

# PAST AND PRESENT PERCEPTIONS OF SYRIAC LITERARY TRADITION<sup>1</sup>

LUCAS VAN ROMPAY

DEPARTMENT OF NEAR EASTERN STUDIES (TCNO)  
UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN  
THE NETHERLANDS

## ABSTRACT

*Whereas Syriac literature is generally seen as the whole corpus of preserved texts as it is presently known to us, the present paper's aim is to gain insight into the various ways Syriac literary tradition was viewed at specific moments in history. First, the letters of Jacob of Edessa (c. 700) and Timothy Catholikos (c. 800) are studied. Second, some relevant data are drawn from what we know about libraries and manuscript collections. Third, the period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries leads to a few general observations on the development of Syriac literary tradition in the later period.*

- [1] The nineteenth century produced several Syriac grammars and two Syriac dictionaries which to this day have not been surpassed in quality and usefulness. The early twentieth century provided us with a handbook of Syriac literature. On the eve of the twenty-first

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly adapted and expanded version of a lecture delivered at the opening of “Syriac Symposium III: The Aramaic Heritage of Syria” on June 17, 1999 at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

century, Syriac scholars, looking at the basic tools of their discipline, may wonder what new tasks and challenges will present themselves in the years to come. Grammatical studies which are presently being carried out in various places have begun to challenge the authority of Theodor Nöldeke's *Kurzgefasste syrische Grammatik* (Leipzig 1880; 2nd ed.: 1898). A new Syriac dictionary which will finally replace Robert Payne Smith's (*cum aliis*) *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford 1879–83) and Karl Brockelmann's *Lexicon Syriacum* (Berlin 1895; 2nd ed.: Halle 1928) is being discussed, and we will hear more about this in the course of this symposium. No one can fail to see that Anton Baumstark's *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (Bonn 1922) is desperately crying out to be replaced by something more modern, more readable and more attractive. To my knowledge, however, no concrete plans to that end have yet been worked out.

[2] Those who embark in the twenty-first century on the preparation of an entirely new Baumstark will have to take some important decisions. These concern not only the present state of research on Syriac literary texts—quite different indeed from that of Baumstark's day, more than seventy-five years ago—but also the various ways in which Syriac literary tradition has been perceived throughout the ages, by those who have built up and transmitted this tradition, by those who study it and, last but not least, by those who in our day see that tradition as part of their identity, as the legacy of their ancestors.

[3] A tradition which has existed for nearly two millennia cannot be studied solely as a linear development gradually unfolding in history, whose constituent elements are continuously being piled up like bricks, forming an ever growing, ever expanding monument. This image does not do justice to the dynamics of history. The way the past was viewed, the way people reflected on it, and reacted to it must always be taken into account. Not only the transmission of texts and motifs is important, but also the processes accompanying that transmission are equally important. The awareness of this fact is much stronger now than it was in Baumstark's day.

[4] While it is now customary for editors, translators and students of Syriac texts to give attention to their sources and to carefully inventory them, it is quite another thing to actually understand how an author viewed not so much his individual sources, but the whole

body of texts which constituted the literary background of his community, and how he defined his own position with reference to it. Very few authors have made statements about the literary tradition to which they belonged. In the case of the two most important ancient Syriac authors, Ephrem and Aphrahat, we know hardly anything about their sources and the literary background against which they themselves viewed their works. As regards Ephrem's poetry, links with the older Aramaic tradition as well as with contemporary Jewish and Samaritan Aramaic traditions may be presumed,<sup>2</sup> and Aphrahat, too, must have had a literary tradition behind him. But we have no more than a few fairly vague suppositions to go on, and it must be admitted that the authors themselves are not very helpful in providing us with answers to our burning questions.

[5] In the case of other moments in Syriac literary history, however, we do have some hints or indications of how Syriac writers and readers viewed their own literary tradition and tried to deal with it. A selection of such data will be the subject of my presentation tonight. I will focus on the Syriac *literary* tradition, which is the body of written texts transmitted by Syrian Christians. The *literary* tradition is of course linked to the interesting question of the Syrian Christian identity. But the latter issue is broader, and the two are by no means interchangeable.

[6] After a few preliminary remarks, I will first discuss certain data culled from the writings of two authors who, primarily in their letters, have expressed themselves on the subject of Syriac literary tradition: Jacob of Edessa and Timothy Catholicos, one belonging to the West-Syrian or Syrian-Orthodox tradition who was writing around the year 700, the other representing the East-Syrian tradition and writing around 800. Second, a few words will be said about libraries. Third, the period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries will lead us to some general observations on the Syriac literary tradition in the later period.

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent study in which an attempt is made to place Ephrem's poetry within its larger Aramaic context, see A.S. Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry (c. 100 B.C.E. – c. 600 C.E.). Selected Jewish, Christian and Samaritan Poems* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica 34; Assen 1997).

## PRELIMINARY REMARKS

[7] Syriac literature is nourished mainly by two cultural streams. One, linked with the Aramaic tradition of the Middle East, has provided first and foremost the language, in a form already well suited for literary use. The other, the Greek stream, is a direct result of the Greco-Roman domination in the Middle East, and the Greek impact on early Christianity. Although they are inextricably intertwined in the bilingual region of Syria, there are nevertheless two different languages and two cultural worlds behind these traditions. For centuries, Syrian Christians have coped with these two streams, complementing the one with the other, bringing them together sometimes in harmony, sometimes in tension.<sup>3</sup>

[8] The theological discussions of the fifth and sixth centuries certainly helped to reinforce the Greek impact on the Syrian world. From then on, there were mainly two separate traditions: one which adopted strict dyophysite theology and eventually became the East-Syrian tradition, and one which emanated from the rejection of the Council of Chalcedon and was subsequently known as the “Monophysite,” Syrian-Orthodox or West-Syrian tradition. Writings antedating the split and representing the common heritage of all Syrian Christians have in part been incorporated into one or both of the two later traditions. Others just happen to have been preserved, totally cut off from their original context, without any indication of when and where they originated. Many more have simply disappeared.

[9] And yet, it is this pre-fifth-century stage of Syriac culture, which is sometimes seen as “essentially semitic in its outlook and thought patterns” and less hellenized,<sup>4</sup> which has such a strong appeal today. Judging by the titles, more than half of the papers read at the present symposium deal with this period. There is no common denominator for this early literature: it consists of individual authors and anonymous works, each with its own characteristics, with very few connections between them. Much of this period soon must have fallen into oblivion.

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<sup>3</sup> See S.P. Brock’s illuminating essay “From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning,” in N.G. Garsoïan, T.F. Mathews, R.W. Thomson (eds.), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Washington, D.C., 1982) 17–34.

<sup>4</sup> Brock, “From Antagonism,” 17.

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As for the greatest author, not only of this period, but also of the entire Syriac literary tradition, Ephrem the Syrian, we know that his works did not cease to be copied, read, sung and enjoyed.<sup>5</sup> However, given the pervasive influence of Greek theology on Syriac thought, his position could not remain entirely unaffected. Even a profoundly Syrian author, like Philoxenus of Mabbog, found it increasingly difficult to maintain Ephrem as a theological authority. Writing at the end of his life (523) to the monks of the Monastery of Senun, he respectfully mentions “blessed Ephrem, our Syrian teacher” (*mallpânâ dilan suryâyâ*), yet found it necessary to take some distance and to subtly criticise Ephrem’s theological terminology as being lacking in precision.<sup>6</sup> That Ephrem, as a theologian, continued to lose ground in the course of the sixth century may be concluded from the theological treatises of the Syrian-Orthodox church leaders in the second half of the century. Although they were Syrian countrymen from the Euphrates region, their writings contain hardly any references to Ephrem or quotations from his work.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> On the transmission of Ephrem’s hymns, see S.P. Brock, “The Transmission of Ephrem’s *Madrashê* in the Syriac Liturgical Tradition,” in E.A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica*, XXXIII (Louvain, 1997) 490–505 as well as Idem, “St. Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition,” *Hugoye* 2,1 (January 1999).

<sup>6</sup> A. de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabbog. Lettre aux moines de Senoun* (CSCO 231–2 / Syr. 98–9; Louvain, 1963) 49–51 (Syriac); 40–2 (French transl.). Compare Brock, “From Antagonism,” 20. At a much earlier date in his life, Philoxenus assigned a more prominent place to Ephrem’s theology, as becomes clear in the florilegium attached to the *Mémrê* against Habbib (written between 482 and 484). Here, nearly half of the quotations are under Ephrem’s name. Cf. M. Brière & F. Graffin, *Sancti Philoxeni episcopi Mabbugensis Dissertationes decem de Uno e sancta trinitate incorporato et passo* (*Mémrê contre Habib*), V (Patrologia Orientalis 41,1; Turnhout, 1982) 58–129 (Syriac and French translation); A. de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabbog. Sa vie, ses écrits, sa théologie* (Louvain 1963) 233–4; Brock, “The transmission,” 491–2. The second most frequently quoted authority in this florilegium is Eusebius of Emesa, the Greek writing Syrian of Edessene descent.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Peter of Callinicos’ theological work *Contra Damianum*, which is in the course of publication by R.Y. Ebied, A. Van Roey, and L. Wickham (Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 29, 32, 35; Louvain/Turnhout 1994 ff.). It must be admitted, however, that this work had a different audience, not limited to the monks of the Syrian and Mesopotamian inland regions.

## JACOB OF EDESSA

[11] The question of the balance between Greek and Syriac, between indigenous Syriac literary tradition and Greek writing translated into Syriac, is still very much at issue in the writings of Jacob of Edessa, almost two hundred years after Philoxenus. Jacob belonged to the first generation of Syrian Christians who grew up under Islamic rule. In those days West-Syrian Christians looked back on a period in which they had been part of the Roman Empire and of the imperial Church, from which they eventually divorced themselves in a long process which reached its decisive phase well before the Islamic conquest. They also looked back on a period that had produced great authors, like Ephrem, Jacob of Serug, Philoxenus of Mabbog and others.

[12] As he himself testifies in one of his letters, when searching for solutions to all kinds of problems, Jacob would consult the writings and commentaries of those “God-clad men” and “tried teachers” Athanasius, Basil, the (two) Gregorys, John (Chrysostom), Cyril, Severus (of Antioch), Ephrem, Aksnaya (i.e., Philoxenus of Mabbog), Jacob (of Serug)<sup>8</sup>—Greeks and Syrians coexisting peacefully. Such expressions as “the tried teachers” (*mallpânê bhîrê*), and “the saintly teachers” (*mallpânê qaddišê*),<sup>9</sup> turn up time and again in the letters. It was on the basis of their writings that he decided that something was true or correct (*šarrirâ*) and deserved to be accepted (*metqabblânâ*). These are the authors through whom the Spirit speaks.<sup>10</sup>

[13] We are very fortunate that Jacob’s friend, John the Stylite, had a burning curiosity, and rather than trying to find the answers to his many questions himself, used to write to Jacob for help. Jacob’s letters to John and several other correspondents constitute a wonderful tribute to the Syriac learned world a few decades after the Islamic conquest.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jacob of Edessa, Letter to John the Stylite: ms. Brit. Libr. Add. 12,172, f. 100r–v.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: ms. Brit. Libr. Add. 12,172, f. 81v.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: R. Schröter, “Erster Brief Jacobs von Edessa an Johannes den Styliten,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 24 (1870): 269,16–17 (Syriac); 274 (German translation).

<sup>11</sup> Dirk Kruisheer kindly put his personal collection of microfilms and photostats of Jacob’s letters at my disposal. A complete edition and translation of the letters is being prepared by Jan van Ginkel. For a

[14] Many questions concern the Bible, both textual and exegetical problems. Others deal with Greek or Syriac writings and authors who, as in the case of the biblical books, are the subject of philological or exegetical analysis. Problems of authenticity are discussed on several occasions. Although his correspondents must have had some knowledge of Greek, in all probability it was always the Syriac text—either the original Syriac or the translation from Greek—which formed the basis of the discussion.

[15] As for the Bible, Jacob did not content himself with the Syriac Bible, later known as the “Peshitta.” Since he himself was engaged in producing a revision of the Syriac Old Testament, which to a large extent took the Septuagint into account,<sup>12</sup> it comes as no surprise that in the letters, too, the Greek Bible—both Old and New Testament—is always in the back of his mind, for comparison or for reference. In addition to the quotations from the Greek Bible, there are a few instances where Jacob shows some knowledge of Hebrew. Not only is Hebrew the original language of the Old Testament, it is also the first language of mankind, as is clear—according to Jacob—from the connection established in the Bible between the names of the “man” and the “woman:” ܐܕܡ and ܚܝܚܐ. Referring to a homily by Eusebius of Emesa (now lost), Jacob is one of the rare Syriac authors who considers Hebrew the first language, rather than “Syriac or Aramaic.”<sup>13</sup>

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preliminary survey of the letters, with bibliographical references, see R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13; Princeton, NJ, 1997) 741–2. For Jacob’s dealings with Islam, see Idem, “Jacob of Edessa on Islam,” in G.J. Reinink and A.C. Klugkist (eds.), *After Bardaisan. Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J.W. Drijvers* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 89; Louvain, 1999) 149–60.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob made use of both the Syro-Hexapla and a number of Greek biblical manuscripts. There are two important recent monographs: R.J. Saley, *The Samuel Manuscript of Jacob of Edessa. A Study in Its Underlying Textual Traditions* (Monographs of the Peshitta Institute Leiden 9; Leiden, 1998) and A. Salvesen, *The Books of Samuel in the Syriac Version of Jacob of Edessa* (in the same collection, 10; Leiden, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> W. Wright, “Two Letters of Mâr Jacob, Bishop of Edessa,” *Journal of Sacred Literature* IV,10 (1867): [434–60: available to me in an offprint with independent page numbering] 20–1 (Syriac); F. Nau, “Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d’Édesse (exégèse biblique),” *Revue de*

[16] In references to the language (*leššānā*), Jacob sometimes juxtaposes “Aramaic” and “Syriac,” joined by the particle *ʿawḵêṭ* “or” (*Suryâyâ ʿawḵêṭ ʾĀrāmâyâ*). When referring to the written language (*seprâ*) or the language of culture, he employs a somewhat different terminology: *nabrâyâ ʿawḵêṭ ʾUrbâyâ ʿaw yattir mšawḏānâʾit l-mêmar suryâyâ*, “(Meso-)potamian or Edessene or, to speak more specifically, Syriac.”<sup>14</sup> As we know, the term *nabrâyâ* “(Meso-)potamian” also occurs in the title of Jacob’s Syriac grammar (*mamllâ nabrâyâ*).<sup>15</sup> Aramaic and Syriac go together like Anglo-Saxon and English, or Germanic and German (“Germanisch” and “Deutsch”). Only the second of these terms can be used for languages of specific cultures: Syriac, English, German. The terms *nabrâyâ* and *ʾUrbâyâ* may point to the literary tradition of “Edessene Syriac,” comparable to such terms as “American English” or “Hochdeutsch.” Some literary or cultural standard is apparently at stake here.

[17] As for the content of Syriac literary tradition, it includes not only writings originally composed in Syriac, but also a number of translations: the Bible, of course, translated from Hebrew and Greek, and the writings of the Fathers referred to above.

[18] Foremost among the authors originally writing in Syriac was Ephrem, who prominently belongs to Syriac literary tradition. He is explicitly described as such, and passages from his works are discussed in great detail, especially the *Madrâšê* on Faith<sup>16</sup> and on

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*l'Orient Chrétien* 10 (1905): 273–74 (French translation). Cf. R.B. ter Haar Romeny, *A Syrian in Greek Dress. The Use of Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac Biblical Texts in Eusebius of Emesa's Commentary on Genesis* (Traditio Exegetica Graeca 6; Louvain, 1997) 28–9 and 205.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to George of Serug; G. Phillips, *A Letter by Mar Jakob of Edessa on Syriac Orthography* (London, 1869) 11,1–2 (Syriac); 9 (English translation).

<sup>15</sup> In the grammar one also finds *mamllâ ʾUrbâyâ* (2a,9), *leššānâ ʾUrbâyâ* (2b,12–13), and *mamllâ nabrâyâ* (2b,19–20): W. Wright, *Fragments of the Turrâš Mamllâ Nahrâyâ or Syriac Grammar of Jacob of Edessa* (London/Clerkenwell, s.d.).

<sup>16</sup> *Madrâšâ* 44, discussed in a Letter to John the Stylite: ms. Brit. Libr. Add. 12,172, f. 85v. Summary in F. Nau, “Cinq lettres de Jacques d'Édesse à Jean le stylite (Traduction et analyse),” *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 14 (1909): 438–40.



the Nativity,<sup>17</sup> and the Hymns against Heresies.<sup>18</sup> In the latter case, Jacob provides information on the identity of the woman who was at the head of the sect of the Sabbatians, including some topographical details. His source may have been oral tradition in Edessa, which would indicate a living chain connecting the Edessa of Ephrem with the Edessa of Jacob.

[19] Another Syriac author regularly quoted by Jacob is the other Jacob, the periodeutes and later bishop of Serug. Jacob knows his works well and is able to recognise writings incorrectly transmitted under his name.<sup>19</sup> But also less well-known authors appear in the letters. He disentangled for his correspondent the complicated data concerning three authors known by the name of Isaac.<sup>20</sup> A most interesting example is that of Šem'on, the poet-potter (*quqāyā*). His identity was unknown to Jacob's correspondent, while Jacob is able to reveal the period in which he was active (the beginning of the sixth century) as well as his village, namely Gāshir, not far from the Monastery of Mar Bassus, where, according to Jacob, his shop still stood<sup>21</sup>—a possible reference to literary tourism in Jacob's day.

[20] Jacob of Edessa's letters are among the earliest and most explicit witnesses to a conscious perception of Syriac literature, having at its core such authors as Ephrem, Jacob of Serug, and Philoxenus of Mabbog. If we look at the language, we see that although Syriac literature is rooted in the Aramaic tradition, there is no reference to Aramaic outside Syriac. Syriac literature—in Jacob's view—also includes the works of the famous Greek Church Fathers—Athanasius, Basil, the (two) Gregorys, John

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<sup>17</sup> *Madrāšā* 25, discussed in a Letter to the deacon George: F. Nau, "Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse au diacre George sur une hymne composée par S. Éphrem et citée par S. Jean Maron," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 6 (1901): 120–31 (Syriac and French translation).

<sup>18</sup> Hymn II,6, discussed in a Letter to John the Stylite: Wright, "Two Letters" [see note 12] 25–26 (Syriac); Nau, "Traduction" 277–8 (French translation); English translation of the relevant section in S.P. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature* (Kottayam, 1997) 232–3.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: Schröter, "Erster Brief" [see note 10] 267 (Syriac); 276 (German translation).

<sup>20</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: ms. Brit. Libr. Add. 12,172, f. 123r–v. Cf. Brock, *A Brief Outline*, 41–2.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: ms. Brit. Libr. Add. 12,172, f. 121v–122r; partial edition in W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1838*, 2 (London, 1871) 602–3.

(Chrysostom), Cyril, and Severus (of Antioch)—known to his readers in Syriac translations. The Syriac Bible obviously belongs to Syriac literature. But at the same time Jacob is well aware of the characteristics of Greek biblical tradition and has some knowledge of Hebrew, the original language of Scripture.

[21] That is not to say that Syriac literary tradition as defined here—a number of inspired authors and canonised translations—entirely determined the spiritual and intellectual horizon of Jacob and his learned friends and readers. Jacob's views are in fact broader, and his curiosity more wide-ranging. Jacob's interest in Aristotelian philosophy reveals itself in some of the Letters, becoming clearer in certain of his other works. The same is true of his other scholarly interests, whether chronology or physics.<sup>22</sup> Another intriguing aspect is Jacob's use of apocryphal stories related to biblical events or figures (in both the Old and the New Testament). Jacob refers to them as *taš'yâtâ* "histories," sometimes more specifically described as *taš'yâtâ yudâyâtâ* "Jewish histories,"<sup>23</sup> *taš'yâtâ barrâyâtâ w-yattirâtâ* "histories from outside (the Church) and additional,"<sup>24</sup> *taš'yâtâ d-hâlên da-lbar* "histories (written) by those who (are) outside,"<sup>25</sup> *taš'yâtâ yattirâtâ da-kîbân* "written additional histories"<sup>26</sup> Although Jacob occasionally calls them unreliable, more often he uses them in a positive way. In addition to such

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<sup>22</sup> That Greek secular culture was an integral part of Syriac literary tradition among the learned elite of North Syria in the first centuries of the Islamic period is convincingly argued by L.I. Conrad, "Varietas Syriaca: Secular and Scientific Culture in the Christian Communities of Syria after the Arab Conquest," in Reinink & Klugkist, *After Bardaisan* [see note 11], 86–105. For a survey of Jacob's fields of interest and bibliographical references, see D. Kruisheer & L. Van Rompay, "A Bibliographical *Clavis* to the Works of Jacob of Edessa," *Hugoye* 1,1 (January 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: Wright, "Two Letters" [see note 12] 5,4 (Syriac); Nau, "Traduction," 203 (French translation).

<sup>24</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: F. Nau, "Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse sur la généalogie de la sainte Vierge," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 6 (1901): 519,19–20 (Syriac); 525 (French translation).

<sup>25</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: Wright, "Two Letters," 14,20 (Syriac); Nau, "Traduction," 265 (French translation).

<sup>26</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: partial edition in E. Nestle, *Brevis linguae syriacae grammatica, litteratura, chrestomathia* (Porta Linguarum Orientalium 5; Karlsruhe/Leipzig, 1881) 84,8 (Syriac).

*taš'yātā*, Jacob refers on one occasion to “an old tradition of Jewish origin” (*mašlmānutā ʿattiqtā d-men Yūdāyē*) to explain why Daniel retained his youthful appearance.<sup>27</sup> Similar references to apocryphal stories are found in Jacob’s exegetical writings,<sup>28</sup> and some of the passages quoted or referred to have been identified in such Jewish apocryphal works as Enoch and Jubilees.<sup>29</sup> Jacob’s endorsement of these uncanonical works is somewhat surprising. We do not know whether he read them in Greek or Syriac or perhaps gleaned them from oral tradition. He himself did not bother to provide any details beyond the rather vague names quoted above.

[22] In the sixth century, as we have seen, an imbalance between the two streams of Syriac culture was threatening, due to the pervasive influence of Greek theological writing. Jacob of Edessa seems to have redressed the balance. Though one of the best hellenists the Syrian world ever produced, he was also a proponent of a culture which was conscious of its own Syriac identity.

[23] Before taking leave of Jacob of Edessa, it should be noted that his interest in Syriac literature is not without parallels in the early Islamic period. John the Stylite and George, bishop of the Arabs, certainly shared Jacob’s interests. It is interesting to note that one of George’s letters—which can be dated between 714 and 718—deals with the identity of the “Persian Sage,” later known as Aphrahat.<sup>30</sup> Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*, which originated in fourth-century Sassanid Persia, the homeland of later East-Syrian Christianity, had been incorporated into West-Syrian tradition quite early on, as demonstrated by the three surviving manuscripts, dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>31</sup> Although

<sup>27</sup> Letter to John the Stylite: ms. Brit. Libr. Add. 12,172, f. 134r.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. D. Kruisheer, “Reconstructing Jacob of Edessa’s *Scholia*,” in J. Frishman & L. Van Rompay (eds.), *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation. A Collection of Essays* (Traditio Exegetica Graeca 5; Louvain, 1997) 189 and 194–6.

<sup>29</sup> W. Adler, “Jacob of Edessa and the Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Syriac Chronography,” in J.C. Reeves (ed.), *Tracing the Treads. Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha* (Society of Biblical Literature; Early Judaism and Its Literature 6; Atlanta, 1994) 143–71.

<sup>30</sup> V. Ryssel, *Georgs des Araberbischofs Gedichte und Briefe* (Leipzig, 1891) 44–54.

<sup>31</sup> Mss. Brit. Libr. Add. 14,619 and Add. 17,182. The latter manuscript is a combination of two different manuscripts, dated respectively AD 474 and 510. The first in all likelihood is a sixth-century

speculations about Aphrahat's identity were apparently circulating, George was unable to provide more information than could be deduced from the writings themselves. Aphrahat apparently belonged to a period that had been forgotten among West-Syrian Christians of the early eighth century.

### TIMOTHY CATHOLICOS

[24] A hundred years after Jacob of Edessa, another church leader and lover of books used the genre of letters to discuss various questions related to Syriac writers and books, thereby giving us some inkling of his views on Syriac literary tradition. He was Timothy, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East between 780 and 823. There are many parallels between the letters of the two men, Jacob and Timothy. When writing their letters, they both had a wider distribution in mind, and each of them had one favourite among his correspondents: John the Stylite for Jacob and Sergius for Timothy. Sergius was a fellow student of Timothy's at the School of Bašoš, in North Iraq, before he became director of that school, and he was later consecrated metropolitan-bishop of Bet-Lapat, or Gundishapur, in the Persian province of Elam.

[25] While Jacob wrote under the Umayyads, who had their centre in Damascus, far away from Northern Syria and Mesopotamia where Jacob lived, Timothy had close contacts with the Abbasids residing in Baghdad. This means that he had a thorough knowledge of Arabic.

[26] In Timothy's case, the church which he headed was more than a local church of Mesopotamia. It included, according to Timothy, not only "the regions of Babel and Persia and Atur," but extended to the east as far as "the land of the Indians, the Chinese, the Tibetans, and the Turks," and included "various and different regions and nations and tongues."<sup>32</sup> In prouder terms than Jacob would ever use to describe his church, Timothy presents the Church of the East as the only one to have preserved the pure and orthodox faith. The East was the region from which Christ

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manuscript. Both manuscripts belonged to the collection of the Syrian-Orthodox Monastery of the Syrians in Egypt.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy, Letter to the monks of the Monastery of Mar Maron (XLI): R.J. Bidawid, *Les lettres du patriarche nestorien Timothée I* (Studi e Testi 187; Vatican City, 1956) 36,16–18 and 22 (Syriac); 117 (Latin translation).

originated, through Abraham and David, where Nimrod the first king had reigned, and from where the twelve messengers<sup>33</sup> set off with their gifts for the new-born Christ. This eastern region, and more particularly the patriarchal throne of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, deserves to be honoured above the other patriarchates.<sup>34</sup>

[27] Timothy's letters are of interest here for two reasons. First, in those of a theological or canonical nature, he regularly refers to the authorities on which his ecclesiastical and theological tradition is based. Second, many letters contain requests for books, as well as brief notes with information on certain writings.

[28] Among the authors Timothy uses and quotes in his theological explanations we find the names of Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, John Chrysostom, Diodore, Nestorius, and Theodore. The honorific title "our father" is reserved for two of them: "our father Theodore the Interpreter," i.e., Theodore of Mopsuestia<sup>35</sup> and "our father Gregory"<sup>36</sup> or "our father the Theologian,"<sup>37</sup> i.e., Gregory of Nazianzus. Other names, which appear less frequently and without quotes from their works, include Justin the Philosopher, Hippolytus of Rome, Methodius (of Olympus), Gregory (Thaumaturgus, one of the "three" Gregories), Amphilochius (of Iconium), and Ambrose.<sup>38</sup> Timothy takes great

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<sup>33</sup> The number of the Magi is discussed in Jacob of Edessa's Letter to John the Stylite referred to in note 25. Jacob and Timothy agree that they were twelve. Cf. E. Balicka-Witakowska, "Remarks on the Decoration and Iconography of the Syriac Gospels, British Library, Add. 7174," in R. Lavenant (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum VII* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 256; Rome, 1998), esp. 646–9.

<sup>34</sup> Letter to Maranzka, bishop of Ninive (XXVI): O. Braun, *Timothei patriarchae I Epistulae*, I (CSCO 74–5, Syr. 30–1; Rome/Paris, 1914–5) 148–150 (Syriac); 100–2 (Latin translation).

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Nasr the faithful (XXXV): Braun, 225,9 (Syriac); 154,31–32 (Latin translation).

<sup>36</sup> Letter to Sergius (XXI): Braun, 133,6 (Syriac); 89,17 (Latin translation); Letter to Sergius (XXXVIII) 277,1 (Syriac); 192,33 (Latin translation).

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Sergius (XXXVIII): Braun, 267,16–7; 268,25; 269,10 (Syriac); 185,28; 186,31; 187,7–8 (Latin translation); Letter to Sergius (XXXIX) 276,12–3; 278,16 (Syriac); 192,16; 193,33 (Latin translation).

<sup>38</sup> These authors, together with those mentioned in our first list, are those whose works, according to Timothy, had been translated into Syriac long before Nestorius. See the Letter to the monks of the Monastery of

pains to defend the orthodoxy of Nestorius and Diodore against the accusations of Severus and others, mainly by arguing that Nestorius was in total agreement with Gregory of Nazianzus and that Diodore had received approval and even praise from Athanasius, Basil, and John Chrysostom.<sup>39</sup>

[29] Thus far I have mentioned only Greek authors. Interestingly, Timothy's list is very similar to that of Jacob of Edessa's Greek authors, which also mentions Athanasius, Basil, the two Gregorys, John Chrysostom. It does not include Cyril and Severus, whom Timothy knows but rejects, while the "Nestorian" authors Diodore, Nestorius, and Theodore are cherished by Timothy and rejected by Jacob. One may assume that Jacob and Timothy were familiar with most of these Greek authors via the same Syriac translations, which circulated among West- and East-Syrians alike, whether they originated during the period prior to the split or were later borrowed from the other community.

[30] But what about indigenous Syriac authors? We know that Jacob of Edessa's main authors included Ephrem, Philoxenus, and Jacob of Serug. Timothy, too, quotes Syriac authors. In a letter to Nasr, apparently one of the protagonists in a christological controversy that had broken out in Basra and Huballat, Timothy replies to the passages that Nasr had selected in defence of his divergent view. These include quotations from both Henana of Adiabene (c. 600) and Mar Narsai (c. 500). With regard to the former, Timothy expresses his amazement, since Henana had been condemned as a heretic by the Synod of Catholicos Sabrišo' (596) and cannot, therefore, be taken as an authority. The quotation from "our great teacher Mar Narsai" is countered with another quotation from the same author, proving that Nasr's position is not supported by Narsai.<sup>40</sup> It is tempting to speculate that Nasr, not unlike Henana,<sup>41</sup> was reacting against the "strict Theodorian" line

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Mar Maron: Bidawid, *Les lettres* [see note 31] 42,19–25 (Syriac); 121 (Latin translation).

<sup>39</sup> Letter to the scholastic brothers of the Monastery of Mar Gabriel in Mosul (XLII): ms. Vat. Syr. 605, f. 279r–303r; summary in Bidawid, *Les lettres*, 34–35.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Nasr the faithful (XXXV): Braun, 233,21–235,29 (Syriac); 161,2–162,23 (Latin translation).

<sup>41</sup> On Henana, see most recently G.J. Reinink, "Edessa Grew Dim and Nisibis Shone Forth: The School of Nisibis at the Transition of the

of East-Syrian theology and exegesis, and thus was inclined to place more emphasis on authors of good Syrian stock. However, with so little evidence at our disposal, this conclusion must remain hypothetical.

[31] There are several other instances where Timothy refers to indigenous Syriac authors. In dealing with canonical matters, he has, among other things, a long quotation from Patriarch Henanišo' (I, d. 701)<sup>42</sup> and a reference to John of Bet-Rabban, a teacher at the School of Nisibis in the early sixth century.<sup>43</sup> More interestingly, at the end of his Letter to the monks of the Monastery of Mar Maron, after having spoken at length about the orthodoxy and the history of the Church of the East, Timothy draws his readers' attention to the martyrs of his church, among them patriarchs, metropolitans, bishops, and lay people, men and women alike. The Maronite monks are referred to the Acts of the Martyrs, composed by Maruta, bishop of Mayperqat, who had himself relied on reports written by local writers.<sup>44</sup> This letter was intended to persuade the monks to join the Church of the East. Three elements are put forward which give this church its distinctive position: its orthodox theology, its unique history, and the blood and bones of the martyrs. As a matter of fact, the literary tradition of Syriac Christianity, in both the Eastern and the Western tradition, has been shaped by theologians, historians and hagiographers.

[32] Let us now put aside for a moment Timothy the churchman and turn to Timothy the erudite book collector. The works of Gregory of Nazianzus are mentioned time and again, here the Iambic Poems, there the Letters or the Homilies. As for the Homilies, he is familiar with the recension by Paul (of Edessa) and the correction of Athanasius (of Balad). But he is also looking for works by Athanasius, Eusebius of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Amphilochius, Eustathius, Flavianus, and

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Sixth-Seventh Century," in J.W. Drijvers & A.A. MacDonald (eds.), *Centres of Learning. Learning and Location in Pre-Modern Europe and the Near East* (Leiden, 1995) 77–89.

<sup>42</sup> Letter to Solomon, bishop of ḥedatta (I): Braun, 26,18–27,14 (Syriac); 15,18–16,3 (Latin translation).

<sup>43</sup> Letter to Rabban Petion (IX): Braun, 95,30–96,4 (Syriac); 62,12–16 (Latin translation).

<sup>44</sup> Letter to the monks of the Monastery of Mar Maron: Bidawid, *Les lettres* [see note 31] 45,20–46,15 (Syriac); 123–124 (Latin translation).

Nemesius (of Emesa). The same book is sometimes requested several times, which proves that the searches were not always immediately successful. Timothy asks Rabban Petion to send him the works of Dionysius (the Areopagite), in the recension of Athanasius (of Balad?) or Phocas (bar Sergius). Later on, the same request is addressed three times to Sergius.<sup>45</sup>

[33] Not only Christian authors fall within Timothy's sphere of interest. Aristotle and the Greek philosophic tradition are regularly mentioned. Timothy proudly reports on his translation of the Topics into Arabic, undertaken at the request of the caliph (al-Mahdi) in co-operation with Abu Nuh (the secretary of the governor of Mosul).<sup>46</sup>

[34] Syriac authors are mentioned from time to time. In one letter to Sergius, Timothy asks for the *Mémrê* on the Soul by patriarch Mar Aba (middle of the sixth century)—there must be three of them, and he has only one—as well as for specific *Mémrê* of Mar Narsai.<sup>47</sup> In another letter Timothy urges Sergius to search in all the monasteries and churches of Bet Huzaye for *mémrê* of Mar Narsai which he might not have. Sergius is requested to note their *incipit* so that it would be easy to identify them and to order a copy.<sup>48</sup> The historian (Daniel) Bar Maryam is quoted once by Timothy,<sup>49</sup> who is somewhat dismissive of his biased account of Papa, the fourth-century bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, which

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<sup>45</sup> Letter to Rabban Petion (XLIII): O. Braun, "Briefe des Katholikos Timotheos I," *Oriens Christianus* 2 (1902): 10–1 (Syriac and German translation); Letter to Sergius (XVI): Braun, 120,14–5 (Syriac); 80,6–7 (Latin translation); Letter to Sergius (XXXIII): Braun, 156,14–18 (Syriac); 106,17–21 (Latin translation); Letter to Sergius (XXXVII): Braun, 265,9–14 (Syriac); 184,5–9 (Latin translation).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbâsîd Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th centuries)* (London/New York, 1998) 61 and most recently S.P. Brock, "Two Letters of the Patriarch Timothy from the Late Eighth Century on Translations from Greek," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 9 (1999): 233–46.

<sup>47</sup> Letter to Sergius (XLVII): O. Braun, "Ein Brief des Katholikos Timotheos I über biblische Studien des 9 Jahrhunderts," *Oriens Christianus* 1 (1901): 312–3. See also note 54.

<sup>48</sup> Letter to Sergius (LIV): ms. Vat. Syr. 605, f. 324v–325r; summary in Bidawid, *Les lettres*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Letter to Sergius (XXI): Braun, 132,7–15 (Syriac); 88,24–31 (Latin translation).



Timothy contrasts with Papa's more favourable depiction in the Synodicon of the church.<sup>50</sup>

[35] On the basis of the letters, it would appear that the literary tradition that Timothy wanted to preserve and transmit was basically of Greek origin and focussed on Greek writings from the fourth and fifth centuries. As we have seen, it is almost identical to what was available to Jacob of Edessa. However, certain differences between the two men are noteworthy. Jacob knew Greek and must have had access to the Greek originals of at least some of the works he discusses. At the same time, the large number of works of Greek origin is counterbalanced by Jacob's pronounced interest in Syriac authors, like Ephrem, Jacob of Serug and Philoxenus. Now if we look at Timothy's letters, we see that they contain no reference to Ephrem, while the attention to Narsai does not even approach the place reserved for Jacob of Serug in Jacob's letters. In Jacob's day the process of borrowing Greek literature into Syriac was still going on. It had its proponents and its critics, and both groups needed to be accommodated. By Timothy's day, this process had reached its completion. Greek works had been appropriated into Syriac and even naturalised, thereby receiving a new context and becoming dissociated from their original milieu.<sup>51</sup> Greek works in Syriac translation had become a legitimate part of the literary tradition and needed no further justification.

[36] There can be no doubt that in the same period—around the year 800—when many Syrian Christians had Arabic as their second or even first language, the knowledge of Greek in both the East and the West declined rapidly, becoming the privilege of a small

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<sup>50</sup> For the wider context, see W. Schwaigert, *Das Christentum in hūzistān im Rahmen der frühen Kirchengeschichte Persiens bis zur Synode von Seleukeia-Ktesiphon im Jahre 410* (Ph.D. Thesis; Marburg/Lahn 1989), esp. 75–6.

<sup>51</sup> Some notions and terms have been borrowed from the introductory chapter of F.J. Ragep & S.P. Ragep (eds.), *Tradition, Transmission, Transformation. Proceedings of Two Conferences on Pre-modern Science Held at the University of Oklahoma* (Collection de travaux de l'Académie internationale d'histoire des sciences 37; Leiden, 1996), esp. xv–xix, and from the paper by A.I. Sabra, "The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Statement," reprinted *ibid.*, 3–27.

learned elite. It is not without significance that in 775/6 a monk from a monastery near Amid used erased folios of six Greek Bibles in the writing of the so-called Chronicle of Zuqnin.<sup>52</sup>

[37] As we move back and forth between the West-Syrian and East-Syrian area, it should also be noted that despite their shared roots in early Christian tradition, the letters of Jacob of Edessa and Timothy bear witness to separate West-Syrian and East-Syrian traditions. The former includes authors like Cyril and Severus, who were known but rejected by the East-Syrians, and the Syriac authors Philoxenus and Jacob of Serug. The latter tradition venerates Nestorius, Diodore and Theodore, who had been anathematised by the West-Syrians. This is the parting of the ways between the two traditions. Taking shape during and in the aftermath of the councils of the fifth century, it was completed in the sixth century and never repaired. Or so it would seem.

[38] And yet in Timothy's letters it becomes obvious that the line of demarcation between the two traditions is far from clear. In fact, the translations of Greek works produced in West-Syrian circles in the course of the sixth and seventh centuries are not only known to Timothy, but also highly appreciated and eagerly sought after. The Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, in the recension of Paulus of Edessa and the correction of Athanasius of Balad—a 'Monophysite' bishop and a 'Monophysite' patriarch respectively—have already been referred to. The works of (Pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite, attested in West-Syrian circles from the beginning of the sixth century on, are mentioned by Timothy on several occasions. He is looking for a copy in the recension of either Athanasius or Phocas. Phocas bar Sergius is known to us as the translator of the Corpus Dionysiacum; in fact this version had been used by Jacob of Edessa. The earlier translation, preserved in a single anonymous manuscript, is now ascribed to Sergius of Reš 'Ayna.<sup>53</sup> One wonders whether Timothy saw it as the work of

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. A. Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin. Parts III and IV. A.D. 488–775* (Mediaeval Sources in Translation 36; Toronto 1999) 1–2. For the reuse of Greek manuscripts of Homer, Galen, and Euclid in the ninth century and later, see Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation" [see note 3], 29 with note 149.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. J.-M. Hornus, "Le corpus dionysien en syriaque," *Parole de l'Orient* 1 (1970): 69–93 as well as S.P. Brock, "Jacob of Edessa's Discourse on the Myron," *Oriens Christianus* 63 (1979), esp. 21.

Athanasius of Balad. In any case, this takes us back to the West-Syrian tradition. Another interesting example is the Syro-Hexapla, the work of the ‘Monophysite’ bishop Paul of Tella, which Timothy succeeded in borrowing with the help of Gabriel, the court physician, in order to have it copied for himself, for Gabriel, and for the library of Bet-Lapat.<sup>54</sup>

[39] It is not surprising that Timothy was so well informed about what was going on in the Syrian-Orthodox world. In some parts of Mesopotamia, the Syrian-Orthodox and East-Syrians lived side by side. This was certainly the case in the Mosul region. Not far from Mosul was the Monastery of Mar Mattai (which still stands today), a Syrian-Orthodox stronghold. On one occasion Timothy asks Rabban Petion, director of the school of Bašoš, to go to Mar Mattai and to make inquiries about commentaries or scholia on Aristotle’s work.<sup>55</sup> The same request is made to Sergius on three separate occasions, after the latter had succeeded Petion, in order to obtain information about the works of Dionysius the Areopagite,<sup>56</sup> Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Eustathius.<sup>57</sup>

[40] Timothy must have been convinced that despite the dogmatic division, the East- and West-Syrians did to a large extent share the same literary tradition. Not only was there a common written language and a shared literary history in the earliest period, but each tradition was able to incorporate the new achievements of the other.

[41] Libraries—like the one at Mar Mattai—bring scholars together and their shared love of books may even make them forget their dogmatic differences. In his letters, Timothy occasionally mentions libraries where he knows—for certain or by intuition—that certain books are kept. Unfortunately, these are for us mere names, faint

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<sup>54</sup> Letter to Sergius (XLVII): Braun, “Ein Brief” [see note 47], 299–313. Cf. R.B. ter Haar Romeny, “Biblical Studies in the Church of the East: The Case of Catholicos Timothy I,” forthcoming in E.J. Yarnold (ed.), *Studia Patristica. Papers of the Thirteenth Patristic Conference* (Oxford, 1999). An English translation of this letter is provided in Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 245–51.

<sup>55</sup> Letter to Rabban Petion (XLIII): Braun, “Briefe” [see note 45], 4–11. Cf. Brock, “Two Letters” [see note 46], 236 and 242.

<sup>56</sup> See the references in note 45.

<sup>57</sup> Letter to Sergius (XXXIX): Braun, 279,17–24 (Syriac); 194,28–33 (Latin translation).

memories of a period of intense writing and reading activity.<sup>58</sup> He knows that Eusebius' Apology for Origen must have been in the library of Šušterin.<sup>59</sup> He asks Sergius to send him the catalogue of the books of Mar Zayna, which he expects to contain some interesting items,<sup>60</sup> and he recalls having seen a manuscript from the monastery of Cyprian containing letters from John Chrysostom.<sup>61</sup> Timothy seems to have built up a private collection of some fifty books in the school of Bašoš, which he had received from Rabban (Abraham bar Dašandad) in return for various services.<sup>62</sup>

### LIBRARIES AND MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

- [42] In addition to these occasional references to Syriac libraries in Northern Mesopotamia in the early ninth century, we also hear of nascent collections in Egypt around the middle of the ninth century. Three monks from the "Monastery of Mar Yonan of the Syrians," in Upper Egypt, donated ten manuscripts to the "Monastery of the Theotokos of the Syrians in the desert of Scetis," the famous Dayr al-Suryan. Of these ten manuscripts, three have survived up to the present day.<sup>63</sup> In the course of the ninth century, other manuscripts were presented to the Syrian Monastery,

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<sup>58</sup> For some observations on book production and distribution in the period prior to Timothy, see M. Mundell Mango, "Patrons and Scribes Indicated in Syriac Manuscripts, 411 to 800 AD," in *XVI. Internationaler Byzantinistenkongress Wien, 4.–9. Oktober 1981*, II/4 (Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik 32,4; Vienna, 1982) 3–12.

<sup>59</sup> Letter to Sergius (XIII): Braun, 109,6–13 (Syriac); 71,33–72,2 (Latin translation).

<sup>60</sup> Letter to Sergius (XIX): Braun, 129,10–130,1 (Syriac); 86,16–32 (Latin translation).

<sup>61</sup> Letter to Sergius (XLIX): ms. Vat. Syr. 605, f. 312v–313r; summary in Bidawid, *Les lettres*, 38.

<sup>62</sup> Letter to Sergius (XVII): Braun, 123,5–16 (Syriac); 82,2–11 (Latin translation). Cf. H. Suermann, "Timothy and his Concern for the School of Basos," *The Harp* 10,1–2 (1997): 51–8. The books had remained there when Timothy left for Baghdad and there subsequently arose some uncertainty about the ownership.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. K. Innemée & L. Van Rompay, "La présence des Syriens dans le Wadi al-Natrun (Égypte). À propos des découvertes récentes de peintures et de textes muraux dans l'Église de la Vierge du Couvent des Syriens," *Parole de l'Orient* 23 (1998): 182–3.

mostly through monks from Tagrit. Thirteen of these items have been identified in European libraries, and three others are still in the monastery.<sup>64</sup> Biblical and liturgical texts are included, as well as ascetic writings (some of them, not inappropriately, dealing with the Egyptian desert fathers), while Philoxenus of Mabbog is also represented by a collection of discourses.

[43] What must already have been a considerable library at the end of the ninth century was substantially enlarged under the abbot Moses of Nisibis, who in 932 returned from a visit to Mesopotamia with 250 manuscripts, some sixty of which are now in European libraries. The library of Dayr al-Suryan continued to expand up to the early sixteenth century, but it may be worthwhile to focus on Moses' acquisitions, for there is reason to believe that they were in part the result of a deliberate acquisition programme, planned by the learned abbot, who was well-off and had some influence with the Abbasid authorities in both Baghdad and Cairo.<sup>65</sup>

[44] Assuming that the sixty preserved pieces provide a fairly accurate picture of the entire collection, we cannot but be surprised at how much Moses' taste—or his view of Syriac literary tradition—coincides with what we have found in the case of Jacob of Edessa and, *mutatis mutandis*, Timothy Catholicos. The classical patristic authors are well represented: Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus,<sup>66</sup> John

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<sup>64</sup> H.G. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wādi 'n Natrān*, II. *The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis* (New York, 1932) 440–1 and Innemée & Van Rompay, "La présence," 184.

<sup>65</sup> On Moses, see J. Leroy, "Moïse de Nisibe," in *Symposium Syriacum 1972* (Orientalia Chistiana Analecta 197; Rome, 1974) 457–70, and M. Blanchard, "Moses of Nisibis (fl. 906–943) and the Library of Deir Suriani," in L.S.B. MacCoull (ed.), *Studies in the Christian East in Memory of Mirrit Boutros Ghali* (Publications of the Society for Coptic Archaeology 1; Washington, D.C., 1995) 13–24. On the impact of the Library of Dayr al-Suryan on Syriac studies, see S.P. Brock, "The Development of Syriac Studies," in K.J. Cathcart (ed.), *The Edward Hincks Bicentenary Lectures* (Dublin: Department of Near Eastern Languages, University College, 1994) 94–109.

<sup>66</sup> For a description of the manuscripts Brit. Libr. Or. 8731 and Brit. Libr. Add. 14,548, see A. Van Roey & H. Moors, "Les discours de Saint Grégoire de Nazianze dans la littérature syriaque," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 5 (1974): 80–4 and 84–7. For Gregory's Homilies in Syriac, see also A. de Halleux, "La version syriaque des *Discours* de Grégoire de

Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and Severus of Antioch. Some of the works Timothy so urgently requested from his friend Sergius, such as the Festal Letters of Athanasius or the works of Dionysius the Areopagite, could now easily be requested on microfilm from the British Library! Just think—a microfilm of a manuscript which in Timothy’s day was already of a respectable age!

[45] In one respect Moses’ collection differs markedly from Timothy’s picture of Syriac literature. It corresponds more closely to Jacob of Edessa’s views in that it is well stocked with indigenous Syriac writings: Ephrem, Jacob of Serug, Philoxenus of Mabbog, and others. Aphrahat should also be added to this list: although he is not mentioned by Jacob, he is discussed at length by George of the Arabs, as we have seen. The oldest manuscript, dated to AD 474, was bought by Moses in Reš ‘Ayna, halfway between Edessa and Nisibis. Another noteworthy manuscript is a collection of hagiographic texts, beginning with the Teaching of Addai and written around the year 500.

[46] Not only the older representatives of Syriac literature have a place in Moses’ collection, but also more recent authors. The works of Iwannis of Dara and Nonnus of Nisibis, both belonging to the first half of the ninth century, are among the items collected by Moses, as is the Chronicle of Zuqnin, dated to 775, which was brought from the region of Amid in a manuscript which may very well be the author’s autograph.<sup>67</sup>

[47] There are a number of very old manuscripts in Moses’ collection, dating back to the seventh, sixth, and even fifth century. They were acquired in various places in Mesopotamia, such as the cities of Tagrit, Reš ‘Ayna, and Harran. This region, east and south east of Edessa, is different from the area to the west and south west of Edessa, where important cities like Aleppo and Apamea are located as well as the monastic centres of Qennešrin, Tell ‘Ada and many others. Syrian Christian culture of the latter region had its heyday in the sixth and seventh centuries, as the archaeological remains of the “dead cities of Syria” attest to this day. However, this culture rapidly declined in the early Islamic period and few

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Nazianze,” in J. Mossay (ed.), *II. Symposium Nazianzenum* (Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums, Neue Folge, 2,2; Paderborn, 1983) 75–111.

<sup>67</sup> Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin* [see note 52] 9–21.

traces of the rich manuscript collections that must have existed there remain.<sup>68</sup>

### DECLINE, RENAISSANCE, AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF TRADITION

[48] Syriac gradually lost its position as a spoken language in Syria and Mesopotamia, becoming instead a written *Kultursprache*. It may have been used in oral form from time to time, in a liturgical context or on special occasions. But all those who used the language also had access to one or more other languages, either Arabic or Persian. Even those who used one of the Aramaic dialects in their daily lives became increasingly alienated from the written language, which was on its way to becoming a *leššânâ ‘attiqâ* (“ancient language”) or *ketobonoyo* (“written (language)”). People may have understood it and may have been able to read and even write it, but the direct interaction between the spoken and the written language had been halted; this happened at different moments in different regions, but the process was irreversible. Jacob of Edessa may have been the last Syrian author whose knowledge of Syriac was firmly rooted in the spoken language,<sup>69</sup> which in his day was not yet too far removed from “Classical” Syriac. However, the evidence at our disposal does not allow us to sketch this chapter of the history of the Syriac language in other than very general terms, skipping some centuries and passing over regional differences.

[49] This new situation drastically limited the role and scope of Syriac literature. Most importantly, the preservation of Syriac was itself no longer a natural fact, but was becoming increasingly dependent on the teaching carried out in the schools of monasteries and parish churches. The system of education had to be built on an ideology that saw the language and literature as

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<sup>68</sup> One of the rare surviving treasures indicative of the scribal and artistic skills existing in that region is the sixth-century Rabbula Codex, containing the four Gospels and an important set of illuminations. On the place of origin of this manuscript, see M. Mundell Mango, “Where was Beth Zagba?” in C. Mango & O. Pritsak (eds.), *Okeanos, Essays Presented to Ihor Ševcenko* (= *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7, 1983) 405–30.

<sup>69</sup> For an assessment of Jacob’s grammatical work, which was based on the real sounds of the language, not on its written form, see E.J. Revell, “The Grammar of Jacob of Edessa and the Other Near Eastern Grammatical Traditions,” *Parole de l’Orient* 3 (1972): 365–74.

constituent elements of Syrian Christian identity. Moreover, in societies in which other languages and other patterns of culture prevailed—and to which Christians were obliged to adapt—Syriac no longer covered the whole range of intellectual and cultural activities. At the same time, Syriac heritage had to be trimmed to a manageable form. That is not to say that Syriac literature became something slightly artificial—comparable to Yiddish in present-day New York or Frisian in the Netherlands. This situation cannot be judged by the yardstick of our Western societies. Indeed, the Middle East has known periods of truly multicultural and multilingual activity, allowing different cultures to flourish at the same time and in the same region, sometimes given expression by the same individuals. Such phenomena could be witnessed until fairly recently in Jerusalem, Mosul, Beirut, or Aleppo. Unfortunately they no longer exist in present-day Europe, where a monoglot consciousness<sup>70</sup> is now becoming the rule.

[50] These ideas may be of some help in understanding the Syriac literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a period which has been variously described as decline<sup>71</sup> and revival.<sup>72</sup> To some extent both descriptions may be correct. However, when considering the works of this period, one cannot but be impressed by the tremendous achievements of Syrian Christians, who were nourished by their own tradition, but at the same time seized the opportunities of their new situation.

[51] Barhebraeus, Syrian-Orthodox *maṣryono* of the thirteenth century, was a man of an exceptional breadth and open-mindedness, who wrote in both Syriac and Arabic. As such he is an outstanding exponent of the Syriac culture of this period. In the case of Timothy, the East-Syrian Catholicos, we saw openings towards the Syrian-Orthodox world, but Barhebraeus' view of

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<sup>70</sup> On the limitations of monolingualism and the “blessings of Babel,” see chapter seven in G. Steiner, *Errata. An Examined Life* (Second impression, London, 1997) 78–102 as well as J.M. Broekman, *A Philosophy of European Union Law. Positions in Legal Space and the Construction of a Juridical World Image* (On the Making of Europe 4; Louvain, 1999), esp. 310–323.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. J.-B. Chabot, *Littérature syriaque* (Paris, 1934) 114: “Quatrième période (X<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle). Décadence et fin de la littérature syriaque,” compare 118, 121, 129.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. P. Kawerau, *Die jakobitische Kirche im Zeitalter der syrischen Renaissance: Idee und Wirklichkeit* (Berlin, 1955).



Syriac literary culture fully encompasses both the West-Syrian and East-Syrian traditions, “two illustrious (we would say: official) traditions” (*tartên mašlmonwon t̄bibon*), as he puts it in the preface to his Book of Rays, or Syriac grammar.<sup>73</sup> That this is not merely a token veneration may be seen from the grammar itself. While it is based mainly on West-Syriac, it contains a great number of references to East-Syriac vocalisation and pronunciation. Among the authors quoted as examples we find the Syriac translations of the main Greek authorities, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil, John Chrysostom, and Dionysius the Areopagite, as well as a number of Syrians: not only Ephrem, Jacob of Serug, and Jacob of Edessa, but also Narsai and once even Theodore of Mopsuestia! A similar incorporation of East-Syrian tradition is to be found in many of his other works, e.g., the Chronicle and the Ethicon.

[52] With regard to the latter two works, the Chronicle and the Ethicon, scholars have in recent years pointed to Barhebraeus’ fairly massive borrowing from Islamic sources.<sup>74</sup> This fact bears witness to the *mafr̄yonō*’s conviction that Syriac culture should not be fostered in isolation; rather, without giving up its own tradition, it should participate fully in the surrounding culture. While the idea has found few supporters since the time of Barhebraeus, the borrowing itself has remained firmly rooted in Syriac tradition, for precisely these two works have become tremendously popular.

[53] One could say that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Syriac literature, especially the West-Syrian tradition, underwent a process of updating by such authors as Dionysius bar Salibi (d. 1171), Michael the Patriarch (d. 1199), Jacob bar Šakko (d. 1241) and Gregory Barhebraeus (d. 1286). Together these men, all

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<sup>73</sup> A. Moberg, *Le Livre des splendeurs. La grande grammaire de Grégoire Barhebraeus* (Lund, 1922) 2,17–18 (Syriac); Idem, *Buch der Strahlen. Die grössere Grammatik des Barhebraeus* (Leipzig, 1913) 1–2 (German translation).

<sup>74</sup> See H. Teule, “The Crusaders in Barhebraeus’ Syriac and Arabic Secular Chronicles: A Different Approach,” in K. Ciggaar, A. Davids, H. Teule (eds.), *East and West in the Crusader States: Context—Contacts—Confrontations* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 75; Louvain, 1996) 39–49; Idem, *Gregory Barhebraeus. Ethicon. Mémra I* (CSCO 535, Syr. 219; Louvain, 1993) XXX–XXXII as well as Appendix I (112–45), on the influence of Al-Ghazālī’s work *Ihyā’ ‘Ulum al-Dîn* on the Ethicon. See also G. Lane, “An Account of Gregory Barhebraeus Abu al-Faraj and His Relations with the Mongols of Persia,” *Hugoye* 2,2 (July 1999).

prominent personalities within their churches and societies, covered the whole range of Syriac literature. In their day, the intellectual and cultural infrastructure of Syriac Christianity was still largely intact. Their works of an encyclopaedic nature incorporate, summarise and complement earlier works, taking into account contemporary developments and allowing for borrowings from neighbouring cultures, as we have seen in the case of Barhebraeus. Through their achievements, Syriac literary tradition was remoulded into the shape in which it would be further transmitted in the centuries to follow. In terms of the fixation and consolidation of the tradition, these authors' works are of paramount importance. The operation was a success, for their works enjoyed great popularity and were frequently copied. Unfortunately, due to the subsequent destruction throughout the Middle East and the decimation of the Christian population, many of the older works on which the twelfth- and thirteenth-century writings were based disappeared forever.

[54]

The general profile of Syriac literature as perceived around the year 1300 in East-Syrian circles is somewhat different from what we find when we look at Jacob of Edessa and Timothy Catholicos. This is clear from the Catalogue of Books by 'Abdišo' of Nisibis (d. 1318).<sup>75</sup> The list of "early and modern" writers (*qadmâyê wa-'hrâyê*) has 198 entries, and although it starts with the books of the Old and New Testaments (nos. 1–2), followed by the "Greek Fathers" (nos. 3–48), by far the largest share (nos. 49–198) is for the "Syrian Fathers." Many of the authors are no longer known to us, and one wonders whether 'Abdišo' himself was actually familiar with all the authors and books he was listing or whether he sometimes just quoted from memory or copied some vague reference.<sup>76</sup> From the earliest period, Šem'on bar Sabbā'e, Acacius, Miles, and the Letters to Papa are referred to, alongside Ephrem, "the prophet of the Syrians" and Aphrahat. A number of East-Syrian authors are also mentioned. The lemma on Babai (fl. c. 600), which refers to 83

<sup>75</sup> J.S. Assemani, "Carmen Ebedjesu Metropolitae Sobae et Armeniae continens catalogum librorum omnium ecclesiasticorum," *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, III,1 (Rome, 1725) 1–362 (Syriac and Latin translation). There is a new edition, by J. Habbi (Baghdad, 1987), which, however, has not been accessible to me.

<sup>76</sup> See, e.g., the otherwise unknown author Bar Ya'qob (no. 159), about whom 'Abdišo' only reports: *'it leb ktābā* "he has a book."

books, puts this theologian on nearly the same level as Theodore of Mopsuestia in the Greek section.<sup>77</sup> This list of authors who “spoke through the spirit” (*malleḥ(w) b-yad ruḥā*)<sup>78</sup> also includes contemporaries; in the last section ‘Abdišo lists his own Syriac and Arabic works. And finally, there are also a few Syrian-Orthodox authors, including Jacob of Edessa, whose Chronicle is quoted.

[55] Not only are contemporary authors included in ‘Abdišo’s Catalogue, they also appear in manuscripts preserved in the monastic libraries. In the case of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, our evidence is scanty, being limited to a few particulars on the libraries of the Monastery of Rabban Hormizd near Alqoṣ and the Monastery of Bet Qoqa (or Baquqa). We are better informed about the later collections of Siirt and Alqoṣ. Religious poetry, in particular, was a very popular genre. After Giwargis Warda and Khamis bar Qardahe (both from Erbil and working in the thirteenth century), monks associated with Bet Qoqa practised this genre—Gabriel Qamsa (end of the thirteenth century) and Brikhišo bar Eškape (fourteenth century)—before passing the tradition on to poets in Gazarta and Alqoṣ in the sixteenth century.<sup>79</sup> These writings were immediately incorporated into the manuscript collections of “Classical” Syriac, which proves that the tradition of “Classical” Syriac was still seen as very much alive.<sup>80</sup>

[56] Another interesting aspect of these late East-Syrian manuscript collections is the presence of a number of Syrian-Orthodox authors: Jacob bar Šakko (first half of the thirteenth century), with his Book of Dialogues and above all Barhebraeus, whose works appear in various collections. It is tempting to see here a positive response of the East-Syrians to the *mafr̥yonō*’s open-mindedness.

[57] As is well-known, from the end of the sixteenth century onwards copying activities intensified in the village of Alqoṣ, where a number of priest-copyists were active, and to a lesser extent in several other places in Northern Iraq. This points in the direction of a new operation aimed at updating the tradition, comparable to

<sup>77</sup> Surprisingly Babai is not mentioned in Timothy’s correspondence.

<sup>78</sup> Compare a similar expression used by Jacob of Edessa, referred to in note 9.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Baumstark, *Geschichte*, 304–6, 321–3.

<sup>80</sup> An article, by Heleen Murre-van den Berg and myself, on some aspects of the East-Syrian transmission of Classical Syriac literature after the thirteenth century is in preparation.

that which took place in the Syrian-Orthodox milieu in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, in seventeenth-century Alqoṣ it was not the high-ranking officials of the church who took the lead, but rather learned village priests. Furthermore, the focus was on copying, i.e., retrieving and preserving ancient texts, rather than rewriting them. Due to the difference in social level, new types of texts came to the fore, such as the History of Alexander<sup>81</sup> and the “Aramaic” History of Ahiqar, texts which must have been popular down through the ages. Finally, in addition to the popular genre of Syriac religious poetry, the Alqoṣāyê experimented with a hitherto unexplored method of dealing with the tradition: religious poetry of traditional content in Sureth, the colloquial Aramaic language of the region.<sup>82</sup>

## EPILOGUE

[58]

The copying activities of East-Syrian village priests in North Iraq in the seventeenth century, the rewriting and assembling of ancient texts by Syrian-Orthodox church leaders of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the collecting of manuscripts by an abbot travelling between Mesopotamia and the Egyptian desert in the early tenth century, all testify to the manner in which Syrian Christians, under very different circumstances, valued their tradition. Comments by Jacob of Edessa and Timothy Catholicos have helped us to understand some aspects of the growth and

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<sup>81</sup> It should be noted that in their letters both Jacob of Edessa and Timothy Catholicos have a reference to the meeting between Alexander and Queen Qandage. For Jacob, see his Letter to John the Stylite: ms. Brit. Libr. Add. 12,172, f. 122v (where *Taṣṣyâtâ bâlên d-meṭṭol 'Aleksandros malkâ d-Yawnâyê* are explicitly referred to). For Timothy, see his Letter to Nasr the faithful (XXXV): Braun, 228,4–14 (Syriac); 156,32–157,3 (Latin translation). On the History of Alexander in Syriac, see most recently C.A. Ciancaglini, “Gli antecedenti del *Romanzo* siriano di Alessandro,” in R.B. Finazzi & A. Valvo (eds.), *La diffusione dell’eredità classica nell’età tardoantica e medievale. Il “Romanzo di Alessandro” e altri scritti* (L’eredità classica nel mondo orientale 2; Alessandria, 1998) 55–93.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. H.L. Murre-van den Berg, “A Syrian Awakening. Alqosh and Urmia as Centres of Neo-Syriac Writing,” in Lavenant, *Symposium Syriacum VII* [see note 33] 499–515 as well as A. Mengozzi, “The Neo-Aramaic Manuscripts of the British Library: Notes on the Study of the Durikyâtâ as a Neo-Syriac Genre,” *Le Muséon* 112 (1999): 459–94.

development of the tradition. It is upon the labour of all these people that we are building our own constructions, Syriac scholars and Syrian Christians alike. It is to be hoped that the result of our joint efforts will do justice to the perspicacity and open-mindedness of the most eminent among them.

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