limited one into the field of Bardaişanian studies.

1. The Purpose of this Paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine the section of the *BLC* in which one of the interlocutors of the dialogue, a certain Avida, says to Bardaişan:

I even greatly desire to hear and to be persuaded, because it is not from any other I have heard this word; but I have spoken it of my own mind to my brothers here, and they are not willing

to persuade me, but say, 'Believe really, and you will be able to know every thing'; but I am not able to believe unless I should be persuaded. (5, 540, 15-22)

The 'word' (ܩܘܢܝܢܐ) which had been the object of discussion between Avida and Bardaişan's disciples was the assertion by Avida that, 'if God is One, as you say He is, and He has created mankind intending you to do what you are charged to, why did He not create mankind in such a way that they could not sin but always did what is right' (1). Bardaişan's disciples had unsuccessfully tried to refute Avida and had, in desperation, argued that he must simply have faith. In the excerpt I have cited, I am particularly interested in the statement which ends Avida's answer to Bardaişan's disciples: 'I am not able to believe unless I should be convinced', in Syriac: ܐܢܝ ܘܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܘܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܘܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܘܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ (540, 21-22). This statement, apparently commonplace, is the exact opposite of Bardaişan's disciples' injunction to Avida, that is, 'Believe really, and you will be able to know every thing'.

Avida's declaration, to the effect that he would not believe without being first persuaded, has a close, if not literal, parallel in

two Nag Hammadi tractates preserved in Coptic, but of which the originals were definitely Greek. In the first one, entitled *The Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI, 1, hereafter *Interp. Know.*),³ it is stated that ‘each one is persuaded [by the things] he believes:’ π|οὔρει ποὔρει γαρ ῤπει|θε ῤν νε|τῤρπιστευε ἀραγ (1, 30-31). The second writing, the *Treatise on the Resurrection* (NH I, 4, hereafter *Treat. Res.*),⁴ also provides an interesting parallel to both the *BLC* and the *Interp. Know.*, when it asserts, regarding the resurrection, that ‘if there is one who does not believe, he cannot be persuaded, for it is the domain of faith, my son, and not that of persuasion, (to assert that) the dead will arise:’ εἰωπε οὔν οὔρει ῤδε εἰῤρπιστευε ἐν ῤντεῤ ῤμεγ ῤῤρπειθε· πτοπος γαρ ῤτπιστις πε παωρηε ἀω παῤρπειθε ἐν πε πετμαογτ νατωων (46, 3-7).

I was struck by the similarities between the *BLC* and the Nag Hammadi tractates in their treatment of faith and persuasion. I also wondered whether, behind Avida’s lapidary statement, there might be a philosophical, or rhetorical, background which would be worthy of consideration, the examination of which could contribute to a better understanding of the origins of the *BLC*. But before getting to the heart of the matter, let us briefly discuss the *BLC* and some questions its study brings up.⁵

2. The Book of the Laws of Countries

The *BLC* is a dialogue in which the participants are Bardaišan, his disciples (two of which, Philip and Bar-Yamā, are named) and a certain Avida, who is a new-comer to the circle of the disciples and who will be the main interlocutor of Bardaišan. The dia-

logue takes place in the home of Šemašgram, a ‘brother’ of the disciples. According to the unanimous view of the critics, the *BLC* was written in Syriac, probably at the beginning of the 3rd century. However, at least part of it was translated into Greek very soon afterwards, as evidenced by the excerpts preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea, the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, Pseudo-Caesarius and Porphyry’s *De Abstinence*. The title given at the end of the work in the one and only manuscript witness to the Syriac text, the British Library Add. 14568, ‘The Book of the Laws of Countries’, applies, strictly speaking, only to the ethnographic section of the *BLC*, devoted to the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά (26-40). The title transmitted by Eusebius, πρὸς Ἀντωνῖνον περὶ εἰμαρμένης διάλογος “Dialogue on Fate to Antoninus” (*Ecccl. Hist.* IV, xxx, 2), is more appropriate given the form and the content of the work as a whole.

The *BLC* is indeed structured around two main themes, which always go hand in hand in the philosophical reflection of Late Antiquity, namely free-will and astral fatalism.⁶ The dialogue opens with a prologue (1), in which Avida voices the question that I mentioned above, the question which is at the heart of the debate: ‘If God is One, as you say He is, and He has created mankind intending you to do what you are charged to, why did He not create mankind in such a way that they could not sin but always did what is right?’ Avida’s question is followed by a brief exchange (2-6) between him and Bardaišan, which serves as an opening for the core of the dialogue. The first section of the *BLC* proper (7-17) deals with free-will, in responding to a second question by Avida: ‘Why did not God create us in such fashion as not to sin and become guilty?’ It

ends with a short development on the nature of man.

The next section of the dialogue (18-22) consists of a philosophical refutation of Fate prompted by an affirmation of Bardaisan's disciples, according to which 'there are others who say, that people are led by the decree of Fate, sometimes ill, sometimes well.' This section is introduced and structured by a remarkable doxography, which lists three opinions or *αἰρέσεις* on Fate:⁷

1st thesis: Of the Chaldaeans, and others, who value the knowledge of their art: 'Everything in which they fail and everything good they do, everything that befalls them of riches and poverty, disease, health and physical injury, comes to them through the guidance of those stars which are called the Seven, and they are led by them.'

2nd thesis: 'Others maintain that this art is an imposture of the Chaldaeans, or even that Fate does not exist at all but that it is an empty name (= ὄνομα κινόν), and that all things, great and small, lie in the hands of man, and that physical injuries and defects happen and come to him by chance.'

3rd thesis: 'Others again say that man does everything he does according to his own will by virtue of the liberty given him, but that defects, injuries and grievous things that befall him are a punishment sent him by God.' (18)

The first thesis, that of the astrologers, called here Chaldaeans, asserts a universal astral Fatalism, whereas the second and third, whose proponents remain anonymous according to Levi della Vida,⁸ they are respectively the later Aristotelians and the mainstream Christians, profess the existence of human free-will, while recognizing that

injuries, diseases and bodily defects are mere accidents (*συμβεβηκότα*) or God-sent punishments.

In his response, Bardaisan does not appear to favour one thesis over the others, not even the third, but he asserts that 'these three sects (*αἰρέσεις*) seem to be partly right and partly wrong.' Their truth lies in the fact that 'people see how things happen to them by chance,' (*συμβαίνειν*) but they are mistaken, because they fail to understand the Wisdom of God, 'which has established the worlds and created man, has ordained the Governors, and has given to all things the power which is suitable for each one of them'(19). Bardaisan's own view of Fate is based upon the conviction that everything, including 'God and the Angels, the Powers, the Governors and the Elements, men and animals,' has its own proper power (*ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ, ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ*) granted to it by God. Bardaisan's theory of Fate distinguishes three levels of reality: Nature (*ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ = φύσις*), Fate (*ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ = εἰμαρμένη*) and Free-will (*ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ = ἐλευθερία*), each with its own sphere of influence as regards mankind: 'It is evident that we are governed by Nature equally, by Fate differently, and by our Free-will each one as he wishes.' As to what is called Fate, it is nothing else than 'the fixed course determined by God for the Powers (*ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ = δυνασταί* or *ἐξουσία*) and the Elements (*ܟܘܢܝܘܬܐ = στοιχεῖα*).' Bardaisan describes Fate's action in these words:

According to this course and order the spirits (or intellects) undergo changes while descending to the soul, and the souls while descending to the bodies. That which causes these changes is called Fate and native horoscope of that mixture which is being sifted and

purified to the help of that which, by the grace and goodness of God, was and will be helped till the consummation of all. (20)

The belief in the absolute power of Fate and the ensuing denial of Providence are therefore the result of a deficient understanding of the order of Universe and ignorance of the domains proper to Nature, Fate and Free-will:

Because of the division and the difference existing between the Powers, there are people who think that the world is governed without a fixed order, because they do not realise that this difference and division, innocence and guilt, arise from the order set by God in according them Free-will, so that these active beings also may either justify themselves or become guilty through their free disposing over themselves. As we have seen that fate can disorder Nature, so we can also see how man's Free-will forces back and disorders Fate. Not in everything, though, as Fate does force back Nature in everything either. It is fitting, then, that these three things, Nature, Fate and Free-will keep each their own mode of being, until the course is completed and measure and number have been fulfilled. For thus has it been resolved by Him, who ordained what was to be the way of life and the manner of perfection of all creatures, and the condition of all substances and natures. (22)

In a passage which serves as a brief transition (23-24), Avida declares himself satisfied with Bardaiṣan's demonstration to the effect that man does not sin by nature and that all men are not governed equally. He then asks Bardaiṣan to show that 'those who sin do not do so under the influence of Fate

(ܕܠܡܐ) or Destiny (ܕܠܡܐܘܠܐ),' (23) but that 'we have liberty to dispose over ourselves, so that we are not slaves of physical nature,⁹ nor moved by the control of the Powers' (24).

Bardaiṣan's demonstration of this is made by means of the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά, which will serve to establish the vacuity of the Chaldaean science.¹⁰ This section (25-40) is the longest and the best-known of the *BLC*, and it established once and for all the reputation of Bardaiṣan in Antiquity, as it appears from the borrowings by Eusebius, the Pseudo-Clementines, Pseudo-Caesarius and Porphyry.

The *BLC* lacks a real conclusion—we are not told whether or not Avida let himself be persuaded by the second part of Bardaiṣan's argument. After a short discussion of the astrological theory of the κλίματα (41-47a), the dialogue ends (47b) with an eschatological fresco, which evokes the image of a New World, a 'new mixture', which, 'by virtue of instruction', will bring the present aeon to its end. Then, 'at the establishment of this new world, all evil motions will cease, and all rebellions will end, the foolish will be persuaded, and deficiencies will be filled up, and there will be peace and safety, by the gift of him who is the Lord of all natures' (47).

Strictly speaking, the *BLC* is not to be ascribed to Bardaiṣan, no more than Plato's dialogues can be seen as works or *ipsissima verba* of Socrates. Nevertheless, the *BLC* has always been considered as an important, if not direct, witness to Bardaiṣan's thought. Here is not the place to pass in review the history of research on the relationship between Bardaiṣan and the *BLC*. It has been done recently by Alberto Camplani, in two remarkable articles, published respectively

in 1997 and 1998.¹¹ Let me just remind that, since Drijvers' monograph on *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen 1966), the *BLC* has been considered either as a rather faithful rendering of Bardaisan's views (Drijver's position) or as a christianized and catholicising revision of the Aramaean philosopher's teaching (Levi Della Vida,¹² Jansma¹³). It is not my intention to enter into this debate, but it appears to me that the *BLC* in itself has received too little attention, and that much of its content is still awaiting explanation.

3. The Epistemological Argument in the Book of the Laws of Countries (5-7)

After this long preamble, we arrive at our main point. We have already quoted the passage of the *BLC* which deals with the opposition between faith and persuasion. What I would like to examine now is the meaning of the verbs *ܘܫܥܘܪ* (to persuade), *ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ* (to be persuaded) and *ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ* (to believe), and of the noun *ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ* (faith). At first glance, the renderings of these terms pose no problems. But, when one considers their use in the *BLC*, especially in chapters 5-7, the situation is not that simple.

A good example of this difficulty is provided by the verb *ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ* (to believe). This verb occurs for the first time in chap. 5, in the discussion between Avida and Bardaisan's disciples of the conditions of the access to certitude. Here is the text:

Avida said: 'I even greatly desire to hear and to be convinced, because it is not from any other I have heard this word; but I have spoken it of my own mind to my brothers here, and they are not willing to convince me, but say, "Believe really, and you will be able to know every thing."

ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ

but I am not able to believe unless I am persuaded.'

ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ (5).

For Bardaisan's disciples, the firm invitation to 'believe really (or 'strongly')' refers manifestly to an attitude of religious faith, as we have it with the *μόνον πιστεύσον* of Luke 8: 50, where the Curetorean has a wording similar to the *BLC*, *ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ*. But Avida's reply is situated on a completely different level. Faith is no longer placed in the foreground, but rather is set in second place. It is also subordinated to and conditioned by persuasion. Such a view is a bit surprising, since persuasion and faith normally fall within two different intellectual provinces, persuasion being the result of rhetorical, or dialectical, argumentation, and faith being 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen', according to the famous definition of Hebrews 11:1.

We have therefore two opposite sequences: faith leading to persuasion and knowledge versus persuasion being the basis and condition of faith. The first sequence is what one would expect in a Judaeo-Christian context. As for the second, despite the use of the verb 'believe', *ܘܫܘܥܘܪܝܢ*, a shift in meaning can be observed, from the Christian significance of faith and belief, to a philosophical, or rhetorical, import. Here we must remind ourselves that the Greek terms *πίστις* and *πιστεύειν*, besides their usual meaning of 'faith' and 'to believe', may also refer respectively to proof, persuasion or confirmation, and to the fact of being persuaded, that is, giving one's assent to a per-

suasive argumentation.¹⁴ Therefore, Avida's reply, "I am not able to believe unless I be persuaded," could be paraphrased as "I cannot give my assent to something unless I be given a persuasive proof."

Consequently, I would suggest that the *BLC* is built upon a misunderstanding, or a double entendre, of the verb ܦܫܬܘܢ "to believe," as Avida and his opponents made use of this term in two different ways.¹⁵ As for Bardaisan, even if, in 6-7, he seems to prove his disciples right, when he says that "there are many, because faith is not in them, who cannot arrive at a firm conviction," he nevertheless engages in a full-fledged philosophical demonstration (ἀποδείξις), so much what Avida has been expecting that he declares himself "persuaded" (ܕܡܠܘܕܝܢܐ) by what Bardaisan has "shown" (ܕܡܠܘܕܝܢܐ) (23). Bardaisan's brilliant exposition of the previous chapters was thus the proof, the πίστις, which Avida had in vain requested from his disciples.

Now, the question I would like to address, is why the *BLC* resorts to a double meaning of the terms ܦܫܬܘܢ and ܦܫܬܘܢܐ, identical to what is well attested for their Greek equivalents πίστις and πιστεύειν? My suggestion is that the use of these terms in the *BLC* reveals a clear, although discreet, polemical intention. The way Bardaisan deals with Avida's questions is to propose a philosophical—even a scientific or ethnological—answer to what remains for him, and probably for many of his fellow Christians, a philosophical problem, namely the coexistence of Fate and Free-will, to which, in any case, no authoritative, unproved solution can be given, a problem for which the solution is also a kind a preamble, a *praeparatio*, to Faith in the Christian God.

Such a polemical use of the term πίστις

is not without parallel. There is an illuminating, though late, example of it in the commentary of Simplicius (circa 500 A.D.) on the *De Caelo* of Aristotle. Referring to the passage where Aristotle says that belief comes from reasoning (269 b 13-14 : ἐξ ἀπάντων ἂν τις τούτων συλλογιζόμενος πιστεύσειεν), Simplicius justifies the use of the verb πιστεύειν by Aristotle in the following terms:

Faith may be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, there is faith which arises without demonstration (χωρὶς ἀποδείξεως), in an irrational manner (ἀλόγως)—such is the faith that certain persons (τινὲς) conceive even about the most absurd things (...καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀτοπωτάτοις). The other kind of faith arises from demonstration and from reasoning: this faith is altogether sure, irrefutable and akin to the truth of beings (ἀσφαλὴς ἐστὶ καὶ ἀνελεγκτος καὶ τῇ τῶν ὄντων ἀληθείᾳ συμπεφυκυῖα).

(In *De Caelo*, p. 55, 3-6 Heiberg)¹⁶

Philippe Hoffmann, in an article on the Chaldean triad ἔρωσ, ἀλήθεια, πίστις has convincingly shown that Simplicius is to be situated in a long tradition of anti-Christian polemicists, from Lucian, Marcus Aurelius and Celsus onward, and of Neoplatonist philosophers as well, who denounce the irrational faith of the Christians. In Simplicius' text, and also I believe in the passage of the *BLC* which we are dealing with, the verb πιστεύειν, or ܦܫܬܘܢ, is used in a double sense, intellectual and religious, and it refers at the same time to the philosophical conviction which arises from a demonstrative deduction and to the religious faith.

To return to Bardaisan, the demonstration offered by the philosopher in the *BLC*,

with all its intellectual rigorousness, may be seen as a protest against an anti-philosophical bias of certain Christians, a bias best exemplified by Tertullian, when he writes in a famous passage of his *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from 'the porch of Solomon,' who had himself taught that 'the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.' Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the Gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides. (VII, 9-13)

Cum credimus, nihil desideramus ultra credere: it is difficult to imagine a motto farther from Bardaisan's thought and manner than this!

4. From Bardaisan to Nag Hammadi papyri and Augustine

As we have seen, the *Interp. Know.* and the *Treat. Res.* offer close parallels to the *BLC* in their use of the terms *πείθεσθαι* ~ *πιστεύειν* / *ἀπιστεῖν* ~ *οὐκ πείθεσθαι*. In

spite of a difference in the sequence of the elements, *πείθεσθαι* → *πιστεύειν* in the *BLC*, and *πιστεύειν* → *πείθεσθαι* in the *Interp. Know.* and the *Treat. Res.*, we remain on either side in the domain of persuasion and proof, which suggests a philosophical, or rhetorical, instead of a theological, interpretation of *πιστεύειν*.

This dialectic of faith and persuasion receives an unexpected - and reversed - echo in Augustine's famous dictum "Crede ut intellegas", "Believe that you may understand", which is based on the Greek Septuagint's false rendering of Isaiah 7:9, "If you do not believe, you shall not understand" (ἐὰν μὴ πιστεύσητε, οὐδὲ μὴ συνήτε), where the Hebrew Masoretic Text (and the Latin Vulgate) has 'If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.' The Augustinian aphorism, though not identical to those of the *BLC* and the Coptic tractates, is nevertheless interesting in its combination of faith and intelligence. It also suggests that there might be a common tradition lying behind all three.

The *BLC* is extant in a single Syriac manuscript, the composition of which is predominantly philosophical, and makes use of a highly technical vocabulary, either philosophical or astrological, which would require a comprehensive commentary, still to be written, a commentary which would do justice to its variegated background. This paper is nothing but a modest start in this direction.

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BECOMING PERFECT:
THE MATURING OF ASCETICISM IN THE *LIBER GRADUUM*



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In 1926 Michel Kmosko published the critical edition of a Syriac book which had acquired the nickname of *ktābā dmasqātā*.¹ William Wright had earlier dubbed this work *The Book of Steps*,² and Kmosko finished the task of naming by endowing it with the scholarly dignity of a Latin title, *Liber Graduum*, by which the book generally has been known since then. Known, but the *Book of Steps* has seldom been understood.

The intent here is to reveal a few more aspects of this complex work. The *Liber Graduum* (hereafter referred to as *LG*) describes the development of an asceticism without hagiography. Normally, Syriac asceticism glorifies the higher levels of ascetic achievement. The *LG* pulls no punches in criticising the Perfect ones, its higher level, as well as building up the reputation and accomplishments of the lower level, the Upright. It is through these observations that one is able to see a response to alleged Mesalianism, a long-time challenge to the orthodoxy of this work.

The *Liber Graduum* in Brief

The *LG* is a collection of 30 *mēmre*, composed by an anonymous author who provides remarkably few details to locate the

work chronologically or geographically. Current opinion opts for a date in the mid-to-late-fourth century, while the only location noted is the Lesser Zab River.³ Situated between Mosul and Kirkuk in present-day Iraq, the Lesser Zab is part of the region classically known as the Adiabene.

The 15 extant manuscripts offer no title. The *LG* is drawn from *mēmre* 19 and 20 which speak of the difficult steps (*masqātā*) on the steep road to the city of our Lord,⁴ a metaphor not used elsewhere in the collection. While the *LG* revolves around the levels of Perfection (*gmīrūtā*)⁵ and Uprightness (*kēnūtā*),⁶ the author does not set out a progressive series of steps towards heaven, as in John Climacus.

The *LG*, however, appears to be the work of a single author, and as such should be perceived as the collected works of this intentionally anonymous author who did not wish to make known his name.⁷ While certain themes thread throughout the *mēmre*, the author has not composed a systematic theological treatise, but has utilized a variety of literary forms for different occasions and purposes.

Piecing together numerous comments and observations by the author, usually in between the lines of theological discourse

and Biblical exposition, is a *sitz im leben* of conflict, internal and external, evolving over a number of years.⁸

The author, in all likelihood the spiritual leader of a pre-monastic Christian community in the midst of or on the periphery of an unnamed town or village, has witnessed the rise and decline of his Christian ascetical ideal. His writings attempt to respond to and remedy this changing situation.

The *LG* is not a static theoretical treatise on the ascetical life, but a dynamic chronicling of the experiment to develop and nurture a mature asceticism incarnate in a company of committed individuals—a fourth-century version of *Geneva* in the 16th century.

Being a collection of writings, the *LG* includes a variety of literary forms. Following the order of *mēmre* in Kmosko's critical edition, several groupings are discernable:

1-8 (columns 12-200): Rules for the Perfect (*gmīrē*)⁹ and the Upright (*kēnē*).¹⁰

9 (201-248), 23 (692-712): Extended Biblical expositions on Old Testament conundrums.

10 (249-269), 25 (733-756), 29 (808-857): Sermons—discourses directed personally to the faith community.

11 (272-284), 13 (305-321), 16-22 (388-689), 24 (713-732): Advanced Perfection, or how to continue to grow as a Perfect one and avoid stagnation.

12 (285-304), 15 (336-385): Essays responding to controversies on the role of the contemporary church and on sexuality and marriage.

14 (324-333): Evagrian-style couplets summarizing the relationship between the two levels of the Perfect and the Upright.¹¹

26 (757-765), 27 (768-784), 28 (785-805), 30 (860-932): The validation and encouragement of the ministry of the Upright.

The Upright and the Perfect

Most readers and scholars have preferred to focus on the rules for the Perfect and Upright as the content for the *LG*. The definition of the Perfect and Upright is a central motif, but the *Book* contains much more than these definitions of an ascetic institution. If one takes the order of the *mēmre* as roughly chronological, the author appears to be concerned at the last to encourage the development of the Upright, the lower level. In this way a different direction is perceived. Instead of preserving an elite institution, the author urges a spirit-filled asceticism that permeates all of society.

Within the collection the author changes perspective on the relationship between the Upright and the Perfect in his community. The Upright ones were those who had accepted the commitment to perform the active forms of ministry in the world: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, assisting the poor and healing the sick. A significant number of the Upright were married, practiced secular occupations and had income. Indeed, they were expected by their calling to use their income and positions for the benefit and support of ministry to others, indicative of the role of village patrons in Late Antique society.¹²

The Perfect were generally defined apophatically—whatever the Upright did, they did not do or did so without the limits imposed upon the Upright. The Perfect did not engage in active forms of ministry—and were forbidden to work—being wandering charismatics who begged, taught, mediated

conflicts, and aspired to a life of prayer without ceasing.

In the low-numbered *mēmre*, the rules of Perfection and Uprightness impose a crisis of decision upon the fledgling Christian: one must choose initially one path or the other. Progression to the higher level is extremely difficult, the boundary line between the levels being the renunciation of the world along with celibacy, that is, the renunciation of married and family life.

However, in the high-numbered *mēmre*, the author observes that some Upright are not far from Perfection and that with a little more work they might well achieve the higher status. It appears that the concreteness of the duties of the Upright enabled them to progress steadily in their spiritual journey, in contrast to the Perfect who always were not doing something, perhaps believing that their journey was complete. This attitude is the locus of the text's struggle.

The *LG* in Later Literature

One of the enigmas regarding the *LG* is what happened to it in Syriac church literature. The *Book* is virtually never quoted or referenced in later literature. British Library Add. 17193 (ff. 3a-3b) refers to the work in a brief exegetical passage, while claiming that the work was written by a Eusebius the Solitary.¹³ That could well be true, but we have no other corroboration, and no idea who such a Eusebius the Solitary might be.

The only Syriac author who has encountered the book or its institutional traditions is the early-sixth-century henophysite bishop Philoxenus of Mabbug. In his 13 Ascetical Homilies he utilizes the institution of the Perfect and Upright in a familiar way.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Philoxenus' situation is

distinctly different from that of the *LG*. He delivers his discourses on the spiritual life to his charges in a monastery¹⁵ where the boundary issue between Uprightness and Perfection of celibacy is no longer an issue. Uprightness is no longer a decision, but a beginning, functioning as a de facto novitiate. Eventually, one is able to progress up into the ranks of the Perfect.

There is no recognizable citation of the *LG* in Philoxenus' *mēmre*. Yet the principal manuscript used by Kmosko for the *LG*, the 12th-century Codex Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris Syrus 201, is also the primary text for Philoxenus' Ascetical Homilies. Some scribe or teacher who ordered the manuscript recognized the connection.

There are only three relatively complete manuscripts: Bibliothèque Nationale Syrus 201 (Kmosko's Ms α), St. Mark's Jerusalem Syrus 180 (7th-8th century) (Ms R),¹⁶ and British Library Add. 14613 (Ms β) which contains 18 *mēmre* plus the Preface. Two more manuscripts contain five and four *mēmre* respectively: BL Add. 17178 (Ms γ), and BL Add. 14621 (Ms E). Eight of the remaining manuscripts contain only one *mēmre* each.

The St. Mark's Ms R was made available to Kmosko only after he had completed his critical edition, though he was able to make reference to it on numerous occasions. The order of its *mēmre* is identical with Ms α, but there is the interesting twist regarding *memrā* 30. The writer of the Preface (*memrā* 1) in Ms α is full of praise for the genius of the author and decides to give the reader a sneak preview by including the last section of *memrā* 30 at the conclusion of the Preface. This section is not repeated at the end of *memrā* 30 in Ms α. However, in Ms R this climactic section is right where it is said

to belong, at the end of *memrā* 30. Ms R also contains a marginal note by the scribe (?) which attempts to identify the author of the *LG* as a certain Abba Philo.¹⁷ Again, this is too little evidence—and contradictory at that—to reach any reasonably certain conclusion.

Messalian Days Are Here Again

The Messalian question is still alive. Many scholars have been interested in the *LG*, not so much for its spiritual subject matter, but for its alleged connection with the Messalian movement and controversy of the 4th and 5th centuries. When the presumption of heresy settled hard upon the *LG* as a result of Kmosko's analysis and verdict, study of the work was effectively inhibited for nearly 30 years. Some scholars believed that the *LG* was the lost *Asceticon* of the Messalian movement, reputedly displayed by Bishop Valerian and condemned at Ephesus in 431.¹⁸ (The Pseudo-Macarian Homilies was the prime candidate for the identity of the *Asceticon*, being read in excerpted form at Ephesus.)¹⁹ The Messalian movement purportedly promoted attitudes which were anti-institutional and anti-sacramental, and perceived ceaseless prayer as the only effective religious action.²⁰ There is considerable doubt now whether there ever was such an *Asceticon*. The anonymity of the *LG* allows aspersions to be easily cast upon it, without being able to fight back with specific names and places.

Arthur Vööbus initiated the redemption of the *LG* in 1954, arguing that it was not a Messalian book.²¹ Gradually, other scholars began to cast off the Messalian label and see other virtues in the work.

The last decade has seen a kind of neo-Messalianism emerging in several studies of

the *LG*. Vincent Desprez suggested that the itinerant missionary work of the Perfect ones prefigured the Messalian communities.²² The Perfect were not Messalians, Desprez emphasized, but through their austerity, refusal to work, humility, poverty and prayer, they presented an unwitting model. Certainly this is not an improbable hypothesis, but the suggestion is outside our present ability to evaluate.

Brian Colless has returned to the possibility that the *LG* is a, if not the, Messalian book.²³ Noting that a number of early Christian texts were purged of perceived heretical material—if the rest of the text was considered spiritually beneficial—Colless suggests that this may have been the case with the *LG*. Extant copies of the *LG*, therefore, may contain alterations, omissions, and interpolations.

There were four primary errors of Messalianism agreed upon by its opponents: (1) the indwelling of the soul by a demon from the time of one's birth; (2) the inefficacy of the sacraments to purify the soul of this demonic power; (3) the exclusive efficacy of prayer to achieve this purification; (4) the resultant impassability (*apatheia*), and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Colless proceeds to illustrate these concepts in the *LG* in convincing manner, although showing occasional caution to allow that some so-called Messalian characteristics and beliefs appear in other orthodox authors.

Colless suggests that the *LG* might have been read or written by Adelphios of Edessa, the original Messalian banished by Flavian of Antioch.²⁴ He observes that the *LG* was considered worthy enough to be copied and handed down in the Syrian monasteries, though never quoted or referred to by name. There are echoes of the *LG* in later

Syriac mystics, as Colless lifts up brief notices from Martyrius Sahdona on the visible, hidden, and heavenly church of *mēm̄rā* 12; and also from Isaac of Nineveh who declared that there is a form of work and service which is concealed from the novices and laity.

That there is something messalian about the *LG* appears probable. Nevertheless, there is no solid evidence, internally or externally, to link the work to Adelphios or any other known author. A seemingly small matter has a critical importance in the interpretation of the text: did the author primarily direct his message and *mēm̄rē* inwardly to his community or outwardly to the world? Most scholars have opted for the latter, proceeding logically from the fact that the various manuscripts have come down to us, with the implication that they were circulated broadly for universal consumption.

Coupled with the smell of Messalianism, this outward intention compelled Robert Murray to complain that the *Liber Graduum* protests too much to be a completely orthodox book.²⁵ Murray understood the author's explanation of the visible, hidden, and heavenly churches to be an apologetic epistle to the wider church.

I wish to focus on several of the *mēm̄rē* in which the author addresses internal issues and attitudes among the community members that point to the primary audience for the *LG* being the particular community of the author whom he was attempting at various points to encourage, revive, and reform. Three *mēm̄rē* are sermons (10, 25, 29) which depart from the usual didactic pattern of the author to deal with the kinds of conflict the author was observing. The unique concern of the author for the lower level of Christians, the Upright, particularly in

mēm̄rē 15 and 30, also provides indication of the internal intention of the Book. The historical issue may be whether there were Messalians circulating in the flesh at this time or even if the author had any awareness of their ideas. Nevertheless, we shall see several instances in which the author appears to be attacking messalianist practices he has perceived developing in his community.

Rules for Upright and Perfect

Mēm̄rē 1-8 function to elucidate the fundamental basics or rules of an ascetically-oriented society. The author distinguishes the mandates of the major and minor commandments of Scripture and develops the profile of the characteristics and duties of the lower level, the Upright (*kēnā*), along with those of the higher level, the Perfect (*gm̄rā*). *Mēm̄rā* 9, On Uprightness and the Love of the Upright and the Prophets (201-248), is an extended Biblical exposition countering objections to the place of the Old Testament prophets in this scheme. Obviously, being perceived as God-filled persons par excellence, these prophets are still revered in the popular mind. However, Elijah, Elisha, David and many others killed opponents of their God. This was at the behest of God, but it still makes them personally fall well below the standards of Uprightness. The author assures the readers that, nevertheless, the prophets will enter heaven and Perfection after the Apostles (232:4-233:3; cf. Hebrews 11:39-40), somewhat tidying up the loose ends of this ascetical institution. The author implies throughout the *mēm̄rē* that while the Old Testament is Scripture, it is superseded by the New Testament (212:14-21).

***Mēmṛā* 10: Body and Soul**

Within the corpus of the edited text, *mēmṛā* 10 is the first discordant note. *Mēmṛā* 10 (249-269) bears no title at its head, but the concluding sentence identifies the *mēmṛē* as On Fasting and the Humility of Body and Soul. The literary approach is more personal, without the propositional style found in the first nine *mēmṛē*, the Upright and the Perfect being mentioned only twice. The audience is addressed as “my brothers” (249:4; 261:5), and it is obvious they are being scolded, cajoled, and encouraged in short succession. The author is attacking a spiritualizing or quietistic approach to asceticism that has developed among some members of the community. Physical fasting, for instance, is disdained by disciples who believe they have become superior to anything physical or bodily (268:3-269:2).

The author begins by declaring that Satan afflicts us more intensely when we are doing good things. One must constantly be alert to the spirit in which one engages in doing good, for Satan will ingenuously manipulate and corrupt one’s motives and patterns of behaviour (249:4-18). In this way the author summarizes the current spiritual crisis.

A person going on a trip makes sure that adequate provisions are in hand; in the same manner, one must be certain to have proper provisions when one departs from this world to the next (252:11-17). You can take something with you: your good deeds, and the benefits of your fasting and prayer.

These attributes are recognizable in the body and also in the soul. God sees the lowliness in your heart, while other people can see it in your body. The body and soul do not compete against one another; either they

mutually succeed or else one fails. The body fasts from food, pleasures, and pride of clothing, while the soul fasts from spiteful words, controversies and jealousies, curses and anger (253:11-18). There is no dualism allowed here by the author. Just like Jacob bowing humbly before Esau, one’s lowliness must be evident before both God and people (256:10-13). The author has now addressed the root of the crisis: one cannot declare that one has taken the higher spiritual road and is fasting spiritually without fasting physically in the body.

Even those who remain deeply involved in the commerce of this world are commanded to fast from the bonds of iniquity, from deceit, injustice, slander, fraud and adultery and luxury. Their calling is to treat people as well as they wish to be treated. God could have created a world in which all are rich and healthy and life-long residents²⁶ (local natives), but as we see, God’s world contains rich and poor, healthy and sick, strangers and locals. The test is to see how those better off treat the less fortunate (260:9-18). The parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) provides the script if there is a lack of compassion on the part of the wealthy and privileged (260:18-261:4).

The author knows that most people know the commandments, but rationalizations are the first tactic of Satan, and the author has heard them all. When we want to eat lustfully, “It is not what enters a belly which is harmful, but what comes out” (261:10-14; Matthew 15:11). When we don’t want to pray, “In our heart let us praise the Lord” (261:14-15). When we don’t want to be diligent and work hard for the church, “Our heart is a church” (261:15-17). If we want to put on luxurious clothing, inwardly

we mourn, for God does not care for visible things (261:17-19). If we do not want to be bothered comforting the naked or poor, In our soul we are justified and shall hear our own illnesses (first) (261:19-22).

The author is not fooled, for he declares that evil teaches us all these things and makes us believe that we work in the heart, while in fact we work neither in the heart nor in the body. No one accomplishes righteousness with his heart who does not also accomplish righteousness with his body (263:23-264:3).

This spiritualizing of physical asceticism qualifies as the alleged faults of the Mes-salian movement: an unhinged discipline which convinces its practitioners that they are spiritually advanced beyond the need to fulfill the law within the physical world. Literal fasting, prayer, simple clothing, and helping the needy do not matter anymore, if they can accomplish all these disciplines in their hearts. The author of the *LG* recognizes the bankruptcy of this attitude, calls it by name, and summons in particular the Perfect to repentance.

The author has come to realize the practical consequences of such a misinterpretation and mispractice of the ideal of Perfection. It takes quite a while for ascetics to callous their bodies and spirits to the demands of physical asceticism. In the same way, little by little one can undo all the progress made in the pursuit of Perfection through an imbalanced spiritualizing (265:23-268:2). One becomes fat and petulant like the Israelites, the author complains, and after a while may even forget that one is a Covenanter (*bar qīāmā*)²⁷ and forget to serve God, just as the Israelites forgot God who had saved them (265:15-22).

***Mēmṛā* 25: Discerning Voices**

Mēmṛā 25, On the Voice of God and the Voice of Satan (733-753), is another sermon in which the author approaches the same problem of relaxed discipline, yet from a different angle. The author observes that the Perfect one, being childlike and not really mature, is susceptible to the scheming of the Evil One since he does not know how to discern the voice of God from the voice of Satan.

The Evil One is crafty, changing his snares every day, so that the Perfect one cannot easily figure him out by means of a routine. Indeed, “because he does not understand the truth in any way, the Evil One makes [him] stray and binds him onto the earth, yet that person is convinced that, in fact, he is bound in heaven” (733:1-15).

The results of the Evil One’s activities, however, are discernible to the author. Under the pretext of providing comfort for the afflicted, Satan convinces the Perfect one that acquiring a little wealth through occupations allowable in Uprightness and building a little dwelling adequate for hospitality to strangers is a virtuous initiative (741:21-26).

Cultivating a little garden to grow vegetables for the sick and healthy certainly cannot be a bad idea, even though labouring is usually not a prerogative of the Perfect (741:26-744:2). Gradually, Satan has made the Perfect one abandon his Perfect road and return unwittingly to Uprightness. The Evil One has beguiled the Perfect one back down to earth, just as he did to Adam (744:19-21).

Then before long, the Evil One will pull him down as well from Uprightness. Satan send messengers to him telling him that peo-

ple are plundering your house;” others are picking through your garden;” still others are stealing and killing his flock of sheep. All this starts with the Evil One advising a heavenly one to own property and build a house upon it (748:1-19).

It is in this sermon that the author begins to laud the Upright ones whom he perceives to be more serious and often more mature in their asceticism. Nevertheless, it all begins with the witness and example of Jesus, for the ascetical, celibate life is deemed the original shape of existence. “[Jesus] demonstrated clearly through his person Perfection and the holiness²⁸ of the first creation of Adam” (736:15-17).

Perfection is still the goal of fallen humanity. The author muses that if all people had reached Perfection, God would have rained food and clothing upon them without them having to work for it (737:18-23). Moreover, if all people had earnestly desired holiness/celibacy, God would have created children for them just as God had made a daughter (Eve) for Adam without marriage or lust (737:26-740:2).

But after God saw that Adam loved earthly things, God allowed him to be married and to become an Upright one in this world, and therefore to be saved and not utterly perish (736:23-26). Whoever works the earth in Uprightness will inherit eternal life, but will not become a Perfect one (740:4-7). Our Lord commanded the Upright to feed and clothe the Perfect, and they will then be able to live the life of the new world as a reward (737:13-18).

The author remonstrates against a pattern of behaviour, perhaps recently begun, which works to undermine the basic mission of the Perfect. God commanded these heavenly ones to treat every person well. Evidently,

among the Perfect some exceptions had arisen.

Where did you get the idea that no one should speak with a worthless or deceptive [person], because it may be [the case] that he will become a Perfect or an Upright one? The author refers to the incident of Jesus speaking to Ananais regarding the notorious Saul (Acts 9:11-15). Ananais recoils at the thought of dealing with such an evil man, but Jesus tells him that Saul is his chosen instrument, a fact which he may not yet understand (745:13-23).

The Perfect appear unable to comprehend the mature nature of their calling and are easily manipulated to live a distorted version of the way of Perfection. The author perceives that they have lost their bearings on the nature of truth, hearing the voice of Satan rather than the voice of God. As such, these failings of the Perfect do not appear to be messalianistic—in some instances, a well-meaning intent to use their financial resources and property for the good of the needy. Yet, without a clear understanding of how the rigours of Perfection intersect daily living, they appear susceptible to a variety of libertarian and insidious misinterpretations of the Christian way of life. Certainly, one cannot make Messalians out of them at this point, but the litany of their misunderstandings of Perfection does till fertile soil for the excesses of Messalianism.

Mēmrā 29: Not By Rote

Mēmrā 29, On the Discipline of the Body (808-857), is the third sermon in which the author laments the spiritless faith of many of his disciples who go about their duties by rote²⁹ and not with passion.

The problem is seen first of all in the

way they muddle through worship and prayer:

Look, my son, consider how much power is hidden in the praises of our Lord, yet we repeat them by rote without passion. Because of this the words of God do not effect in us good deeds, for we do not give them a place in our soul to lay down roots in us. For that matter, even pagans, if they want, [can] learn the words of our Lord by rote at the same time they are worshipping in the house of their idols and doing the will of the devils (816:17-817:1).

Echoing Paul (1 Corinthians 9:27), the author declares that he will subdue his body and his soul in order to honour everyone as a servant (809:1-3), the primary example being Jesus who called his betrayer Judas Iscariot “my friend” (809:25-812:3; Matthew 26:50). The author then digresses—or is this the main intent of the sermon?—to launch into a diatribe against the behaviour of some ‘un-Perfect’ disciples:

Because you do not restrict your bodies from food, nor make supplication to our Lord that he set you free, there are many sickly and ill people among you and many who sleep and many who are drunken, greedy, and unrestrained, because they do not examine themselves and subdue their bodies³⁰ (812:24-813:6; 1 Corinthians 11:30).

That the Perfect have lost their way clearly disappoints the author. The evidence does not permit facile labeling, yet could this not be a situation in which the Perfect have deteriorated from their discipline into Messalianesque practices?³¹ The charge of sleeping is a prime indicator of so-called Messalians who claimed that dreaming is a

form of prayer. The more you sleep, the more you dream—how better to pray unceasingly?

The author continues to challenge the luxurious life-style the Perfect have adopted, denigrating the memory and reputation of the ascetical saints who have gone before them. “We teach others, but do not teach ourselves” (820:13-14). They eat meat and drink wine improperly, dress in lavish clothes, possess wealth and are lords of the domain, and keep a suspicious eye on strangers (820:14-821:3).

Apparently, this way of life has led to an inhospitable, ungenerous spirit, creating a gulf between the Perfect and the less fortunate. “When is a person so poor that he cannot afford a cup of water and morsel of bread, nor afford the washing of feet nor the bandaging of [the wounds] of the sick nor hosting strangers [for the night], [if] he has a house? No one is too poor to [be able to give] compliments and a loving greeting, unless he wishes to become an evil one” (845:23-848:5). The author decries the spiteful words and gossip mongering in which many of these disciples have felt free to engage (848:11-849:13).

The author never mentions Messalians and may well have had no idea of their existence in his frame of reference. He does not like the shift he has seen develop among his charges of undisciplined and luxurious living, boredom with aspects of the spiritual life, and a prideful elitism separating themselves from their inferiors. The author roundly condemns as illegitimate this behaviour, which has fallen from Perfection to a state below even that of Uprightness.

All through the *LG*, the author has provided a worthy place and status for the Upright, albeit condescendingly at times. Now

he seems no longer unsure about the level of the commitment of the Upright who have proved themselves by their compassion and piety. They will reap the rewards of salvation, and if only they would go the next step—the author urges—they would earn the greatest reward, that of Perfection:

Therefore, as there are different [kinds of] fasts with respect to these foods, so also those people who are incapable of these fasts of which I have spoken and are married, when they loosen the bonds of iniquity and cut off the chains of deceit, and set the oppressed free (Isaiah 58:6), they will genuinely fast, as it is written, ‘this fast is preferred by God in which a person avoids evil things and eats food rather than fasting from food and doing evil things.’ If a person avoids evil things, gives alms, redeems the afflicted, and gives relief to the needy, he will steadily progress in his fast [even] when he eats and drinks well and when he dresses nicely and possesses wealth. He is an Upright one [even] while being married (825:19-828:7).

Reminding his disciples that food and ornate clothing are not unclean of themselves, but what matters is how one eats and wears these things, the author infers that asceticism is not absolutely necessary. Certainly, too much food leads to gluttony and fancy clothes ease one towards a debauched life (833:1-836:13). However, as long as the Upright worship God wholeheartedly, and treat well and kindly everyone they meet, they have attained a worthy calling. Having witnessed the decline of the Perfect ones, the author would much rather settle for a faithful Upright one, as he implies by means of an apocryphal saying attributed to Jesus.

Therefore, the Lord reviled these false people who fraudulently fasted and lowered themselves falsely, and said, ‘I will not accept a deceitful lowliness and a false fast. It would be better for a person to eat and drink and wear white [clothes] than to do evil things while fasting and wearing sackcloth and causing everyone to wail through the evil things he does’ (844:11-17).

Marriage and Money

The two pillars of traditional asceticism—celibacy and giving away one’s possessions—are never reputed by the author of the *LG*, but are muted for the sake of the developing Upright who live in the world. *Mēmrā* 15, On Adam’s Marital Desire (336-385), is an extended discourse on the origins and consequences of the human sexual drive, especially as it deals with the issues of the requisite of celibacy for perfection. The author uses the *mēmrā* to prove that sexual lust is not innate in human beings, but derives from the temptations of Satan.

After [Adam] had sinned and was censured, a law was established for him, inferior to that first [law]. By this same law [God] permitted him to marry. Because he had desired to become physical and not spiritual, that is, earthly and not heavenly, it was then that carnal desire came to exist in him, for Adam desired intercourse as a result of the teaching the Evil One who had plotted to make him fall from the sanctity of the angels and imitate wild beasts (336:3-13).

Adam and Eve, the author explains further, did not really desire intercourse, but did so in the hope they could become great like

God. They did not have lust prior to the intrusions of the Evil One, as demonstrated by their unashamed nakedness similar to that of infants (340:7-344:1).

However, in compassion, God provisionally and grudgingly blesses marriage:

[If] your freedom listened to the Evil One and you desired [intercourse] like Adam, your Creator will angrily give it to you as he had to Adam. [God] is angry because we renounce the celibacy of the angels and imitate the beasts. But [God] will have compassion upon you as he had upon Adam and you will observe Uprightness and be alive/saved while you [are involved] in intercourse (352:3-10).

This is not the happiest tone of voice for the Upright, but the author's emphasis is upon God's compassion which is the example for human relationships. The author softens his perspective even more in defining the proper actions of the Upright:

Those who bind and loose in the world and buy and sell, owning possessions justly and treating the needy well while not treating anyone badly, are the Upright who are inferior to the Perfect. For the Uprightness of people does not treat poorly anyone who treats it badly, but it does away with its goods and flees from evil, just as Isaac had left behind his father's water wells when they quarreled with him. He named [the wells] 'Satan'³² and 'Contentious'³³ because they had quarreled and contended with him,³⁴ and he migrated from there; and just as Abraham and Isaac had given up their wives and neither condemned nor quarreled, yet God administered their judgment (357: 6-17).

The final *mēmra* (30), "On the Com-

mandments of Faith and the Love of the Solitaries" (860-932), begins by distinguishing between the disciples of faith and love and their commandments—these groups being the intermediaries between the Upright and the Perfect. This is a new dichotomy only hinted at previously: the disciples of faith being virtually synonymous with the Upright, while the behaviour of the disciples of love is barely distinguishable from the Perfect.

What is even more new and striking is the report of conflict and violence that besets the disciples of faith and love. The disciples of faith are sometimes attacked and even martyred by idolaters and pagans "because [the disciples of faith] resolutely confront them for their evil doctrine, tearing down their altars and enduring wherever they are persecuted in order not to become vain idolaters in the land of the Lord our God" (869:21-25).

The disciples/martyrs of love, on the other hand, are persecuted and killed by the members of the household of faith³⁵ (872:15-17). The apparent conflict arises because the latter are confident they know the whole truth, so when a disciple of love mentions an idea normally not shared with the lower levels, they are outraged, not understanding that they do not know the whole truth (872:19-873:4). Obviously, civil society has broken down even within Christian and ecclesiastical circles.

Such behaviour is not to be countenanced at all, for the author declares, "faith does not command its disciples to kill the evil ones, but to flee from their presence and to expel [the evil ones] from their midst. Therefore, those who kill do not become the disciples of faith, but are disciples of Satan" (873:9-13).

Returning with the conviction of experience to an earlier theme that different levels of spiritual development and aptitude require different commandments and commissions, the author discusses at length the need to discern which people can manage a stringent way of life and for which ones a more open and flexible way is appropriate (893:10-901:11). His concern now shifts to advocacy for the status and well-being of the Upright, the lower level. One can be married, own property and possessions, and have income and still attain a significant measure of salvation.

Abraham is cited as the model of a wealthy person who used his wealth for people who were in need, treating equally well both the good and the evil (925:3-928:14). Recalling Jesus' references to Abraham, the author asserts that because of this [Abraham] became great and was glorified and called the ruler of the feast (Matthew 8:11), so that all the Upright and the righteous might be comforted in the bosom of righteousness (Luke 16:23). Lazarus, the archetypal poor man of the Gospels, is held in the bosom of Abraham, who knew how to use his wealth, in contrast to the rich man, who did not.

It is Zacchaeus, though, that the author offers as the exemplar of the Upright one's duty towards his wealth:

Understand from this that people are saved if they do as they were commanded: [following] that precept which is lower than that perfect and superior precept, [even] while they are married and possessing wealth. [This is clear] by that demonstration when our Lord entered the house of Zacchaeus, a sinner and an extortioner and doer of evil things, and admonish-

ing him made him a disciple with these commandments which are inferior to Perfection.

[Jesus] did not say to him, 'Unless you leave your wife and your house and your children and empty yourself from everything you own, you will not be saved.' Look, the response of Zacchaeus makes it clear that our Lord admonished him in such a way that he need not empty himself, because he knew that he could not reach the power of that great portion. Zacchaeus said, 'Everyone whom I have cheated I will repay four-fold, and half of my wealth only (*balhūd*³⁶—eisegesis!) I will give to the poor' (Luke 19:8). See, while he did not say to our Lord, 'I will abandon everything I have,' our Lord did say the following to him, 'Today salvation has come into this house' (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus shall be called *a son of Abraham*, he who when he promised to repay their lords what he had extorted had said, 'half of my wealth only I will give' (Luke 19:8). But whoever gives to the poor half of his wealth while not defrauding anyone, look, is he not greater than Zacchaeus who was called righteous? When he gave two portions of his wealth, look does not he grow greater still? Whoever gives all he possesses to the poor and strangers, look, is [that person] not better and greater? (924:13-925:16).

It is in this generous attitude towards the vindication of the Upright that the *LG* ends its journey.

In Search of Mature Asceticism

What kind of book is the *LG*, what was its purpose, and how well did it accomplish that

purpose? This diverse collection of 30 *mēmre*, written by a single anonymous author, with few historical or geographical clues, is not an easy work to classify. Written in a pre-monastic era, one is not able to bring the understanding of early monastic institutions into the analysis of the *LG*. Reconstructing the chronological order of *mēmre* would be a helpful, but very uncertain task, so for the time being I believe that there are more important tasks.

If all one wants is a description of the characteristics and duties of the Upright and the Perfect, the author provides well. Usually, he is systematic in defining the contrasts between the two levels, although sometimes he notes something significant as a tangent. But he is consistent, both in the broad and nuanced strokes. Nevertheless, this is only a part of the picture, and not even the most useful part for the history of the development of asceticism.

Viewed as the collected works of this author and pastor, the *LG* provides rules, essays, exegeses, and sermons chronicling the vicissitudes of his community of faith. Things do not always go well, so much so that the author develops the “rules” of Perfection and Uprightness in order to remind, reform, and reinforce the standards both levels had learned from the beginning of their pilgrimages.

Giving strong voice to his disappointment and despair at how the Perfect have fallen from the standards of their way of life, either by spiritual ineptitude, seduction, naiveté, or delusion, the author is not happy with their debauched behaviour or their rationalizations. He names their problems for all to hear in a tone of voice which implies that the author is not writing a universal epistle, but a diatribe targeted at his own

community.

If these less-than-Perfect ones are indeed nascent Messalians, then here is an intriguing scenario. The *LG* does contain some ideas which belong to the roots of Messalianism, though it is doubtful that the author consciously planted them as such. Messalianism was not a formal “-ism,” but a movement which was the result of good theology losing its compass.

The author perceives his lapsed Perfect ones as betrayers of the Christian ascetical ideal, and in numerous sections, the *LG* assumes an anti-messalian agenda. So here is a book which provides both an unwitting source for the Messalian trajectory, while at the same time rejecting vehemently the legitimacy of any such distorted practices.

Along the way, the author came to appreciate the more humble Upright, moneyed and married. Their structured life-style and discipline gradually moved them closer to the heights of Perfection, if only they could become poor and spouseless. To see a fourth-century ascetical writer lauding a group of Christians who have not totally embraced the full ascetical ideal is remarkable, if not unique. For that reason, the *LG* grapples with the same problems as do most contemporary churches: how does one progress towards mature and authentic discipleship in the midst of a sinful world?

The author does have one answer or approach. Asceticism with a goal of Perfection is a matter of maturation, of training and development in the faith, not simply possessing an innate aptitude for spiritual matters. No level functions without error, and that is why the *LG* was written. Champions are made, not born.

Our final problem regarding the *mēmre* of the *LG* is that we cannot tell whether or

not it has ended as a literary work. Are we missing further *mēmre* or did the author die before the story was completed? Did the Perfect all run off and become full-fledged

Messalians and live and pray unhappily ever after? Of course, we do not know and we must be careful not to claim what we do not know. Anonymity exacts its price.

NOTES

1. M. Kmosko, editor, *Liber Graduum (LG)* (*Patrologia Syriaca* 3; Paris, 1926); Syriac title: ܠܝܒܪܘܫܝܡܘܨܝܘܬܐ.
2. W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Part II* (London: 1871) 949.
3. Kmosko, *LG* 896:2 (references to the text are column:line).
4. *LG mēm̄rā* 19, 445-525 (ܠܡܡܪܐ); *mēm̄rā* 20, 528-581.
5. ܠܡܡܪܐ.
6. ܠܡܡܪܐ.
7. 1:3-4: ܠܡܡܪܐ ܠܡܡܪܐ ܠܡܡܪܐ ܠܡܡܪܐ ܠܡܡܪܐ.
8. Cf. R.A. Kitchen, "Conflict on the Stairway to Heaven: The Anonymity of Perfection in the Syriac *Liber Graduum*," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 256 (1998) 211-220.
9. ܠܡܡܪܐ.
10. ܠܡܡܪܐ.
11. Cf. J. Muyldermans, ed., *Evagriana Syriaca* (Bibliothèque du Muséon 30; Louvain, 1952. British Library Add. 14578 contains this *mēm̄rā* embedded (f. 102aff) in a manuscript devoted to the works of Evagrius.
12. Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 62 (1971) 80-101; also in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (University of California Press: Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1982) 103-152. A more concise summary of the rural patron is found in: "Town, Village and Holy Man," *Assimilation et résistance à la culture gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien*, ed. D.M. Pippidi (Bucharest, 1976) 213-220; also *Society and the Holy* 153-165.
13. Wright, *Catalogue* Part II, 949. Text and Latin translation, Kmosko, *Praefatio, LG*, xi-xiii.
14. E.A.W. Budge, ed., *Discourses of Philoxenus, Bishop of Mabbogh*, 2 vols. (London, 1894).
15. The late André de Halleux suggested that Philoxenus was writing specifically to the monks of the monastery of Senūn, to whom he had also written one of his most important defenses of the henophysite faith. Cf. A. de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabboug: Sa Vie, ses Écrits, sa Théologie* (Universitas Catholica Louvaniensis Dissertationes ad graduum magistris, Series III, 8; Louvain, 1963) 45.
16. Cf. Mar Filoksinos Yohanna Dolabany, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in St. Mark's Monastery* (Dairo DMor Marqos; Damascus, 1984) 377-380 for a list of *mēm̄rē* titles.
17. Kmosko, *Praefatio*, ccxcv: ܠܡܡܪܐ.
18. Cf. "The Definition of the Holy and Ecumenical Synod of Ephesus Against the Impious Messalians Who are also 'Alled Euchetae and Enthusiasts," in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Universal Church*, H.R. Percival, ed., (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 14; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 240.
19. Columba Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart* (Oxford, 1991) 13. Stewart notes that from the historical perspective, the Messalian movement can only be described as a controversy, 5-8.
20. Thus their Syriac name: ܠܡܡܪܐ (mš allīānē) "pray-ers."
21. First in an article: A. Vööbus, "Liber Graduum: Some Aspects of its significance for the History of Early Syrian asceticism," *Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile* 7; Stockholm, 1954 108-128. Subsequently, in the first and third volumes of his *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* I (CSCO 184/Subsidia 14; Louvain, 1958) 178-184, 190-197; III (CSCO 500/Subsidia 81; Louvain, 1988) 1-18.
22. V. Desprez, "L'ascétisme mésopotamien au IVe siècle: III. Le 'Livre des Degrés'," *La Lettre de Ligugé* 262 (1992) 16-29.
23. The following is summarized from excerpts from Brian Colless' paper at the VIII Symposium Syriacum in Sydney, Australia, August 2000: "The Book of Degrees and Adelphios of Edessa."

TRADE ROUTES AND THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE NEAR EAST



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Introduction

There are two main Syriac sources that deal with the introduction of Christianity into the Near East, particularly Upper Syria and Mesopotamia. If we believe them, the roots of Christianity in those lands extend into the time of Jesus himself. Once the new religion was firmly established in Edessa, near the upper Euphrates, it moved eastward to Nisibis, near the Tigris, until it planted itself in Babylonia at the hands of two disciples of Thomas the Apostle. The two sources are late in time, and countless details seem to conflict with what must have happened during the first Christian century in that part of the ancient world. Nonetheless, rather than dismiss these sources as academically useless, as some scholars did at the beginning of the 20th century,¹ we shall use them to reconstruct a possible scenario: Christianity entered Mesopotamia through Edessa at the time of the Apostles through traceable trade routes and by merchants, as also hinted at by the Syriac sources.

Syriac Sources and the Christianization of the Near East

The two Syriac sources relating the expansion of Christianity in the Near East are the

familiar *Teaching of Addai* (ܬܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܐܕܝܐ) ² and the lesser-known *Acts of Mār Mārī* (ܐܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܐ ܡܪܝܐ).³ According to the *Teaching of Addai* (probably 5th century), the person who was at the origins of Christianity in Mesopotamia was none other than Jesus himself. The *Teaching* claims that before his crucifixion Jesus corresponded with Abgar, his contemporary who ruled over a small kingdom called Osrhoene (ܐܘܨܪܝܘܢܐ), the capital of which was Edessa. It is claimed that the letters were kept in the royal chancellery of Edessa. Abgar took the initiative, inviting Jesus to come to him to cure him from an undisclosed disease. Here is the wording of the famous letter:⁴

Abgar Ukkāmā⁵ to Jesus the good Physician who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem.

Greetings, my Lord!⁶

I have heard concerning you and your healing, for you do not heal with drugs and herbs but by your word you give sight to the blind, cause the lame to walk, cleanse the lepers, and cause the deaf to hear; by your word the spirits are expelled, the lunatics and the sufferers are delivered. You even raise the dead!

Once I heard that you are performing these great wonders, I thought you

were either God who must have come down from Heaven to perform these things, or the Son of God for you have performed these things!

For this reason, I write to beg you to come to me, so that I may pay you homage and that you may heal me from the pain that I have, for I believe in you.

I also heard that the Jews murmur against you and persecute you, seeking to crucify you to destroy you.

I rule over a small but beautiful city, enough for both to live in peace.

Jesus could not answer his request but promised that after his Ascension he would send one of his disciples to heal him. Moreover, Jesus blessed his city so that it would never be conquered again. This is what he said to Abgar's messenger:⁷

Go and tell your lord who sent you to me:

Blessed are you for though you did not see me you believed in me, for it is written concerning me that those who see me will not believe in me, and those who do not see me will believe in me.⁸

As for what you write to me to come to you, that for which I was sent here is now fulfilled and I am about to ascend to my Father who sent me. As soon as I have ascended to Him, I will send to you one of my disciples to treat and heal the illness that you have. He will return all who are with you to eternal life. And your city will be blessed, and no enemy will overpower it ever again.

True to Jesus' promise, Addai was sent to Edessa through the Apostle Thomas. Addai resided in the house of Tobias, a local Jewish resident, and began to perform miracles, and before long the royal palace heard

of him. Once Abgar the king had been healed along with a number of his officials, he realized that Jesus had fulfilled his promise toward him. In a short time, Edessa was won to Christ, becoming the first Christian kingdom ever. The correspondence between Jesus and Abgar was also discussed by Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340), bishop of Caesarea of Palestine, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, which deals with the history of Christianity from the Apostles to his own time. He quoted the two letters exchanged by Jesus and Abgar, taken from the archives at Edessa, which was at that time a capital city.⁹ Eusebius claimed that he extracted the letters from the royal archives and translated them from Syriac into Greek. On the basis of a Syriac text appended to the letters, Eusebius commented on the outcome of the contacts between Jesus and Abgar. Here the information is roughly the same as that found in the *Teaching of Addai*, though Addai becomes Thaddaeus. Thus the detail about the correspondence between Abgar and Jesus was known at the beginning of the 4th century or even at the end of the 3rd century.

At a much later date, perhaps the beginning of the 7th century, the Christians of Babylonia wrote the story of the Christianization of their own land. What they wrote was an expansion of the *Teaching of Addai*, in that this holy man sent his own disciple Mārī (a Jew from Palestine)¹⁰ to Christianize Mesopotamia. The connection between the two sources is made as follows:

So far were (the stories) about the conversion of Mesopotamia. Let us now return to show how the fear of God had moved from there to our own territories. Because this story is not told clearly, I am putting into writing

the old tradition that is transmitted in the books, as follows. Before the blessed Addai died, he selected one of his disciples named Mārī, who was living in the love of God and was adorned with virtuous manners. He placed his right hand on Mārī, as conferred to him by our Lord Jesus Christ, and sent him to the eastern region, to the land of Babylonia, ordering him to go and preach there the word of our Lord (...)

Mārī, his *Acts* tells us, moved from Edessa eastward, toward a major city to the east, Nisibis. From here he travelled progressively through Ediabene (modern northern Iraq), and southward through Babylonia where he founded the first church in Kokhe near Seleucia-Ctesiphon (south of present-day Baghdad).¹¹ After securing Babylonia for the Christian faith, Mār Mārī moved to Persia proper, beginning with Beth-Hozaye (Ahwaz) and Elam to the southwest of present-day Iran. The whole of Mesopotamia was converted to Christianity, beginning with the rulers, through countless Miracles performed by Mārī, a thaumaturge rather than a missionary. The churches founded by him in Mesopotamia and Persia were all furnished with priests, deacons, teachers, schools, hospitals, and monasteries, even though monasticism as an institution did not yet exist. In fact the Christian centres supposedly founded by Mār Mārī fit better with the time of the writer of the *Acts* or earlier rather than the apostolic age even at its end. Despite these shortcomings all Christian native sources concur that Christianity entered Mesopotamia during the apostolic age. The Christian Arabic *Kitāb al-Majdal* "Book of the Tower" (12th century), goes as far as giving the exact date of the death of Mār Mārī: July 19th, the year 393 of the

Greeks (Seleucid),¹² which corresponds to AD 83, in the heyday of apostolic missionary activities.

Objections to the Syriac Sources

Much has been written refuting the authenticity of the two Syriac sources during the past two centuries. Some scholars went as far as denying the historical existence of Addai and Mārī.¹³ Others denied Edessa's role as the cradle of Syriac Christianity, claiming that this kingdom was converted by another kingdom located to its east, Ediabene (ܐܕܝܒܢܐ), the capital of which was the ancient city of Erbil (modern Arbīl).¹⁴ Some scholars thought that the aim of our Syriac sources was to stress the apostolic origins of Syriac Christianity, a propagandistic attempt also made by several other churches in the Near East as well as in Europe.¹⁵ As for the date of Christianity in Edessa, some scholars thought that it became powerful by the 3rd century,¹⁶ leaving the impression that the new faith was implanted there late in the 2nd century.

It is true that we cannot accept our Syriac sources at face value. In 494, Pope Gelasius considered the letters supposedly exchanged by Jesus and Abgar to be apocryphal. Syriac funerary inscriptions from Edessa dated from the 1st to the early 3rd centuries seem to be entirely pagan, both in content and in the depictions that accompany them.¹⁷ The names attested there, such as Amat-Sin Servant of (the Moon-god) Sin, `Abd-Shamash Servant of the (Sun-god) Shamash, and `Abd-Lat Servant of Allat, highlight the worship of local pagan deities. The New Testament, including the Book of Acts, does not refer to the events in question either. As for the *Acts of Mār Mārī*, its author used the *Teaching of Addai* as a mold in which he

cast his account. Both documents shared the belief that the Christianization of Mesopotamia occurred quickly and through miracles and wonders. They followed a pattern also detected in Syriac hagiography, in that Christianity almost everywhere began first with the royalty and the pagan priesthood and then passed on to the rest of the population in a comprehensive manner. In short, our sources belong to an ancient literary genre, which we may call golden-age literature, where origins are explained in an idealistic manner, and this is obviously due to the paucity or the non-existence of primary sources.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the *Acts of Mār Mārī* and the *Teaching of Addai* may contain reliable historical cores. In the first place, the cultural and linguistic unity of the Near East, in addition to the relative proximity of major cities within it, must have greatly facilitated the expansion of the Christian faith in Mesopotamia at an early, even apostolic, stage. Secondly, Christianity was introduced, not miraculously or victoriously as conveyed by the Syriac sources, but most probably with the help of Merchants and traders through traceable and easily recognizable trade routes.

Cultural, Linguistic and Geographical Unity of the Near East

When Christianity spread out from Palestine to the rest of the world, the Near East was divided into two major political entities, with Rome dominating Syria and the Mediterranean, and Parthia ruling over Mesopotamia and Persia. Rome conquered Syria and Palestine in 64 BC, thereby ending the Hellenic hegemony over them since Alexander's conquest in 332 BC, whereas the Par-

thians (Iranian tribes) came to power around 250 BC, ending the Seleucid control over Mesopotamia. The Euphrates separated both superpowers, though this natural borderline was not always secure. This explains why some cities located along or near the Great River, a buffer zone between the two superpowers, remained mostly semi-independent. This was, for example, the case of Edessa, Ediabene, Hatra and Palmyra, which at the beginning of our era enjoyed remarkable wealth in addition to local political power despite their being mere city-states.

Even though Edessa and the rest of Mesopotamia belonged, at the dawn of Christianity, to the Parthian political orbit (unlike Antioch and Jerusalem that were under Roman hegemony), one should not exaggerate the political division and cultural diversity of the Near East.¹⁹ Beginning in the first millennium BC a series of unifying powers appeared for the first time in history, with the aim of keeping the Near East and the rest of the accessible world under one and the same hegemony in spite of regional aspirations for independence. The Assyrians were the first to apply such a policy under the powerful Sargonid Dynasty (721-610 BC), which created the first true empire. This very extensive, centralized, and well-administered empire was Assyrianized in defense of the unifying policy.²⁰ Roads connecting the various regions of the dominion were expanded, maintained, and used for trade and military purposes, becoming Royal Roads. Relocation of various peoples within the empire and the location of Assyrians across the entire dominion were part of their administrative policy. The Assyrians succeeded in politically unifying the Near East, setting an example for all political powers which followed.

Thus the Babylonians (also called Chaldeans) walked in the footsteps of the Assyrians as far as the Near East was concerned, after the fall of the latter in 609 BC. The revolt of Jerusalem in 587 BC, which threatened the unifying policy of the Babylonians, was not tolerated and the capital of Judah was destroyed and its nobility deported to Babylon. The exile of the Jews in Babylonia at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar is another instance of mixing the various populations of the Near East together. We will see that the presence of Jews throughout Mesopotamia and Upper Syria helped the cause of the Christian mission in those lands. The next people to adopt this unifying policy were the Achaemenids, who solidified the unity of their vast empire after they had adopted Aramaic as the language of their diplomacy and communication worldwide. After Cyrus captured Babylon in 539, the entire Near East began to speak Aramaic from Persia to the Mediterranean and from Anatolia to Egypt. The impressive archives uncovered in Egypt that date to this period highlight the importance of Aramaic as the language of diplomacy, trade, law, correspondence and belles-lettres.²¹ From that time, Aramaic never lost its unifying power and that explains why it was the only language of communication shared by Jews, Arabs, Assyrians, Babylonians, Arameans and other peoples during the first century AD. It was also the language of all the caravan cities, such as Palmyra, Hatra, Edessa, and Petra, as their numerous Aramaic inscriptions show.

While Aramaic represents the linguistic unity of the Near East, the peoples of this part of the ancient world shared enough customs, cults and beliefs that they can also be considered culturally united despite local characteristics.²² Even though Seleucus I

Nicator, who dominated the Near East after the death of Alexander of Macedon in 323, took drastic measures to Hellenize this region,²³ a move toward the unifying policy, his dominion remained largely Semitic in tongue and culture. Jerusalem, Berytus (Beirut), Tyre, Edessa, and Babylon were furnished with gymnasia, theatres, temples, and such other landmarks of Greek civilization, but they remained faithful to their ancient traditions. In Mesopotamia, the New Year festivities (*akītu*) were held annually as was done thousands of years before, religion and cultic rituals in the local temples continued to be practiced, and libraries such as the one in Uruk never desisted from producing literature written in Cuneiform until the beginning of our era. It seems Hellenism was Babylonized rather than the other way around.²⁴ Thus, culturally the Near East remained deeply Semitic, and outside the major Hellenistic cities, such as Antioch, Seleucia on the Tigris, and Apameia,²⁵ people continued to speak and write Aramaic until the advent of the Arabs in the early 7th century AD.

Short distances between major cities and communities in the Near East also contributed to Near Eastern unity, and thereby to the early Christianization of Upper Syria and Mesopotamia. Edessa, claimed to be the cradle of Syriac Christianity in Syriac sources, was not far from the famous Metropolis of Antioch, where a Christian community had existed since the earliest days of Christianity. Here Paul the Apostle was converted to Christ and the followers of Jesus were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). About 270 kilometres separated these two cities, which correspond to a twelve-day march of caravans on the backs of donkeys. Some 730 kilometres separated Edessa from

Jerusalem, heart of the Christian religion. All these Christian centres were located along trade routes linking northern Mesopotamia with Palestine, and the distances between them were minimal if we consider the rest of the ancient trade route that extended from Palestine to India²⁶ and from Babylonia to deep inside Asia Minor.²⁷ These routes were used very frequently, whether by pilgrims as in the case of Jews in the Diaspora, or by merchants whose profession was to travel.

Thus, the Near East, from Palestine to Babylonia and from Upper Syria to Jerusalem, was a compact region, monolingual, and mostly unified culturally. This being the case, the missionaries who undertook the Christianization of Upper Syria and Mesopotamia had simply to take normal trade routes to disseminate their religious beliefs.

Near Eastern Trade Routes and Caravan Cities

The belief attested in Syriac sources that Christianity is rooted in Edessa and nowhere else is very old, though it may not date to the earliest Christian centuries. Given the fact that the Near East was politically divided, one would assume that the road from Roman Syria to Parthian Mesopotamia was not easy for individuals whose only purpose of travel was to preach a new religion. Unlike the case of the Apostles who had the freedom to move from Palestine and through Roman Syria, Anatolia and beyond, the travel from Roman land to Parthia must have been through trade and only via trade routes. Historically, trade routes were the usual, if not the only way religions, philosophies, and other intellectual trends travelled, disseminating in foreign lands. Christianity

must have entered Upper Syria from Edessa in like manner.

By the beginning of the first century of our era, the Near East witnessed intensive trade activity, invigorated perhaps by the collapse of the Seleucid political power and the emergence of Rome and Parthia that brought relative peace in the region. Growing demand for goods and luxuries kept trade routes busy. Merchandise and goods were transported on the backs of donkeys on the Silk Road that linked China with the Mediterranean and on the backs of camels on the Incense Route that linked Arabia and the Mediterranean. A net of trade centres located along the trade routes covered the regions involved in trade. While en route, caravans settled in their caravansaries and local citizens took care of their welfare and maintenance. Administrators worked for the security of travellers thanks to their connections with tribal and nomadic peoples situated along the trade routes, especially those traversing steppes and deserts. Attested in Old Syriac, the Aramaic titles *shallīā d-`arab* (governor of the Arabs) and *malkā d-`arab* (king of the Arabs; often borne by the kings of Hatra) possibly refer to the connections of the bearers with the aforementioned nomads. In return, the international traders paid in kind and in hard currency fees for their transit and for all the services rendered to them. The caravan cities along the Euphrates and in the Syrian Desert gave evidence of their growing wealth and power in inscriptions, art and buildings. The monumental temples and palaces, stone sepulchers, funerary mosaics, and a great number of stone statues all point to the brilliant era lived by these cities thanks namely to trade.

Consulting any map of the Near East in

the first centuries of our era, one notices a number of strategic cities playing the role of gates to regions, districts, and seas, without which these would be difficult to access. Most remarkable are those located along the Euphrates, which we shall now survey to highlight the unique position of Edessa. The Nabatean kingdom of Petra (now in Jordan) was a major trade centre during at least the first centuries before and after Christ. After the creation of the Roman province of Syria in 64 BC, Petra remained independent, and during the reign of al-Ḥārith (Aretas) IV (9 BC-40 AD), it proved to be a quite remarkable state, as the Aramaic inscriptions of and the money cast by this king show. The magnificent rock-cut tombs and temples in Petra that survived to this day are dated to his reign. The eclectic architectural style of the monuments, combining Mesopotamian, Syrian, Egyptian and Hellenistic features testifies to its cultural contacts with the rest of the Near East. According to Strabo, merchandise was shipped from Petra to everywhere in the ancient world, from Rhinocolura, south of Gaza.²⁸ There is no doubt that the international trade, mainly of aromatics, was behind the political and economic fortunes of Petra. As in Palmyra, taxes were collected at both the arrival and the departure of the caravans in addition to fees levied on their loads. The so-called Palmyrene Tariff, an early 2nd century AD inscription in Aramaic and Greek, recorded all the taxes and finances dealing with trade and other commercial activities, thereby shedding light on the wealth of Palmyra as a caravan city, as well as on the commodities that flowed in it.²⁹ What was practiced in Palmyra was presumably also the norm in other contemporaneous caravan cities.

Hatra, another caravan city located in

Upper Mesopotamia, was founded around the mid-first Christian century, during which time the rulers bore the Aramaic title *maria* "lord." In 116 the fortified city resisted the onslaught of Trajan in such a way that the Romans had to lift the siege and leave in failure.³⁰ Many inscriptions written in Aramaic survived from this magnificent site, where the architecture bore Hellenistic and Oriental influences. Like Petra and Palmyra, Hatra was also politically independent from both Rome and Parthia at least during the time of the lords. The city was located on trade routes, and this is indicated by both written and archaeological sources. Though the local Aramaic inscriptions do not pertain to trade, the mere existence of Hatra, with its monumental architecture, magnificent statues, defense system, brilliant history, and great wealth, can hardly be explained in the absence of trade.

Arbela, the capital of the small kingdom of Ediabene, was also a caravan centre of great significance because of its location in the heartland of Assyria. Our information about Ediabene is literary rather than archaeological. During the 5th century BC Arbela was mentioned in an Aramaic itinerary of a state caravan belonging to the Achaemenid Satrap Arshama.³¹ The caravan departed from Susa, in southeast Persia, passed through Babylonia and Assyria, where the travellers and their horses stopped at 'RBL and other Assyrian stations before reaching Damascus (DMŠQ). Our information on Ediabene during the first Christian century comes mainly from the 1st century AD Jewish historian and general Josephus, who wrote elaborately about Izates, the king of Ediabene and a convert to Judaism.³² Thanks to the support of the Parthian king Artaban II, Izates expanded his small do-

minion up to and including Nisibis at the expense of Armenia.³³ These events took place around 34 AD, but not much is known about Ediabene during the second half of the 1st century. One can assume with confidence that it remained a traditional passage-way to the rest of Assyria and Syria, and that it continued to witness the influence of a strong Jewish community.³⁴

Palmyra, located in the Syrian Desert halfway between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean, had been a caravan station since Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian times when its name appeared as Tadmur and Tadmar. By the early Christian era it connected with several caravan cities through a network of trade routes: Dura-Europos to the southeast and on the west bank of the Euphrates, Emesa to the west, Antioch to the northwest, and Petra in Nabataea southward. Though the Romans created the province of Syria in 64 BC, Palmyra enjoyed political independence for a while. Following its annexation to Syria by Emperor Tiberius (4-37 AD), it rose rapidly to become a Roman city in c. 129 AD and a Roman colony in 212 AD. Throughout its history Palmyra played the role of middleman between Rome and Parthia.³⁵ Pliny the Elder (1st century AD) wrote that it had a destiny of its own between these two mighty empires, and even though Palmyra may not have been independent by the time of his writing, its position as indicated by him is very suggestive. Palmyrene inscriptions written in Aramaic shed much light on the work of the local citizens in trade. Their work consisted of assisting merchants journeying eastward to Babylon, organizing caravans, and ensuring security for the merchants and their loads while travelling through the desert on the backs of camels.

Camels, crucial beasts of burden of the desert, are depicted in many reliefs alongside figures of Palmyrene citizens. These were known to the Romans as merely Merchants, in Palmyrene *taggaraya* and *taggare* (the latter as in Syriac): Being merchants, they bring the products of India and Arabia from Persia, and dispose of them in the Roman territory, wrote Appian.³⁶

Edessa can easily be considered the most important caravan city in comparison with all those mentioned above, as well as with others such as Dura-Europos on the Euphrates. Throughout at least two millennia before Christianity, this city-citadel enjoyed a strategic position, both politically and commercially, that no other site, even nearby Harran, could boast. The commercial role of Edessa is extremely ancient, dating to the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC if not earlier. The name of the place at that time differed from the Hellenistic Edessa, and from its Syriac counterpart 'Urhoy / 'Urhay (ܘܪܗܝܐ). Based on evidence from the 10th century Syriac encyclopedia normally referred to as the Lexicon of Bar Bahlul, the ancient name of Edessa was Adme (ܐܕܡܐ).³⁷ This name in turn, with various forms close to its Syriac spelling, is attested in Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian itineraries (2000-1700 BC), beside other city names, including Harran (spelled *harrānu*, lit. road). The itineraries followed a trade route which linked the ancient city of Ashur in Assyria with the land of Cappadocia in eastern Anatolia. For at least two hundred years, roughly between 1900 and 1700 BC, caravans of donkeys carrying goods, including textiles and tin, took that road to Cappadocia where the merchandise was exchanged with gold and silver. The textiles were brought to Ashur from Babylonia and

tin from Iran, both through trade routes. The Babylonian route went up along the Tigris River until it reached Ashur, and from this point it stretched to Nisibis and Edessa eastward. The name Adme continued to be employed in reference to the ancient fortress of Edessa until the end of the 2nd millennium BC and presumably much later, though the available Cuneiform sources fail to mention it again. It was most probably this name that Seleucus eliminated in favour of Edessa, capital of ancient Macedonia, after he rebuilt the ancient fortress into a Hellenistic stronghold.

Though the Cuneiform itineraries mention Adme as a mere caravan station, just as Harran and other unidentified places were, it was far more significant in terms of strategy. The fact that it was located near the Euphrates on its eastern side suggests that it was truly the gate to that part of the ancient Near East. Between c. 1500 and 1200 BC another fortress-city, Carchemich on the Euphrates, served the Hittites as a strategic stronghold watching the movement of traders and enemy armies marching toward Anatolia from the region to the east side of the Euphrates.³⁸ Carchemish lost its strategic importance and perhaps even its own existence long before the time when the Seleucids decided to use the fortress of Adme to play that same role.³⁹ That Adme was of particular significance for the Seleucids is shown perhaps by the fact that they named it after the capital of their own homeland as seen above.

The importance of Edessa as a caravan city is also highlighted by the fact that it was located on a trade route that was particularly well-used. While Palmyra and Hatra were located in the desert, where roads were often raided and lack of water proved to be detri-

mental, Edessa was located in a heavily populated region that was particularly fertile thanks to the plentiful water of two major rivers, several perennial river branches, and countless sources. Traders from Palestine or central Syria going to Mesopotamia had the choice of taking a short route that cut into the Syrian Desert or a long route along the Mediterranean coast up to Antioch, the Roman Metropolis of Syria. From Antioch the route led directly to the Euphrates, Edessa, Nisibis, and north of Mesopotamia before it descended toward Babylonia. Though this road was long and time-consuming, the state-caravan of Arshama, the 5th-century BC Persian Satrap mentioned above, took it from Susa in southwest Persia while heading toward faraway Egypt.⁴⁰ The rations given to the people and horses within the caravan at each station were pitifully minimal. Probably Arshama could have saved some money had he ordered his caravan to take the road of the Syrian Desert, via Dura-Europos and Palmyra, but he opted for the longer travel via Erbil and Damascus. One can only assume that the Satrap, shrewd politician that he was, preferred the safe route along which he happened to have estates that furnished the expedition with provisions.

The unique position of Edessa within Upper Syria and Mesopotamia explains why the city grew into a kingdom that managed to remain mostly independent before and after the Christian era. A number of kings who took up the name Abgar ruled Edessa and its people for more than three hundred years (132 BC-242 AD). We encountered Abgar V nicknamed the Black (ܐܒܓܪ ܫܘܚܪ) who supposedly corresponded with Jesus. Abgar VIII the Great (177-212) is particularly well known, having also hosted in his

own palace Bardaysan the Aramean Philosopher who wrote in Syriac. Local rulers struck money, and Edessene coins are found in great numbers in Edessa and elsewhere in Syria. No kingdom of the size of Edessa could have survived if that land could not have sustained itself economically. Though that region, like the rest of the Jazirah, was particularly fertile thanks to the abundant water in and around it, the kingdom's economy must have been based on the fortunes of trade. There are no written sources from Edessa that shed light on this particular subject, but the reasons behind the wealth of the other caravan cities, particularly Palmyra, also shed light on Edessa's economy. One can safely add that Edessa exceeded all the caravan cities in wealth, culture, power, and strategic importance.

Reference to Trade and Tradesmen in Syriac Sources

Now that we have surveyed the most important among the caravan cities that were active in the first century AD, allusions to trade and trade routes in the Syriac sources will be discussed. The *Teaching of Addai* and the *Acts of Mār Mārī* are both offshoots of the *Acts of Thomas*.⁴¹ It is quite significant that the mission of Thomas to India is placed in a trade context. His *Acts* states that he was hired by an Indian merchant searching for a carpenter able to build a palace for Gundaphar king of India. Though the Apostle's mission is not our immediate concern, he was the one who sent Addai to Edessa according to the latter's *Acts*. If this were true, the date would be the latter part of the 1st century AD.

Addai could well have arrived at Edessa in a caravan travelling from Palestine via

Antioch. The road going eastward from Antioch passed through fertile fields, plentiful water, and densely-populated areas, ideal conditions for travellers. Antioch also played a key role in the early history of Christianity, and there must be a reason why all eastern churches proudly call themselves Antiochene. The only other way to reach Mesopotamia from Syria was through the Syrian Desert, but lack of security and want of water in the desert hindered travel. Upon his arrival at Edessa, Addai resided in the house of a Jew from Palestine named Tobias. As a foreigner in Edessa, Tobias must have worked in trade, or his presence in the city is unintelligible. For obvious reasons the Christian message was first addressed to the Jews of the Diaspora and the *Acts of Mār Mārī* makes the same claim. Jewish merchants also frequented the city on account of their profession, as many of them worked in international trade involving spices, silk, textile and jewels, benefiting from the Jewish presence in Upper Syria and Mesopotamia and from their synagogues, schools, and hostels.

Once Addai settled in the city and felt free to preach Christianity, people from the East disguised as merchants passed over to the territory of the Romans in order to witness the signs performed by Addai. Since there were frontiers separating Roman lands from Parthian ones, only tradesmen could travel with relative freedom, following the rules of international trade. The *Teaching of Addai* is therefore credible at least with regard to the men disguised as merchants meeting Addai. It continues:

And those who became disciples received from him the hand of priesthood, and in their own country of the

Assyrians (i.e. Ediabene) they found disciples.

The statement above finds echo in the *Acts of Mār Mārī*. While this source celebrated the great achievements of this holy man in bringing Christianity to the whole of Mesopotamia, it modestly admitted that he was not at the origins of Christianity in Persian Khuzistan. For when Mār Mārī went there, to his amazement and satisfaction, he found the land already converted to Christ. Rather than precipitately crediting Mār Mārī with the Christianization of Persia, his *Acts* attributed it to none other than trades people and merchants from Persia proper:

Tradesmen from both regions (Beth-Hozaye and of Beth-Parsaye) went to the West for reasons related to their profession, where the blessed Addai the Apostle instructed them in the fear of God. And after these Khozian and Persian believers came down from the West, they instructed many people in faith in those territories. From that time, the Church of Beth-Hozaye and of Beth-Parsaye was founded.

This statement may not describe in every detail the way Christianity spread out in the region to the southeast of Babylonia. It nonetheless offers a possible scenario that tradesmen founded the first Christian community in Persia, and that their contacts were with Edessa through the usual trade route leading to it from Persia and Babylonia.

The itinerary of Mār Mārī followed a route that continued from Edessa to Nisibis, an important caravan city along a trade route that extended at least from Assyria to the Euphrates. Thanks to its strategic position, Nisibis⁴² became a border city, *ܢܝܨܝܒܝܫ*, separating Sassanian and Byzantine

lands from the 4th century onward; it also witnessed a very active Christian community soon after its conversion to Christianity. There is therefore little doubt that this remarkable caravan city was Christianized shortly after Edessa. The route continued from Nisibis to Erbil in Assyria, and from this point to Maishan (Mesene of the classical sources) in southern Mesopotamia and then to Babylonia proper. In Babylonia Mār Mārī laid the foundations of the future Church of the East in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The trade route between Babylonia and Syria via Assyria is confirmed by the Aramaic itinerary of Arshama mentioned above. Moreover, the role of Maishan in trade is confirmed by a very ancient Syriac source, the Hymn of the Soul, that found its way into the *Acts of Thomas*.⁴³ The hymn talks about a prince who left the East on a journey to Egypt. He passed through the borders of Maishan, the meeting place of the merchants of the East, before he reached the land of Babylonia. The Hymn mentions that on his return from Egypt, the prince went through Babylonia once again, coming to great Maishan, to the haven of merchants which sits on the shore of the sea, the Arabian-Persian Gulf. Maishan, which had Spasinou Charax as centre, was under Parthian rule during the first century of our era.

Admittedly, the references to trade and merchants in our Syriac sources are not numerous, but even if we consider them as only hints, they are suggestive. Trade routes and merchants always served as carriers of religions, sects, cults, and ideologies. During the first millennium of our era, monks, missionaries and religious zealots accompanied merchants along the Silk Road, the former spreading out their religions, philosophies, ideologies and intellectual trends, and

the latter trading their goods and merchandise. The Silk Road passed through many countries and human settlements across Asia, corresponding to what is now China, including Tibet and Sinkiang, Outer Mongolia (the Republic of Mongolia), and the Southern Siberian republics, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.⁴⁴ The road took caravans to such oases as Bukhara, Samarkand, and Kashgar, and into the Tarim Basin, where it was divided into southern and northern branches, both leading into China.⁴⁵ Along this famed route religious settlements of Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Syriac Christians and later Muslim were founded, some of which, remarkably, continued to exist for several centuries. In the case of Syriac Christianity, the churches and Syriac inscriptions that were recently uncovered in Kyrgyzstan on the northern Silk Road⁴⁶ are a case in point, and there are many other Christian sites in Asia located along the same road.

The well-known presence of Syriac Christianity in India, especially in the eastern province of that country, can also be explained through trade routes. There are still questions whether or not Christianity in India was founded by Thomas the Apostle, though there are pieces of evidence that the Apostle did travel there. What is sure, however, is that by the early 6th century there were Nestorian Christians already settled on the island of Socotra in the coastal region of modern Kerala, as well as in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) though in lesser numbers. The evidence comes from a diary written by a merchant from Alexandria, Cosmas Indicopleustes, who sailed to India in 520.⁴⁷ That these settlers were converted by Christians from Mesopotamia is clear from the influence that Syriac Christianity exerted

over the Indians, in such a way that for time immemorial Indian bishops had to be consecrated by the Catholicos of the Church of the East in Babylonia (and later in Baghdad). As for the Southists among the Christians of Saint Thomas, they still trace their origins directly and unequivocally to seventy-two Babylonian families that immigrated to India as early as 345 AD under the leadership of Thomas Kenaya. Though the number of these families sounds symbolic (see the seventy-two disciples of Jesus), modern Kenanites are aware of their Near Eastern origins through ancient poems mentioning personal and place names reminiscent of Mesopotamian ones.⁴⁸ Their claim is credible. Traders sailed to India from the Red Sea as early as the time of Alexander of Macedonia, and the travel of St. Thomas to that land as claimed by his Acts can at least be justified. From Mesopotamia merchandise was unloaded and loaded at a major trade centre, Charax-Spasinu (probably near modern Basra in Iraq) located at the mouth of the Arabian-Persian Gulf. Babylonian Jews certainly conducted missionary activities while travelling on commercial missions,⁴⁹ as in the case of the exilarch Hiyya, whose sons and nephews worked as his own commercial agents.⁵⁰ The Christian neighbours of the Babylonian Jewry merely did the same. Thus, if trade routes were carriers of religions throughout the ages, it is not a far-fetched scenario that Christianity too spread out in greater Mesopotamia and beyond through trade routes.

Final Remarks

If Christianity entered Upper Syria and Mesopotamia through merchants and trade, the first churches in those lands must have

begun and developed slowly and modestly. This assumption agrees with what we currently know about Christianity during the second century in and around Edessa. Eusebius of Caesarea⁵¹ stated that the churches of Osrhoene and the cities there agreed with the churches elsewhere in the world to celebrate Easter on Sunday; the agreement took place when Victor I was Bishop of Rome between 189 and 199. In 201, a flood destroyed among other buildings the apse of the church of the Christians as reported by the Chronicle of Edessa on the basis of the royal archives of that city.⁵² Bardaysan also points in the Laws of the Countries to the existence of Christians in Mesopotamia, Persia, and elsewhere;⁵³ this text was written by his disciple between 196 and 214 AD. Lastly, the *Diatessaron* (the four Gospels in one), which was widely used in Mesopotamia until the 5th century, was composed by Tatian the Assyrian between 150 and 170 AD. All these events suggest that Christianity was active in Upper Syria and Meso-

potamia during the second half of the 2nd century if not earlier, but was by no means victorious as claimed by our Syriac sources.

The Acts of Mār Mārī tells us that Mār Mārī settled in the Parthian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon, a cosmopolitan city made up of Babylonians, Jews, Parthians, Greeks and foreigners, including traders, an attractive multi-ethnic community to address. The holy man settled in nearby Kokhe (ܟܚܝܟܝܗ, كوخى), where a house of worship was built, and this site was destined to become the cradle of Babylonian Christianity. Interestingly, *Kitāb al-Majdal* interprets this toponym as 'akwākh (اڪواخ) "huts" belonging to the farmland of the leader of Ctesiphon.⁵⁴ Most probably the first church in Kokhe was no more than a hut or a simple house (as at Dura-Europos and presumably in Edessa,) a reflection of the modest beginnings of Babylonian Christianity. Whether in Edessa or in Kokhe, a church founded by merchants who happened also to be missionaries need not have experienced a miraculous beginning.

NOTES

1. J. Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'Empire Perse*, 15, claimed that the *Acts of Mārī* is denuded of any historical value.

2. The *Teaching* is dated to the early 5th century; S. Brock, *Brief Outline of Syriac Literature* (Kerala 1997), 34. The most recent translation of the Syriac source is found in G. Howard, *The Teaching of Addai* (Ann Arbor 1981). This translation is based on the Syriac original previously published by G. Phillips, *The Doctrine of Addai* (London 1876).

3. The *Acts* in question is dated around the early 7th century; see my recent translation, *The Acts of Mār Mārī the Apostle* (forthcoming).

4. The letters were known to Eusebius of Caesarea; *Ecclesiastical History* I xiii, trans. K. Lake, Loeb Classical Library 153 (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1980); see below.

5. *Ukkāmā* "the Black." The reference must be made to Abgar V, who reigned from 4 B.C.-7 A.D. and once again from 13-50.

6. The introduction of the letter reflects the way letters were formulated in antiquity, with the name of the greater person in rank (in this case King Abgar) at the beginning. Nonetheless, the letter lacks concluding formulae, including a fixed date, a fact which makes the letter unhistorical.

7. The 12th century Christian Arabic *Kitāb al-Majdal* claims that Thomas the Apostle was the scribe and that the material on which the message was written was Egyptian papyrus! See Maris, Amri et Salibae, *Akhbār faṭārika kursī al-Mashriq*, edited by R. Gismondi (Rome 1899), 5. See also now the recently discovered (and intriguing) source *Mukhtaṣar al-`akhbār al-bay`iyyah* (Short History of the Church), edited by Fr. Buṭrus Ḥaddād (Baghdad 2000).

8. John 20:29.

9. *Ecclesiastical History* I xiii.

10. According to the 12th century *Kitāb al-Majdal*, 5, Mārī was not only of Hebrew origin, but also one of the seventy disciples of Jesus.

11. Kokhe, Seleucia, Ctesiphon and other nearby settlements were all grouped by the Arabs under one name, al-Madā'in, the Cities. For Kokhe, see M. Cassis, "Kokhe, Cradle of the Church of the East: An Archaeological and Comparative Study," in the present issue.

12. Maris, Amri et Salibae, *Akhbār*, 5.

13. Labourt, *Le Christianisme*, 15.

14. R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, Oxford 1975, 8-12; J. B. Segal, *Edessa 'The Blessed City'*, (Oxford 1970), 41-42, 67-69. Segal suggested that the story about Abgar of Edessa and his conversion to Christianity was borrowed from an older account reported in detail by Flavius Josephus (1st century AD), concerning the conversion of the king of Ediabene to Judaism during the first century of our era (see below). Syriac Christianity would be born out of the flourishing Jewish community of Ediabene.

15. Labourt, *Le Christianisme*, 9.

16. *Ibid.*

17. See the most recent edition of these inscriptions in H.J.W. Drijvers and J.F. Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa & Osroene: Texts, Translations & Commentary* (Leiden 1999).

18. As a reflection of this idealistic approach, see the paradisiacal beginning of humankind in the early chapters of Genesis, and the Sumerian King List, which imagined early Sumerian history as an era of heroes and total harmony.

19. Some scholars believe that the borderline divided the Near East both politically and culturally; see W. Hage, *Syriac Christianity in the East* (Kottayam 1997), 1. What we mean by Near East here is the region that included Mesopotamia, Upper Syria, Syria proper, and Palestine.

20. One of the most favoured titles borne by the powerful Assyrians kings was *šar erbetti*, king of the four (quarters of the world.) Though some kings merely boasted in using this title, other aspired and certainly attained rulership

over the civilized world of the ancient Near East.

21. W. Aufrecht, A Legacy of Syria: The Aramaic Language, in M. Fortin (ed.), *Canadian Research on Ancient Syria: Annual Symposium of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* (Quebec 2001), 145-155.

22. The most powerful cultural link between the peoples of the Near East is religion; despite local cults of individual gods, the whole Near East believed in polytheism. Social, religious and royal institutions also differed but were often of the same origin; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, vol. 1: *Social Institutions*, vol. 2: *Religious Institutions* (New York 1961).

23. Hellenization is shown through Seleucus's attempt to change local geographical names into Greek and Macedonian ones. Adme became Edessa, Aleppo Beroia, Amman Philadelphia, etc.

24. G. McEwan, *Priest and Temple in Hellenistic Babylonia* (Wiesbaden 1981), 186f.

25. Hellenization was probably not total even in the above-mentioned Hellenistic cities. The early 6th century Peter of Apamea, the contemporary of Patriarch Severus of Antioch, and who is very well known in Greek patristic sources, left us a commemorative inscription in Syriac; see my Notes on Syriac Inscriptions, I: The Inscription of Malzar-Zayta (Syria), *Orientalia* 64 (1995), 110-119.

26. There are hints in the Bible about international trade in Palestine during Solomon's time, but it is the location of Palestine on a trade route linking it with Syria, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia that makes it part of long trade route linking the Indus Valley with the entire Near East.

27. The first hint to trade route occurs in an Epic related to Sargon of Akkad; see the Epic of the King of the Battle in J.G. Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (Indiana 1997), pp. 102-139. But since the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, the well-known Assyrian trade business with Cappadocia functioned for at least two centuries; see M. T. Larsen, *The Old Assyrian City-State and its Colonies* (Copenhagen 1976), 85-105.

28. *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. H.L. Jones, Loeb Classical Library VII (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1983), 359. Strabo is the best source, though not the only one, as far as trade routes around the first Christian centuries are concerned.

29. J.-B. Chabot, *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum, pars secunda, tomus tertius* (Palmyra), fasc. I (Paris 1926), 3913.

30. *Dio's Roman History*, trans. E. Cary, Loeb Classical Library (London 1914), vol. VIII: LXVIII 31.

31. B. Porten and A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, vol. 1: Letters (Jerusalem 1986), 114.

32. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. L. H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. 1965), vol. XI: XX 17-19.

33. Josephus XX 3.3.

34. Since the so-called *Chronicle of Arbela* is too controversial, we will not use its content about Ediabene.

35. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (London 1935), vol. V, 88.

36. Appian, *The Civil Wars*, trans. John Carter (London; New York 1996), 5.1.9

37. A. Harrak, "The Ancient Name of Edessa," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51 (1992), 209-214.

38. About Carchemish see J.B. Hawkins, "Karkamiš", *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* (1976-1980), 426-446.

39. The so-called Sea People destroyed Carchemish with the rest of the Hittite kingdom at the end of the 12th century BC.

40. Porten-Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents*, 114.

41. For the edition see A.F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden 1962).

42. J.-M. Fiey, *Nisibe métropole syriaque orientale et ses suffragants des origines à nos jours* (Louvain 1977).

43. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 121.

44. Hage, *Syriac Christianity in the East*, 14, 17.

45. W. Klein, "A Christian Heritage on the

Northern Silk Road: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence of Christianity in Kyrgyzstan,” *JCSSS* 1 (2001), 85-100.

46. Klein, “A Christian Heritage.”

47. E.O. Winstedt, ed., *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes* (Cambridge 1909), Chapter XI.

48. J. Kollaparambil, *The Babylonian Origins of the Southists Among the St Thomas Christians* (Rome 1992).

49. J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 1 (Leiden 1964), 98.

50. J. Neusner, *Jews in Babylonia*, 113, 98.

51. *Ecclesiastical History* xxiii-xxv.

52. The oldest historical mention of a Christian presence in Edessa is dated to AD 201, the year in which a Christian church was destroyed by the flooded Daysan River that passed through the city; see *Chronicon Edessenum* in I. Guidi (ed.), *Chronica Minora* I, T. CSCO 1/Syr. 1, 1-3, V. CSCO 2/Syr. 2 (Paris 1903), 1-3. An English translation can be found in Segal, Edessa, 24-5.

53. Syriac text in I. Parisot et al., in *Patrologia Syriaca* II (1907), cols. 607-608.

54. *Kitāb al-Majdal*, 5.

KOKHE, CRADLE OF THE CHURCH OF THE EAST: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND COMPARATIVE STUDY



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Introduction

As early as the third century A.D. the Christians living in the Sassanian Empire were recognized as an important and distinctive community. Early Syriac and Greek sources refer to the arrival and development of Christianity in the Eastern provinces of Assyria and Babylonia.¹ By the fourth century the Christian community in the Sassanian Empire was large enough to warrant a letter between Constantine the Great and King Shapur II of Persia, in which the Byzantine Emperor expressed his concern for the safety of these Christians:

And now, because your power is great, I commend these people to your protection; because your piety is outstanding, I commit them to your care. Care for them with your accustomed humanity and kindness. By this proof of faith you will obtain an immeasurable benefit both to yourself and us.²

By the beginning of the fifth century the Eastern Christians of the Sassanian Empire had evolved into a well-ordered community. The *Synodicon Orientale*, the earliest clearly datable record of the Eastern Church as a hierarchical organization, is evidence for the firm establishment of Christianity in the re-

gion. In A.D. 410 the Synod of Seleucia established twenty-one canons, all of which clearly indicate that the Church of the East was organized, recognized by the state and growing, both through conversion and expansion.³

Following the fifth century Synod, it was the fate of Kokhe, a city in Babylonia, to become the counterpart of Byzantine Constantinople as the spiritual and ecclesiastical centre of the Sassanian Empire. In antiquity Kokhe was located on the banks of the Tigris and was established as one of the major Sassanian centres in southern Mesopotamia, usually named in conjunction with Ctesiphon. The Synod of Seleucia recognized Kokhe as the seat of the Catholicos and consequently as the ecclesiastical centre for the churches in the province of Babylonia.⁴ In addition to the written sources there have been some important early Christian archaeological finds at Kokhe which augment our knowledge of Christianity in southern Mesopotamia. While the Christian material is not overly extensive, its presence within a Sassanian context is significant for understanding the presence of Christianity as part of the Sassanian milieu and as an ecclesiastical organization independent of the Byzantine Empire.

More research has been undertaken in

southern Iraq and the Persian-Arabian Gulf during the last thirty years and has shed light on the origins of Christianity in Mesopotamia. The purpose of this paper is to survey the work that has been done to date, and to highlight the following key points concerning this corpus of material. Firstly, the archaeological data clarifies to some extent the existence and development of Christianity in Kokhe during the early Christian centuries. Secondly, the Christian architectural remains from Kokhe along with notable parallels found in other churches in the region suggest a local church architecture, but also confirm the growth of an independent branch of Christianity in Mesopotamia.⁵ Finally, both architectural and decorative elements of this early church echo those of the Sassanian world, linking Christianity in the region to Mesopotamian building traditions.⁶ Through a survey of the archaeological material relevant to Kokhe, we will be able to illustrate the independent identity of early Christianity in Mesopotamia.

Archaeological Kokhe

The archaeological finds from Kokhe and the surrounding vicinity on the Tigris have been discussed in a number of secondary sources. The first excavations at the site were done by the Germans, who mistakenly believed that what they were excavating was actually the Sassanian royal city of Ctesiphon.⁷ The most recent publication concerning this material, written by J. Kröger, is primarily concerned with the much neglected stucco (plaster) work from the site.⁸ Subsequent work in this general geographical area was undertaken by the Americans, although they concentrated on the Hellenistic settlement at Seleucia.⁹ The latest set of

excavations were undertaken by the Italians who worked in Kokhe and were able to decipher the convoluted settlement patterns of the region around Seleucia-Ctesiphon.¹⁰ Several authors have also tackled the question of the importance of Kokhe in understanding early Mesopotamian Christianity. In terms of the archaeological material, Okada was the first scholar to notice the major similarities which exist among the churches of the Persian-Arabian Gulf.¹¹ J.M. Fiey used the literary sources in conjunction with archaeological material to help delineate the boundaries of the cities in the region of Lower Tigris.¹²

The geography, including the settlement patterns of the Seleucia-Ctesiphon area have remained a difficult issue until recently. When the German excavators began working on the area to the west of the Tigris, they believed that they were working in Ctesiphon.¹³ During the subsequent excavations the Italian team found that the archaeological data did not support this. Ctesiphon was known from the sources to have been the major Parthian city in the region.¹⁴ However, the stratigraphy of the site begun by the German team and taken over by the Italian excavators was almost exclusively Sassanian. The Italian team identified several stratigraphic layers and rebuildings and was able to prove conclusively that nothing above the very bottom level was pre-Sassanian.¹⁵ Their analysis was based primarily on coin evidence and clearly indicated that this area was a Sassanian urban centre. As well, the evidence for the very bottom level was mortuary, suggesting that the Hellenistic or Parthian populations of the previous periods had used the area solely as a necropolis.¹⁶ Consequently the name Ctesiphon was given to a site further away, and

the round city of Sassanian origin was given what must surely be its rightful name.¹⁷ Further, the recognition of this fact allowed Fiey to use Roman, Jewish and Syriac sources to help reconstruct the shifting of the Tigris over the years.¹⁸ Before A.D. 100 the Tigris flowed between Hellenistic Seleucia and Parthian Ctesiphon, with the two cities lying on alternate banks of the river. From approximately A.D. 100 until sometime in the seventh century the river shifted away from old Seleucia, perhaps contributing to the rise of Kokhe.¹⁹ As Kokhe developed into a major centre, the sources began to refer to it alongside of Ctesiphon as the pair of royal Sassanian cities in Mesopotamia called *al-Madā'in* or The Cities.²⁰

The archaeological work at Kokhe indicates first and foremost that this city was a sizeable Sassanian centre on the Tigris [Figure 1].²¹ It is within this context that the members of the early East Syriac Church lived and worshipped. Until the discovery of the Christian evidence here our knowledge of Kokhe as both a Christian and an ecclesiastical centre came only from such literary sources as, for example, the *Synodicon Orientale* and the seventh century *Letters of Išo'yahb III*. Both of these sources are important for understanding the hierarchical aspects of the church as well as how it operated within a Sassanian cultural context. The *Synodicon Orientale* makes mention of the position held by the Christian community as being very much a part of Sassanian society, rather than an entity standing in opposition to it. The letters of the Catholicos Išo'yahb III, on the other hand, detail the problems encountered between the Holy See in Kokhe and the disparate Christian groups in Persia and the Persian-Arabian Gulf.²² Because of the discovery of the church at Kokhe, these

written sources now have independent physical proof of how significant Kokhe was to the early Church of the East.

Let us now turn to the archaeological remains. Because the stratigraphy established by the Italian excavators falls almost exclusively within the Sassanian period, the finds provide a unique picture of Christianity within an enclosed Sassanian context. The actual material which is pertinent to this paper was found by the German excavators in the first half of the twentieth century and includes architecture, architectural decoration and some small finds. Architecturally, the most important discovery was the church [Figure 2].²³ This structure exhibits two building periods, with the earlier structure becoming visible beneath the top one during excavation. The exact dates for this church are still uncertain, although the upper church probably dates to the final part of the sixth century.²⁴ The two levels of building may be indicative of persecution and rebuilding, or may simply represent the need to accommodate a growing congregation.

According to the original excavators the dimensions of the top church are 27.18 m. long by 15.06 m. wide, and the church is constructed of baked bricks filled in with gypsum mortar.²⁵ The church is single-aisled, with four rectangular pillars set near each lateral wall and attached to the walls by small arches, by which are created a series of small niches. The top plan indicates that the church possesses six lateral doorways but does not possess a western entrance. The nave ends in a deep rectangular sanctuary with a straight back wall and is connected to two *pastophoria* (adjoining rooms which probably served as the *diaconicon* and the *prothesis*). These flanking chambers are connected to the sanctuary, to the nave and

also to the outside of the structure. The sanctuary chamber has two niches (one in each lateral side); four holes in the floor suggesting the remains of either a *ciborium* (*baldachino*) or a *mensa* (altar table); and a large step against the back wall.²⁶ Interestingly, however, no evidence for a *bema* has been found. Beneath this top structure were found the remains of an older church. The previous incarnation of this structure was a narrower building with round pillars on square bases instead of rectangular ones and with *pastophoria* accessible only through the sanctuary. The excavators indicated that the first structure was not completed.²⁷ The entire structure was almost certainly roofed by means of a series of barrel vaults.

In terms of architectural decoration and small finds the remains are not extensive and unfortunately do not tell us to whom the church was dedicated or how important it was compared to other churches in the city or the region. Nevertheless, several distinctive objects were excavated in the sanctuary, including a stucco figure of a holy man [Figure 3].²⁸ According to Reuther:

On the ground before this step [in front of the back wall] there was the debris of paving laid down in Islamic times, and underneath was the draped figure of a man, made of painted stucco in high relief, and broken into several fragments. Unfortunately, head, hands and feet are missing. The figure is about three-quarters life-size, and can hardly represent any other than a saint, probably the dedicatory saint of the church. We found with it pieces of ornamental framework, likewise coloured and in part gilded, half-pillars with shafts of zigzag pattern, palmettes, and other things.²⁹

We will return to the architectural decora-

tion shortly, as it helps in placing this church within the context of other churches in the region, as well as within the Sassanian Empire.

Finally, below the floor of the sanctuary, a small Estrangela ostracon was also unearthed [Figure 4].³⁰ While the question of the significance of this ostracon is a difficult one, it would not be futile to revisit its content, which may read as follows:

ܠܝܘܗܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ .1
 ܕܝܫܘܥܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ .2
 ܕܝܫܘܥܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ .3
 ܕܝܫܘܥܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ .4
 ܕܝܫܘܥܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ .5
 ܕܝܫܘܥܐ ܕܝܫܘܥܐ .6

1. And the Lord said to me [...]
2. The trial of the stylus alone
3. [...trial?] of the stylus, until¹, and he said
4. God of Abraham
5. God of Isaac
6. [and Go]d of Jacob [...]

The Syriac content was lately discussed in every detail by Erica Hunter,³¹ though it is fragmentary and in places quite uncertain. According to Hunter, the fragment bearing the inscription is of a wheel-made vessel, and is written in East Syriac Estrangela, in the classic angular style with cursive overtones.³² Of the five lines of the inscription the first line and the final three lines are quite clear. The difficulty lies in the second and third lines where some of the letters are obscure.

Hunter read the first word of the second line as ܕܝܫܘܥܐ (Greek ουσια), and the following one as ܕܝܫܘܥܐ,³³ suggesting that the latter must be a participle feminine singular which would fit ܕܝܫܘܥܐ, a feminine singular noun. But the expression “trial of the stylus”

suggested above finds support in a related expression in Syriac: ܟܘܟܗܝܢ ܟܘܟܗܝܢ “trial of the ink” well-attested in dictionaries of Syriac. The context of the fragmentary inscription is now lost. The fact that it includes an abbreviated or paraphrased biblical text from the Old Testament³⁴ highlights the religious or liturgical nature of the ostrakon. In turn, its presence provides us with clear evidence of the liturgical language being used and helps to situate the church within the context of the East Syriac community.

Despite the moderate size of the church as well as the important inscriptional evidence, we are no further ahead in gaining a sense of to whom the church was dedicated or of specific people who may have been associated with the structure. The question has been raised as to whether this could be the major cathedral of the *Synodicon Orientale*, the seat of the Catholicos and the most important church in the region.³⁵ However, three elements weigh against this interpretation: the lack of further inscriptional evidence; the lack of patriarchal graves; and the size. It should also be added that more exploration in and around the church needs to be done in order to rule out this possibility.³⁶ Consequently, at present we must assume that this was simply one of several ecclesiastical structures in Kokhe. In many ways this is a preferable explanation, as the existence of several churches would only enhance our idea of Kokhe as the ecclesiastical centre of the region.

Comparative Analysis

Now that we have seen that the archaeological remains confirm the presence of the early East Syriac church within the cultural

sphere of the Sassanians, let us turn to their position among the other Christian churches of the region. In looking at the archaeological material by itself we are able to locate regional similarities which help to establish the independent character of the early Christian church in Mesopotamia and the Persian-Arabian Gulf. This is extremely obvious when we look at a number of other churches which have been excavated recently in southern Iraq and the Gulf region. Thirty years ago only three churches had been found in this geographical area: the church at Kokhe and two churches at Hira, also in southern Iraq. These three churches were hardly enough to constitute a corpus, and as such were usually treated with a certain amount of ambivalence.³⁷ However, by comparing some of the architectural aspects which are common to the church at Kokhe, those at Hira and these newly discovered churches, the emergence of a separate branch of church architecture becomes more conspicuous.

Among the churches of Babylonia and the Persian-Arabian Gulf there are notable architectural similarities with the church at Kokhe, and consequently we will restrict our analysis to this geographical area. Some of the churches in this region fall within highly urbanized Sassanian centres, such as Hira, and some mostly monastic complexes like Ain Sha'ia occur in the hinterland of the Empire. In both cases, however, Hellenistic and Byzantine influences are minimal and it is clear that these churches are making use of local traditions as they establish themselves.³⁸ The characteristics which are predominant in these churches are as follows: tripartite, straight-backed sanctuaries (as opposed to the apsidal sanctuaries); lateral entrances (often with no entrance in the

western end of the church); and long, barrel-shaped, vaulted naves (often single aisled, but not exclusively). While there are variations between the churches in the region, these three elements retain a certain uniformity which suggests both a common source and a common acceptance among the Christians of the region. The initial observation of the similarities has come from the excavator of one of the sites in southern Iraq, Y. Okada, who has established a basic rectangular shape for these churches which he calls the geometry of rectangles.³⁹

One or more of these elements is evident in all the remaining churches from southern Iraq and the Persian-Arabian Gulf. For example, both of the churches from Hira, located south of Kokhe on the Euphrates, possess all three elements even though they are substantially larger than the church at Kokhe.⁴⁰ The remains of the Church A at Qusayr, west of the Euphrates, also show the same elements but with such variations as a minor entrance in the west end.⁴¹ Finally, a small monastic church was excavated at Ain Sha'ia near Hira by a Japanese team. It too possesses the three basic elements, while also containing a narthex and at least one western entrance.⁴² In the Persian-Arabian Gulf two churches are particularly noteworthy for containing these elements. The Kuwaiti island of Failaka has been undergoing extensive archaeological excavation over the last few years and a Christian church has been discovered there.⁴³ This church also possesses the distinctive lateral entrances, a straight-backed sanctuary, and the same long nave [Figure 5].⁴⁴ Again at this church we note some differences, including a definite narthex and western entrances, but these cohabit with the basic shape favoured by the other churches

in the region.⁴⁵ On the Iranian island of Kharg a small monastic complex was also discovered.⁴⁶ The initial publication of this church is somewhat short, but the same similarities can be seen. Finally, there are two very small churches which need to be mentioned, one on the mainland at Rahaliya north of Qusayr,⁴⁷ and one in the Persian-Arabian Gulf on the Abu Dhabi island of Sir Bani Yas.⁴⁸ Both of these structures are extremely small, making the comparison a little artificial in terms of the nave. However, the straight backed sanctuary is found in both of these churches. It should also be added that some of the common characteristics are found throughout Mesopotamia, as far north as the Tur Abdin.⁴⁹ The closer the location was to Byzantine construction techniques, the more such western elements were included in church plans. However, for those structures isolated within the Sasanian Empire, there was less impetus to change known and proven construction techniques.

A final element which needs to be compared is the remaining decorative material which was found in the church at Kokhe. Although not extensive, it does fit into a corpus of plaster decoration that has been found in a number of these churches, most notably at Ain Sha'ia, Qusayr and Failaka. As we have noted above, the remaining finds consist primarily of architectural decoration as well as the remains of a plaster relief statue.⁵⁰ Although nothing has yet been found which is obviously religious in nature (e.g. plaster crosses), the manner of manufacture among the remaining fragments from several of the churches is similar. For example, if we compare the palmette fragments from the church at Kokhe [Figure 6]⁵¹ with two small pieces from crosses found at

Qusayr [Figures 7 and 8],⁵² we are able to see a stylistic similarity and a parallel use of material, although not the same motif. This is also true if we look at decorative remains from other sites such as Ain Sha'ia and at Kharg, as in both locations plaster crosses were found.

The distinctive nature of both the architecture and the architectural decoration suggests that they owed their origins and development to an independent source. Reuther was the first to suggest that a logical place to look for this source was the Parthian/Sassanian context in which the early East Syriac Church came into existence.⁵³ This idea has been encouraged by other authors, including Okada⁵⁴ and Krautheimer, who says: "The plan [of the churches] has been linked to royal reception and judiciary halls in Sasanian and Umayyad palaces. If true, this derivation would constitute a neat parallel to the origin of Constantinian church building from the ambience of secular basilicas."⁵⁵ With the abundance of new archaeological material from southern Iraq and the Persian-Arabian Gulf, this seems increasingly probable. When we look at these structures, their essential shape parallels the basic *iwan* architecture of Parthian and Sassanian construction. The *iwan* refers to the long, often barrel-shaped hall, flanked by side chambers or alcoves, generally roofed with a vaulted ceiling.⁵⁶ This can be seen, for example, in the Parthian palace at Sarvistan, the Taq-i Kisra of New Ctesiphon and in smaller secular houses at Kokhe itself. Not only is the architectural shape the same, but the manner of construction in the region is also parallel, since both Christian and Sassanian structures were built of mud-brick.

Further, the decorative work described

above has clear parallels throughout the Sassanian milieu. Plaster stucco decorations were used throughout palaces, villas and public buildings. Several elements can be compared, including the motifs used, manner of manufacture and the realization of certain features. One such parallel can be seen when we compare the palmette fragments from the church at Kokhe [Figure 6] with other examples from secular house contexts in the region.⁵⁷ The above evidence points to the interaction between the Sassanian and Christian communities. Given the overlap of the secular Sassanian world and the ecclesiastical Christian church, it is not difficult to see the Sassanians as the source for early East Syriac Christian architecture and decoration. By borrowing from the Sassanians, the Church of the East established its position as a full member of Sassanian society.

The interplay between the Christians and the Sassanian Empire should not be underestimated. Both Michael Morony and Amir Harrak have drawn attention to the fact that the organization of the Church of the East often paralleled the Sassanian hierarchy.⁵⁸ Both have shown that the Syriac titles Father of Fathers and Shepherd of Shepherds parallel the Persian King of Kings. If the East Syriac Church was willing to accept this structured terminology for themselves, albeit with a Christian overtone, it should be no surprise that they were willing to accept secular Sassanian architecture, again adapting it by applying Christian characteristics. Consequently there is no need to search for an external source for these structures. The Sassanian church took in a large number of wealthy Persian converts from the Zoroastrian faith. Thus the point of reference for many of these Christians in terms of art and

decoration would not have been the Byzantine West, but rather the Mesopotamian and Persian East. In addition, the Christians living under the Sassanians certainly looked for at least some acceptance from the Sassanian kings. By the fifth century, rumours abounded in the royal court that the Christian community was sympathetic to Byzantium.⁵⁹ The reality was quite different. Christianity in Mesopotamia and particularly in Babylonia took on its own identity, expressing its own architectural and cultural customs. By taking on Persian architecture and decoration as well as such characteristics as a hierarchical organization, the early Church of the East was able to establish its own regional character and attempt to show its loyalty to the Sassanian kings. As Young says, the result was a carefully defined hierarchy, with a designated Head. It meant that a relationship between the Head of the State and the Head of the Church was in effect a practical relationship between the State and the Church.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Let us now sum up our investigation. The archaeological material from Kokhe confirms our knowledge of the Christian community under the Sassanians. This evidence parallels the literary sources, giving us a sense of the physical context in which the Christians lived. By looking at the archaeological remains we can also establish the place of Kokhe within the context of other Christian communities in the region, as well as the Sassanian Empire. The church at Kokhe follows a number of set building and decorative patterns which are mirrored in structures throughout the Persian-Arabian Gulf and southern Mesopotamia. These elements are, in turn, an integral part of the Sassanian secular architectural corpus. The prevalence of these characteristics throughout the region establishes the independence of the Christian church in the Sassanian Empire and the importance of Kokhe as the cradle of Mesopotamian Christianity

NOTES

1. The dates for the arrival and establishment of Christianity in Mesopotamia are far from secure. For a discussion of the texts relating to this period and their inherent problems, see S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1997), pp. 13-19. There is still no consensus on when Christianity arrived in the region. J.M. Fiey, "Topography of al-Mada'in," *Sumer* 23 (1967), pp. 16-17 places the arrival before the end of the first century, while W. S. McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 98-99 sets the date about a century later.

2. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4: 13. For the translation and discussion of this letter, see W.G. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph* (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Centre), 1974, p. 22. Further confirmation of this letter is found in *Sozomen* 2:15.

3. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, p. 30. J.-B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), pp. 27f, 266f. See particularly Article 12 (as translated by Young): "We accept of our own free-will, and we have been commanded by Yazdgard, King of Kings ... to obey, in all things right and prescribed, the Bishop, Catholicos, Archbishop, Metropolitan, of Seleucia and Ctesiphon, until Christ shall come that is to say, every bishop who shall sit on the sublime throne of this Church of Kokhe."

4. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, pp. 29f.

5. This idea was first proposed by Y. Okada, "Early Christian Architecture in the Iraqi South-Western Desert," *al-Rafidan* 12 (1991), pp. 71-83 and "Ain Sha'ia and the Early Gulf Churches: An Architectural Analogy," *al-Rafidan* 13 (1992), pp. 87-93.

6. O. Reuther, "Sasanian Architecture," in A.U. Pope, ed., *A Survey of Persian Art*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), Volume II, pp. 560-566, was the first to suggest this as a possibility.

7. For the German excavations, see O.

Reuther, "The German Excavations at Ctesiphon," *Antiquity* 3 (1929), pp. 434-451; E. Meyer, "Seleukia und Ktesiphon," *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* 67 (1929), pp. 1-26; Reuther, "Sasanian Architecture," pp. 560-566. For the original excavation reports, see O. Reuther, *Die Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Ktesiphon-Expedition im Winter 1928/29* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen in Berlin, 1930) and E. Kühnel, *Die Ausgrabungen der Zweiten Ktesiphon-Expedition 1931/32* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen in Berlin, 1933).

8. J. Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor* (Mainz am Rhein: Philip von Zabern, 1982), pp. 45-50. This book is an overview of Sassanian stucco, including the very important discussion of the material from Kokhe.

9. See for example, C. Hopkins, ed., *Topography and Architecture of Seleucia on the Tigris* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972).

10. Most useful for this paper were: G. Gullini, "Problems of an Excavation in Northern Babylonia," *Mesopotamia* 1 (1966), pp. 7-38; M. Cavallero and M. Ponzi, "The Excavations at Coche (the Presumed Ctesiphon)," *Mesopotamia* 1 (1966), pp. 63-88; A. Invernizzi, "Ten Years' Research in the Al-Mada'in Area Seleucia and Ctesiphon," *Sumer* 32 (1976), pp. 167-174. Further excavation reports concerning the secular Sassanian material can also be found in the subsequent issues of *Mesopotamia*.

11. Op. cit.

12. Op. cit. There is also an article concentrating on the Arabic sources: S. A. el Ali, "Al-Madā'in and Its Surrounding Area in Arabic Literary Sources," *Mesopotamia* 3-4 (1968-69), pp. 417-439. Gulliani, "Problems," and Invernizzi, "Ten Years' Research," also discuss this problem.

13. Fiey, "Topography," p. 4 suggested that the German excavators named it Ctesiphon based on a generally held assumption by archaeologists and travellers that this site was Ctesiphon.

14. S.J. Simpson, "Ctesiphon," in E.M.

Myers, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 77-79.

15. Cavallero and Ponzi, "The Excavations at Coche," pp. 63-73; Invernizzi, "Ten Years' Research," 172.

16. The identification of this material is still an open question, but does not concern us here. Invernizzi, *ibid.*, pp. 172-3.

17. This city had several names during this period of antiquity, including Sassanian Veh-Ardashir, Greek New Seleucia and Syriac (Aramaic) Kokhe, lit. "Huts."

18. Fiey, "Topography," pp. 14-25.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 21. There is literary evidence for a village of some antiquity here, but the evolution of this area into a major city occurred only with the advent of the Sassanian dynasty.

20. The Cities are often referred to in the sources as Seleucia-Ctesiphon for the Sassanian period. However, given that the Hellenistic centre of Seleucia was eventually deserted through overpopulation and over-development, the reference must be to New Seleucia (Kokhe).

21. Figure 1: Topography of al-Mada'in. From Fiey, "Topography," p. 37.

22. *Išo 'yahb III Patriarcha. Liber Epistularum*. R. Duval, ed. CSCO, Scriptorum Syri, ser. 2, tom. 23 (Paris, 1905).

23. Figure 2: Upper and lower levels of the church at Kokhe; after Reuther, "Sasanian Architecture," p. 562. I would like to thank Loretta James, of the Wadi Tumilat Project, University of Toronto, for the drawing.

24. There is as yet no clear idea about the exact date of the church, perhaps because it has not been completely excavated. Okada follows the excavators in giving it a date in the mid to late sixth century, based on the stylistic comparison of sculpture. Okada, "Early Christian Architecture," p. 76. See also Reuther, "The German Excavations," pp. 450-451, and Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*, p. 48. The Italian team commits only to the end of the Sassanian period: Gullini, "Problems of an Excavation," p. 34.

25. Reuther, "Sasanian Architecture," p. 561.

26. The archaeological descriptions of the church can be found in *ibid.*, pp. 560-566, and in Okada, "Early Christian Architecture," p. 76.

27. Reuther, "The German Excavations," p. 450.

28. Figure 3: Figural relief of a holy man. From Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*, Tafel 12.3. Kt.W.292 B.IM. Reproduced by the kind permission of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Museum für Islamische Kunst.

29. Reuther, "The German Excavations," p. 450.

30. Figure 4: Ostrakon from the church at Kokhe. From Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*, Tafel 12: 1. Kt.W. 295 B.IM. Reproduced by the kind permission of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Museum für Islamische Kunst.

31. See E.C.D. Hunter, "A Syriac Ostrakon from Ctesiphon," *al-Rafidan* 18 (1997), pp. 361-367. Although the ostrakon was published subsequent to excavation, the earliest real discussion and translation of this, was by Macuch in Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*, p. 48.

32. Hunter, "A Syriac Ostrakon," p. 362.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 364-365. She bases the first suggestion on a potential letter change from *alaph* to *'ayn*, as found in Mandaic.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 365-366. See for example Exodus 3:6.

35. Fiey, "Topography," pp. 18-19.

36. *Ibid.* Certainly these three aspects weigh heavily against this being the major church of the city. Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*, pp. 48-49 mentions that an affiliated courtyard and possible cloister have not yet been completely excavated.

37. These churches have not received as much notice as they certainly deserve. Two sources which do discuss them as important and as representative of a separate branch of church architecture are R. Taft, "Some Notes on the Bema in the East and West Syrian Traditions," *OCP* 34 (1968), pp. 326-359 and R. Krauthimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architec-*

ture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 301-302.

38. Krautheimer, *Early Christian*, pp. 135, 301, recognizes the tendency of Christians in the hinterlands to utilize local architectural traditions. He cites evidence for adaptation of local architecture in both Syria and in Turkey.

39. Okada, "Ain Sha'ia," pp. 89f.

40. D. Talbot Rice, "The Oxford Excavations at Hira," *Ars Islamica* 1 (1934), pp. 51-73; D. Talbot Rice, "The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931," *Antiquity* 6 (1932), pp. 276-91. The dimensions of the two churches are as follows: Mound XI = 35.7 X 18.6 m.; Mound V = 58 X 33.5 m. The first church is published as being sixth century, although Okada places it later. The second church is probably seventh century. From Okada, "Early Christian Architecture," p. 76.

41. The best analysis of this material is B. Finster and J. Schmidt, "Sasanidische und Fruhislamische Ruinen im Iraq," *Baghdader Mitteilungen*, 8 (1976), pp. 27-39. This site was recorded by travellers in the early twentieth century, discussed by the above authors and has recently been worked at by the Iraqis. However, the excavation reports are not readily available. By using the projected dimensions of the church, Okada gives it dimensions of approximately 43 X 19 m. Okada, "Early Christian Architecture," p. 76. The date is still nebulous, but is probably mid- to late- Sassanian.

42. The dimensions are 26.5 X 13.8 m. (including the narthex); *ibid.*, p. 72. The date is suggested as eighth century, with the monastic complex falling into disuse by the ninth. Okada, "Ain Sha'ia and the Early Gulf Churches," p. 93.

43. V. Bernard and J. Salles, "Discovery of a Christian Church at al-Qusur, Failaka, (Kuwait)," *PSAS* 21 (1991), pp. 7-22; V. Bernard, O. Callot, and J.F. Salles, "L'Église d'al-Qousour Failaka, État de Koweït," *AAE* 2 (1991), pp. 145-181; and D. Kennet, "Excavations at the Site of Al-Qusur, Failaka, Kuwait," *PSAS* 21 (1991), pp. 97-111. The dimensions are 35 X 19 m. (including the narthex) and the date, based on pottery, ranges between

the seventh and the ninth centuries. The excavators do indicate that there are stucco crosses which may be dated earlier based on style. Bernard and Salles, "Discovery of a Christian Church," pp. 9, 12.

44. Figure 5: Simplified plan of the church at Failaka, Kuwait. From Bernard, Callot and Salles, "L'Église d'al-Qousour," p. 167. Reproduced by the kind permission of the editor.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 166f, 178. The excavators at Failaka feel that there are many differences between the churches at Kokhe and at Failaka, most notably the cruciform shaped chambers flanking the sanctuary. Their belief is that there may be alternate purposes for these chambers. Nevertheless, there are still strong similarities between the plans of the two churches, even if the *pastophoria* were used for fundamentally different purposes.

46. R. Ghirshman, *The Island of Kharg* (Tehran: Iranian Oil Operating Companies, 1964), pp. 17f. No values are given in these reports for the dimensions, but Okada, "Ain Sha'ia," p. 90 sets them at 28.7 by 15.5 m (including the narthex). The date is also a problem. In the original publication it is dated to the fifth or sixth century. However, Okada (*Ibid.*, p. 93) places it somewhat later, and I would agree.

47. See Finster and Schmidt, "Sa-sanidische und Fruhislamische," pp. 40-43.

48. P. Hellyer, *Filling in the Blanks* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1998), pp. 42f; G.R.D. King, "A Nestorian Monastic Settlement on the Island of Sir Bani Yas Abu Dhabi: A Preliminary Report," *BSOAS* 60 (1997), pp. 221-235.; G.R.D. King, D. Dunlop, J. Elders, S. Garfi, A. Stephenson, C. Tonghini, "A Report on the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (1993-4)," *PSAS* 25 (1995), pp. 63-74; and G.R.D. King and P. Hellyer, "A Pre-Islamic Christian Site on Sir Bani Yas," *Tribulus* 4 (1994), pp. 5-7.

49. Reuther, "Sasanian Architecture," pp. 562-563.

50. Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*, pp. 46-50.

51. Figure 6: Palmette fragments. From *Ibid.*,

Tafel 12.5. Kt.W. 293 B.IM. Reproduced by the kind permission of the editor.

52. Figures 7 and 8: Two fragments of crosses from Qusayr. The Iraqi Museum. Photograph: Amir Harrak. No inventory numbers available; with the kind permission of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage.

53. Reuther, "Sasanian Architecture," p. 561.

54. Okada, "Early Christian Architecture," pp. 80f.

55. Krautheimer, "Early Christian," p. 302.

56. Reuther, "Sasanian Architecture," p. 561.

57. See Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*, p. 46 for a variety of comparisons.

58. A. Harrak, "Early Eastern Christianity

and Monasticism in Mesopotamia," *Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 18 (1989), pp. 12-23. M. Morony, "Religious Communities in late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq," *JESHO* 17 (1974), pp. 113-135. Ultimately, these titles are rooted in Assyrian and Babylonian royal traditions inherited by the Parthians and then the Sassanians.

59. For a discussion of this see S. P. Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," in Stuart Mews, ed., *Religion and National Identity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 1-19.

60. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*, p. 31. See also page p. 53.

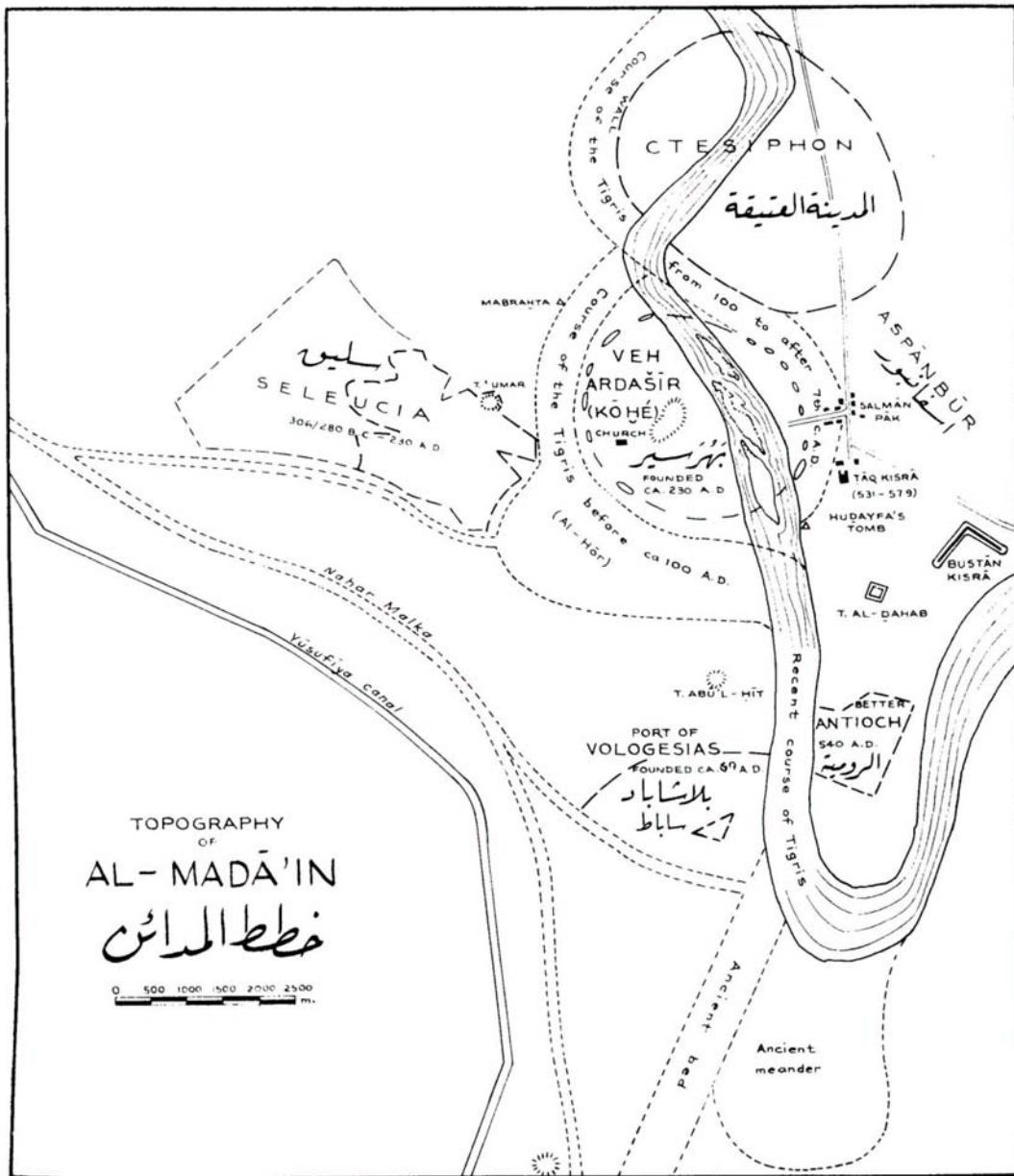


Figure 1:

Topography of al-Madā'in

From: J.-M. Fiey, "Topography of al-Mada'in," *Sumer* 23 (1976) p. 37
Courtesy of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities, Baghdad

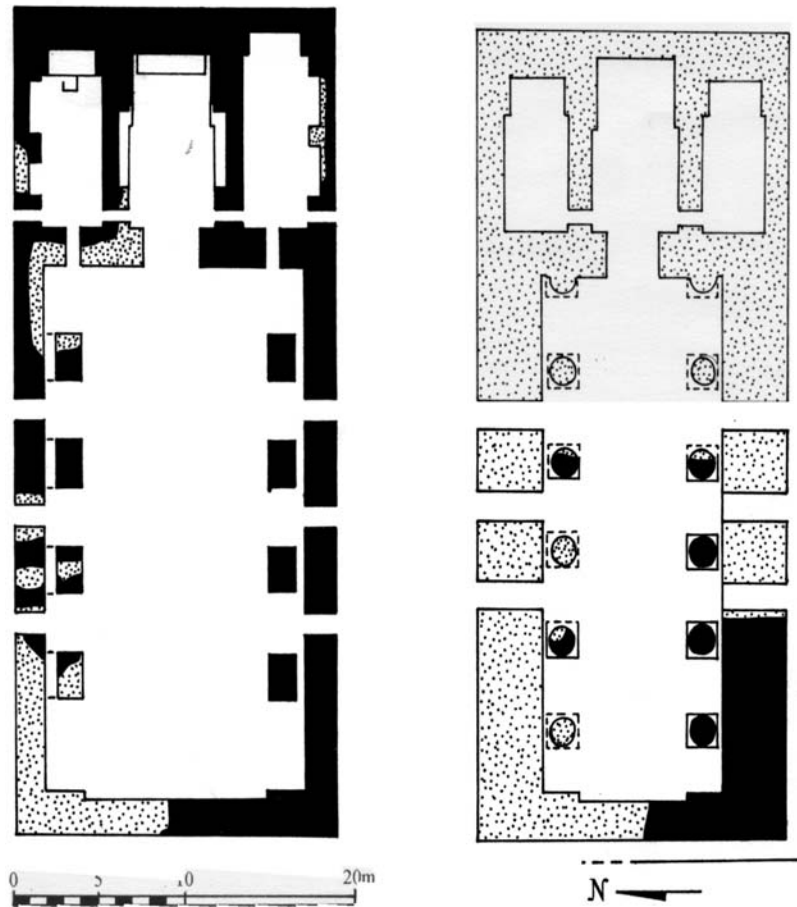


Figure 2: Kokhe
Upper and lower levels of the church
After O. Reuther, "Sasanian Architecture," in A. U. Pope, ed., *A Survey of Persian Art*,
vol. II (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) p. 562
(Drawing by Loretta James)



Figure 3: Kokhe
Figural relief of a holy man

From J. Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1982) Tafel 12.3. Kt.W.292 B.IM.
Reproduced by the kind permission of the
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Museum
für Islamische Kunst.

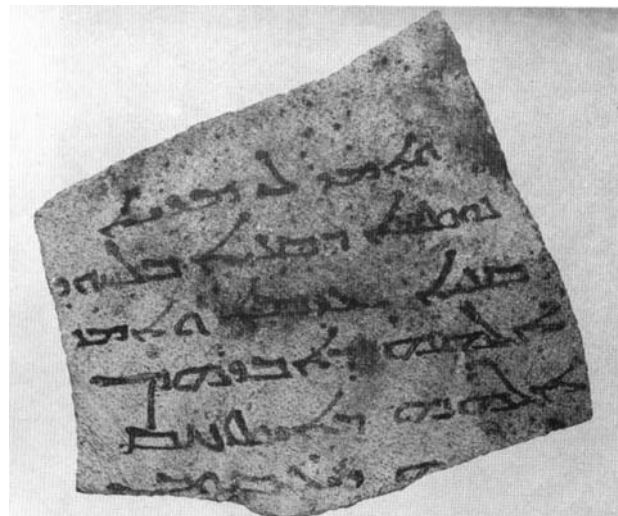


Figure 4: Kokhe
Ostracou from the church
From

J. Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 19) 82, Tafel 12: 1. Kt.W. 295 B.IM.
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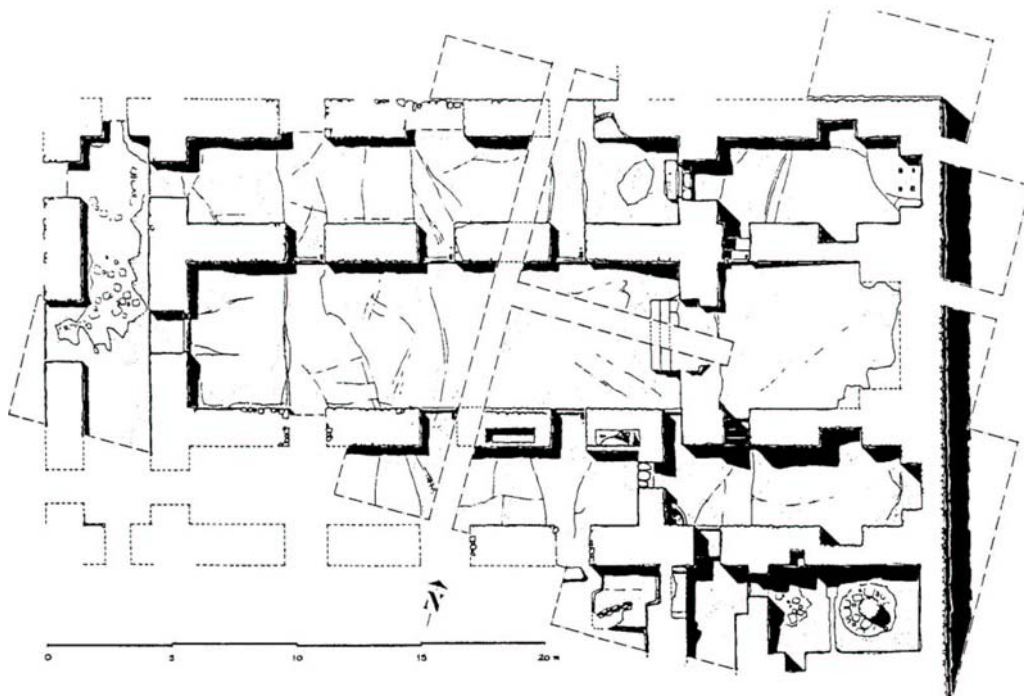


Figure 5: Failaka, Kuwait
Simplified plan of the church
From V. Bernard et. al. "L'Église d'al-Qousour Failaka, État de Koweit,"
Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy 2 (1991) p. 167
Reproduced by the kind permission of the editor

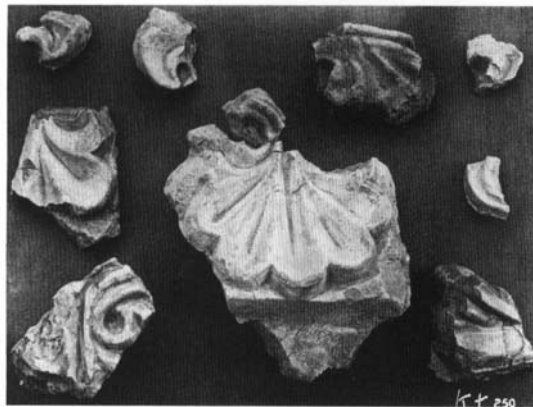


Figure 6:
Palmette fragment
From J. Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1982) Tafel 12.5. Kt.W. 293 B.IM.
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Figure 7: Qusayr
Fragment of a cross (Iraqi Museum)
Photo: Amir Harrak
With the kind permission of the
Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage



Figure 8: Qusayr
Fragment of a cross (Iraqi Museum)
Photo: Amir Harrak
With the kind permission of the
Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage

SYRIAC IN INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH



GROUP OF INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARS

**UMBRELLAS AND SANDALS:
VTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON SYRIAC LANGUAGE AND
LITERATURE
KOTTAYAM, KERALA, S. INDIA
SEPT 8-14 2002**

DAVID J. LANE
COLLEGE OF RESURRECTION, MIRFIELD

As it was the tail end of the monsoon, the presence of members of the conference at a reception could be deduced from the neat rows of sandals and miniature umbrellas on the porch of a building: the equivalent of the overshoes in a Canadian lobby in the winter months. The core membership of this conference was about 70, half from India and half from the rest of the world.

Most Indians were from the southern state of Kerala, but the rest of us came from such diverse places as Australia, Canada, the U.K., the U.S.A., Japan, Iraq, Lebanon, France, Germany, Russia, Hungary, the Netherlands and Belgium. We had come to Kerala for the fifth in a series of world-wide conferences. This series had begun in 1986, following the previous year's inauguration of the St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (SEERI) as a place in which the seven Syriac-patrimony churches could

come together for study and research on the language and literature of that patrimony.

The Institute had its origins in a meeting of Indian bishops and scholars at the 1980 Goslar meeting of the European *Symposium Syriacum*, where it was planned to have a Kerala equivalent of the *Institut Catholique* in Paris, where Dr Jacob Thekkaparampil, the effective founder and present Director of SEERI, had studied. The present complex of lecture rooms, dining hall, common rooms, lecture rooms and church are evidence of the support and enthusiasm which the project engendered, and to the commitment of the churches who sponsor it. For this project Kottayam is the obvious choice. It lies almost about two-thirds of the way from the state capital Trivandrum in the south to the main port of Cochin towards the north of the state, which corresponds to some degree with the pepper-coast of Malabar, chief world source of the spice cardamon. The monsoon trading route from Arabia brought here, among others, Jews and Arabs, Christians and Muslims from at least the 3rd century B.C. It is here, too, that sea and land routes brought Christian traders and refugees from Persia in the 4th and 8th centuries A.D., so that representatives of the old Syriac church of Persia made their home here where Christians had been established

from the time of St Thomas in 52 A.D. The old ports of the south are long-since silted up, and the Christian and Jewish settlements moved north to the port of Cochin and to its environs. The former moved south again, to Kottayam, in the 18th century so as to be at a greater distance from Tippoo Sultan, of brass tiger fame, in Mysore. Hence the appropriateness of the setting both for SEERI and for the congresses it has sponsored, for Syriac is a living part of the culture and is a second language in the school system. Conference members had in effect an immersion course in Syriac culture as much as if they had been in the Middle East or the Syriac diaspora. They found, too, an India of palm trees, coconuts, bananas and shady backwaters, rather than the hills and plains of Rudyard Kipling. They found, too, skilled performances of the dances which circled round a lampstand, signifying the coming of St Thomas to India and the miracles he performed here.

The conference's 70 papers covered almost the entire range of Syriac literature between the fourth and the nineteenth centuries, from the work of Ephrem of Nisibis and Edessa to laments for famine and drought in the Middle East, and even comment on the twentieth century work by Bede Griffith and Francis Acharya to integrate Syriac and Hindu theology and culture. More important, though, was the clear impression that there is a very able and accomplished group of younger scholars in Europe and India. Understandably there was minimal representation from the U.S.A. where there is also known to be a very able younger generation. Clearly it is not possible to mention here individual papers in detail or even summary, and it is invidious to mention individual scholars: but the follow-

ing account of the range of material offered gives an impressionistic landscape.

Of particular interest were accounts of Syriac communities in places difficult to access: Tur Abdin in Turkey and the more remote area around Lake Urmiah, together with an account of the unhappy twentieth-century history of the Assyrians, promised a homeland by the British for their support in 1914-18, but denied it because a wartime promise was not considered a binding promise. The Silk Road to China featured in a paper on the Nestorian expansion as traders, especially of *materia medica*, and in an account of the reverse journey by the thirteenth century monks of Kublai Khan to the courts of Europe. The Old Testament Peshitta featured in several papers, though now seen as a component of Syriac culture rather than an end in itself for text criticism of the Hebrew Bible. Naturally, classical writers of the first seven centuries featured at such a conference: whether as thematic presentations on the Bridal Chamber, or as studies of individual writers such as Ephrem. Jacob of Sarug was rightly chosen as the subject of several papers, as a notable example of east Syriac figurative poets.

Jacob of Sarug leads into the world of liturgy, and here there were papers discussing elements of the Eucharist and the daily office, and also of the festivals, lectionaries and officiants, especially diaconal. Practical experience of liturgy was available through a daily *Qurbono* in Syriac, with notably excellent singing, especially at the Old Seminary (founded 1815). Doctrinal matters were addressed, for the most part concerning personalities and controversies of the Chalcedon Council period.

No understanding of Syriac literature can be gained without a chronological perspec-

tive. This was provided, with reference to the early middle and late periods, and to areas in Turkey, India, west Syria as well as lists of Patriarchs.

Nor was the presentation of the Syriac tradition denied discussion of monasticism, both in its earlier and later-developed forms.

While literature may be the higher slopes, the lower slopes of grammar and lexicography were given proper weight. These were shown to be matters of moment and current concern, but the wealth of material produced in Kerala came as a revelation to some of us. The most recent student grammar follows an excellent tradition known to classicists: the introduction of rhymes to facilitate the learning of grammar.

Inevitably, some papers which do not fit easily into such categories can find the merest mention, even though of great importance. Among them are papers on iconography and archaeology and on inculturation, whether ancient or modern, and especially one on possible relationships between Hindu philosophy and Christian theology. But the summary above suggests both the range and competence of the speakers, and the capacity of the participants to engage in vigorous discussion of such papers. Not surprisingly, commentators at the evaluation deplored the busy-ness of the programme and demanded a 'shopping afternoon', and while wanting fewer papers to enable this, requested more papers to increase the range and depth of the conference.

The papers delivered, and some which were submitted for publication but not delivery, will appear over the next couple of years in volumes of *The Harp*, the journal published by SEERI. In conclusion, participants left with a strong sense of the vigour

of Syriac studies in India and beyond, and of the welcome and generosity of our Indian hosts. They provided us with all the facilities of a conference, and also social outings where a meal and an entertainment were provided by different communities. This article should therefore be read as an expression of gratitude:

ܠܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܩܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܬܝܢܐ

**NEW RESEARCH PROJECT:
IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG
WEST SYRIAN CHRISTIANS**

BAS TER HAAR ROMENY
LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and Leiden University have decided to finance a major research programme on Syriac Christianity, entitled *The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians (451-1300)*. The programme is among the last 14 recipients of a PIONIER grant from NWO.

Among the Christians who did not accept the acts of the Council of Chalcedon (451), the group now known as "West Syrians" or Syrian Orthodox" were probably least likely to form a national or ethnic community. Yet a group emerged with its own distinctive literature and art, its own network and historical consciousness. In an intricate process of adoption and rejection, the West Syrians selected elements from the cultures to which they were heirs and from those with which they came into contact, thus defining a position of their own. The new five-year research programme will investigate this process of identity formation. The study of the

formative periods of the community will improve our understanding of the position of the Syrian Orthodox today. Many of them now live as refugees in Western Europe. In the debate on their identity they constantly refer to their “golden era,” the period before 1300. The programme will also contribute to the theoretical debate on identity, identity formation, and ethnicity. It offers a well-defined case of a group that can be followed from its very beginnings, as it comes into existence as a religious partnership or association, becomes a religious community, and develops further into a group that has all the characteristics of an ethnic community. The programme consists of three projects. Together they combine four different disciplines: religious studies, history, art history, and philology, while taking account of recent developments in the social sciences.

The project “Michael the Syrian and His Sources,” led by Dr. Jan van Ginkel, will investigate the role of historiography. Historiography collects and interprets the shared memories of a common history that binds members together and distinguishes them from others. It has to present itself as objective, in order to give the community an anchor-hold in the past. However, selection, adaptation, and imagination always play a role, though the author himself is not necessarily conscious of this. The different historical sources can be seen as witnesses of the various attempts to foster a communal identity among their readers. Michael the Syrian’s twelfth-century *Chronicle* is an obvious starting point for this project because of its position, its extent, its wealth of sources, and the originality of its conception. However, in order to establish what Michael really intended, it will be necessary to compare his discourse on West Syrian

identity with a fuller picture of the historiography of the mid seventh to the end of the ninth century. This project therefore aims at a description of the way Michael perceived and processed the work of his most original predecessors, Jacob of Edessa and Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, with regard to their positioning of the Syrian Orthodox in history.

The project “Two Exegetical Collections,” led by Dr. Bas ter Haar Romeny and a PhD student, will deal with the contribution of two important exegetical collections to identity formation. Considerable sections of these collections will also be edited and translated. Biblical interpretation plays a major role in shaping, legitimizing, and conveying any orthodoxy, but this seems to have been particularly true in the case of the West Syrians. A large part of the literary output of the Syrian Orthodox and some of the main genres of their literature were concerned with exegesis. Exegetical works used the authority of the Bible to discuss the creation of the world, its early history, and the future; to give moral guidance; and to inform the reader about physics, astronomy, and other sciences. Some works dealing with the Creation were in fact up-to-date encyclopaedias of contemporary scientific knowledge. Thus biblical interpretation served as a vehicle for a complete worldview.

The oldest of the two collections is the London Collection (seventh or eighth century), which unites the opinions of various, mainly Greek, exegetes, and poses the question of the attitude of the Syrian Orthodox toward Greek learning. The second collection is that of the monk Simon, which dates from the end of the ninth century and is best known as the *Catena Severi*. This work combines the early Syriac interpretation

from before the split of the fifth century with the explanations of Jacob of Edessa and other Syrian Orthodox authors, thus illustrating continuity and change in biblical interpretation and doctrine.

As words do not tell the full story, the third project entitled “West Syrian Mural Paintings,” led by Dr. Mat Immerzeel and a PhD student, will approach the issue from an art-historical point of view. Works of art fulfill an obvious function by providing symbols of identity. This aspect of art, however, has not attracted very much systematic attention. Art can be seen as a means of expressing the identity of a group. This is particularly true in the case of religious art, which expresses religious beliefs, and these in turn are sometimes linked to political concepts. Pictures are an effective way of convincing people of true doctrine. The focal point of the study will be the wall paintings of Lebanon and Syria, the area where the Syrian Orthodox Church was well represented, and where a local artistic tradition existed alongside Byzantine art. These paintings will be placed in a wider context, taking into account both the earlier witnesses of Syrian Orthodox art, as well as

contemporary examples, Christian and Islamic, from the Crusader kingdoms, Egypt, the former Byzantine Empire, and other areas of the Mediterranean. The decision to focus on the wall paintings contributes to the ground-breaking nature of the project: many of these objects have not been studied sufficiently so far. Several discoveries are recent, and in other cases hidden murals are still being uncovered. The initial impetus to deal with the question of how ‘Syrian’ this art is has been given, but much remains to be done.

The programme will be based at the Faculties of Theology (Peshitta Institute) and Arts (Languages and Cultures of the Near East, Paul van Moorsel Centre for Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East). It will seek cooperation with other scholars in the Netherlands and abroad. From time to time, colleagues will be invited to work with us for short periods on themes and issues of common interest. In addition, a workshop will be organized in the course of 2005.

For more information about the programme, please contact its director, Dr. Bas ter Haar Romeny at romeny@hetnet.nl.

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