

BAR HEBRAEUS AND HIS BOOK:
MUKHTASAR TARIKH AL-DUWAL
(SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF NATIONS)

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1. THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK

Maphrian Gregory Ab'ul Faraj bar Ahron, better known as Bar Hebraeus, was one of the most prolific Syriac scholars in the second half of the 13th century. Bar Hebraeus was born near Melitene (modern day Malatya in eastern Turkey) in 1226 and died at Maragha in north-western Persia in 1286, however his remains were subsequently buried in the famous Fourth Century Syriac Orthodox monastery of Mar Mattai, situated near Mosul.

Bar Hebraeus lived in a period of severe historical challenges for, in addition to the ever-increasing aggressions against Christians, he witnessed and lived through the Mongol invasion of several regions starting with Hulagu's invasion of Baghdad in 1258. He is known to have come up to Hulagu at the Euphrates River, upon the latter's way to invade Aleppo, where Bar Hebraeus was an archbishop, requesting him to be merciful to its population. However, Hulagu ordered him placed in prison while he completed his invasion of Aleppo, where more people were killed than was the case in Baghdad.

Bar Hebraeus was subsequently promoted to the position of maphrianate (a major ecclesiastical position that is above that of a bishop) for Iraq and further east in Persia, a position he held for 22 years from 1264, until his death in Maragha, in Persia, in 1286.

His extensive philosophical and theological works were reflected in the 35 books he authored. E. Wallis Budge, who translated his *Chorography* made a specific reference to the encyclopaedic nature of his writing noting that BH made reference

to more than 15,000 different named individuals in his *Chronography* for which Budge provided a complete reference list.¹

From a historical perspective, the most important of the surviving works of Bar Hebraeus are addressed in his *Chronicle* (*makthabnuth zabne*), a historical work organized in two parts: a secular history, (*The Syriac Chronicle*), and an ecclesiastical history, (*The Ecclesiastical Chronicle*).² The *Syriac Chronicle*, which is the main source of material for the subject book, mainly considers events in the Syriac Orthodox regions of existence, and largely compliments Michael the Syrian's chronical of the early 13th century. *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle* is divided into two sections. The first section is set mainly in the territories of the Byzantine Empire while the second section goes further East into Iraq and Persia, thereby covering the history of the maphrians who were responsible for the eastern half of the *Syriac Orthodox Church*. The contents of both chronicles were subsequently extended by one or more anonymous hands to include the period that extended almost to the end of the 15th Century.

The principal value of both chronicles lies in the detailed coverage of the events of the 13th century, for which Bar Hebraeus was often an eyewitness, as well as in its particularly extensive treatment of the events in the East. As a maphrian himself, Bar Hebraeus was particularly interested in the affairs of the eastern sections of the Syriac Orthodox Church, particularly Iraq and Persia, that were often insufficiently treated by Michael the Syrian.

2. THE SUBJECT BOOK

Regarding the subject book and the circumstances relating to its writing, BH's brother, Barsauma, wrote that when violence increased throughout Ninevah, he urged his brother Gregory to move to Maragha, in north-west Persia which was a relatively safer place and where he was respected and appreciated for his scholarship. There, several Arab personalities requested him to translate into Arabic his Syriac writing on history. Bar Hebraeus responded positively to that request, writing it in literary Arabic. The material of this 522-page book was essentially derived as a short version of his Syriac Chronicle (*Makthabnuth Zabne*). However, the subject book includes more material, particularly relating to Islamic Abbasid caliphate and to the Mongols, than in the Syriac Chronicle. This was all done during the last month of his life.

Regarding the title of the book, there has been a controversy on whether it was "Tarikh Mukhtasar Al-Duwal", which literally means "History of the Summary of Nations", as it appeared in the 1890 Beirut publication by Fr. Antoun Salhani,³ or, more logically, the title given in this presentation, namely 'Mukhtasar Tarikh Al Duwal',

¹ Wallis Budge. *The Chorography of Gregory Abul Faraj Bar Hebraeus*, Volume I, Gorgias Press, 2003.

² Wilmshurst. Bar Hebraeus *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, an English translation, page xvii.

³ Salhani, *Tarikh Mukhtasar Al-Duwal*, 1890, Beirut.

translated to ‘Summary of the History of Nations’, as noted by Aphram Barsoum,⁴ and Conrad,⁵ See Takahashi-Barhebraeus: A Bio-Bibliography).⁶

3. BOOK CONTENT

In the form of an introduction, Bar Hebraeus explains that his book is:

A summary intended to benefit from the affairs of rulers and wise men, including the good and the evil, all sourced from books written elegantly in different languages: Syriac, Arabic and others, starting from Creation and ending into our time. These have been naturally organized by God into ten nations, which I have followed.

- The First Nation (State) is the Nation of the first Rulers from Adam, the First Human.
- The Second Nation (State) is that transferred from the First Rulers to the Judges of the Israelites.
- The Third Nation (State) is that transferred from the Judges of Israel to their Kings.
- The Fourth Nation (State) is that transferred from the Kings of Israel to the Kings of the Chaldeans.
- The Fifth Nation (State) is that transferred from the Kings of the Chaldeans to the Kings of the Magi.
- The Sixth Nation (State) is that transferred from the Kings of the Magi to the Kings of the pagan Greeks.
- The Seventh Nation (State) is that transferred from the Kings of the pagan Greeks to the Kings of the French (Romans).
- The Eighth Nation (State) is that transferred from the Kings of the French to the Christianized Kings of the Greeks.
- The Ninth Nation (State) is that transferred from the Christianized Kings of the Greeks to the Kings of the Muslim Arabs.
- The Tenth Nation (State) is that transferred from the Kings of the Muslim Arabs to the Kings of the Mongols.”

4. EPILOGUE

The book ends rather abruptly with no epilogue. Regarding this, Barsauma, Bar Hebraeus’ brother, tells us that the Maphrian worked on the subject book for a whole month, just before his death, and that he finished it except for three folios of the corresponding Syriac material that remained to be translated. However, despite this he included important additional material concerning Muslim and Mongol rules that were not included in his other publications.

⁴ Aphram Barsoum, “Nawabigh al-Surian”, *Majalat al-Hikma –(Al-Hikma Journal)*, No. 1, Year 5, 1991, p. 25.

⁵ Conrad, Lawrence (1994): “On the Arabic Chronicle of Bar Hebraeus: His Aims and Audience”.

⁶ Hidemi Takahashi, *Barhebraeus A Bio-Bibliography*, p. 75, 2005, Gorgias Press.

The book, written in a very high standard Arabic, is highly informative and is characterized by considerable detail. This is quite amazing considering the short period of time he had to write it, and not least his deteriorating state of health as he approached the end of his life.

BAR HEBRAEUS - MUKHTASAR TARIKH AL-DUWAL

Summary of the contents of the book

The First, Second and Third States (Nations) comprise brief summaries derived from the *Old Testament*. These are not addressed here.

The Fourth State – Transferred from the Kings of the Israelites to the Kings of the Chaldeans

The Chaldeans were an old nation headed by renowned kings, first of whom was Nimrod bin Kush. One of his sons was Bukhtanasar (Nebuchadnezzar) who invaded the Israelites, killed many of them and ransacked the rest, in addition to invading Egypt and many other countries.

Bukhtansar ruled for 19 years before the invasion of the Israelites. On the third year after the invasion he saw a frightening dream that Daniel interpreted. His son and grandson ruled ending with Balshazzar who made a wild drinking gathering and called for the Temple's vessels to use for drinking. He then saw a figure's hand writing on the wall, which Daniel read in its very negative meaning. That same night the Persians (Darius the Mede) arrived and conquered, killing Balshazzar, and destroyed his people and their belongings.

The Chaldeans were rich in knowledge and famous for their philosophers and for their men of science.

THE FIFTH STATE – THE KINGS OF THE PERSIANS

Here begins the state that resulted in the transfer of the rule from the Chaldeans to the Kings of the Persians (Medes). The Medes were people of honour and high reputation. Their rule continued until Alexander (the Great) invaded them as part of his general invasion of the region. Their rule was followed by the Shahi's whose rule continued until the Sassanid Kingdom emerged, starting with Ardashir ... to Yazdegerd III, who was the last of the Persian kings, and who was followed by the Islamic victory.

This period saw Daniel's rise and his survival from the lions Cyrus ruled over Iraq, Khorasan, Armenia, Syria and Palestine and he invaded India. He permitted the Jews to go back to Jerusalem to re-build the Temple. However, since the Palestinians objected, the re-building was delayed by 46 years.

In this period, Zarathushtra, the teacher of Zoroastrianism, anticipated the coming of Jesus and ordered through the Wise Men the presentation of precious presents at the birth of Jesus.

In this time the wise man Pythagoras, the renowned master of philosophy and science died at the age of 95. Other famous people of science, philosophy (Aristotle and other Greek philosophers), literature and medicine emerged in this period that was rich with knowledge and general culture

THE SIXTH STATE – WHICH PASSED FROM THE KINGS OF THE PERSIANS TO THE PAGAN GREEKS

The Greeks were a great nation of enormous ability and status. Their powerful leaders included the famous Alexander who reigned for six years, after he killed Darius and brought to the end the kingdom of the Babylonians and Persians, seized Babylon and took over all greater Asia and conquered India until 323 BC.

After the death of Alexander his empire was divided up by four of his generals, most famously: Ptolemy who ruled over Egypt and Antiochus who ruled over Syria. Ptolemy, who was particularly interested in literature, collected many books and ordered the translation of the Old Testament to Greek which yielded the Greek Septuagint, which was subsequently used by the Syriacs to translate the Old Testament into Syriac in a version called 'Peshitta', meaning basically simple).

In this period, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were among the famous philosophers who characterised that important period.

THE SEVENTH STATE – WHICH PASSED FROM THE KINGS OF THE PAGAN GREEKS TO THE KINGS OF THE RHOMAYE (ROMANS)

The Romans were the Franks whose country bordered the Greeks from the east and Andalusia (Spain) from the west, with Rome being its capital. Augustus, their first emperor, overcame the Greek kings and included their kingdom under his rule, causing Romye to be as great as when the Persians ruled over the kingdom of the Chaldeans. Thus, Rome was the base of these two kingdoms until Constantine became Christian and built Byzantium, which he called Constantinople. Henceforth, this city became the base for the rule of the Romans until the year 1262 (951 AD) when their differences mounted and they became separated. Rome had its own men of science, but the Greeks were more superior and were more recognized in that sense.

Augustus ruled for 56 years, and on the 43rd year of his rule, 309 years from the rule of Alexander the Great, Jesus was born from the Holy Virgin Mary and celebrated by the arrival of the Magi who came from the East. BH then goes over the massacres of the children of Bethlehem.

This chapter covers the events until 325 AD and beyond which included the crucial period when several Christian councils were held to examine the controversies that surrounded the Christian dogma at that time. It, in particular, witnessed the emergence of Sargius of Raas al-Ain who translated several books from Greek to Syriac. It also witnessed the continued wars between the Greeks and the Persians.

THE EIGHTH STATE – WHICH PASSES FROM THE KINGS OF THE *RHOMAYE*

(ROMANS) TO THE CHRISTIANISED KINGS OF THE *YAWNAYE* (GREEKS)

During this period of the rule of Justinus, Tiberius ruled and all the kings of Constantinople were Frankaye (Franks). However, the ministers, the authors and citizens were Greek. Following that, the Kingdom also became Greek. The reason for this development was the fact that the last years of King, Justinus, with his worsening health, he could not find among his Franks anyone who could properly handle and rule the kingdom after him. So he resorted to Tiberius, who was Greek. Consequently, the Kingdom of Constantinople became Greek, until it was recovered by the Franks in 1204 AD, (600 H). It was then re-taken by the Greeks during “our time” in the year 1268 AD. Tiberius, who thus inherited the crown of the Kingdom, subsequently became Christian in 1515 (*Greek years*) (1204 AD), that is, 600 years Hijri. The Franks then resumed control in 1240. However, it was re-occupied by the Greeks during our time on 1568 (1257) (560 H). The Persians, too, invaded the region and at one stage the Persians invaded Alexandria in 624 AD. Attacks and invasions by one side or the other, continued and involved cities like Antioch, Hums, Jerusalem, and as far west as Alexandria. They also invaded Chalcedon and slew its entire population. Thus the Persians held all the countries of the Rhomaye from the coast of the Sea of Pontus eastward.

THE NINTH STATE – (320 PAGES CONSTITUTING NEARLY 60 % OF THE

BOOK) THE STATE THAT IS TRANSFERRED FROM THE CHRISTIAN KINGS OF THE *YAWNAYE* TO THE KINGS OF THE MUSLIM ARABS

Historically, the Arabs were of two branches: one that is extinct which included *Aad and Tamood, Tassan and Habees*, both of which existed only through *Jahilia* (which refers to Arab nations before Islam), and the second branch comprising *Kahtan* and *Adnan*, which has survived through Islam. This chapter is by far the most important and voluminous chapter of this book.

BH addresses the birth of Islam, starting from the early life of Muhammad (ibn Abdullah), his marriage to Khadija, who remained his only wife until she died in Mecca after 22 years. Soon after that, when he was forty, the message of Islam reached him. BH then goes through the periods of *Al-Khulafaa al Rashdun* (the Righteous Caliphs) – (632–661) AD, the *Umayyad Caliphate* (661–750) AD, followed by the *Abbasid Caliphate* (from 750–1258) AD. He addresses the Sunni-Shiite historical religious fights during the Umayyad period, including the influence of the disastrous historic event that led to the killing of Hussein bin Ali and his family and over 120,000 people in the fighting and the taking of 50,000 men and 30,000 women as prisoners, all during the ruling of *al-Hajjaj* who was the governor in Iraq, during the Umayyad period.

The book then provides an extensive coverage of the Abbasid Caliphate that commenced with *Abu Abbas (Al-Saffah)* who ruled in the period 749–754 AD, down

to its last (37th) caliph, *Al-Musta'sim*, who ruled from 1242 down to 1258 AD, when he was killed by the invading Mongols who brought the Abbasid Caliphate to its end.

BH covers, with particular detail, the second half of the Abbasid period that was marked with the increasing arrival and power of the Central Asian Turkic people in their different tribes and formations. One of the historic events in that period took place in 1070 AD when the Seljuk Sultan Alp Arslan forcefully entered Manzikert, located on the eastern edge of Asia Minor, which marked a historic victory over the Byzantines that opened the gate of Asia Minor for the Turkish people who have ruled ever since.

One of the remarkable events stated in this chapter was the invasion of Constantinople by the Italians in 1203, when, for three days they massacred priests and others who were in Ayia Sophis (Hagia Sophia), and who held the Bibles in their hands begging their invaders for safety.

Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongolian Empire, conquered the region in 1209.

His extensive account in this chapter also covered the prominent regional rulers Nur al-Din and his son Imad al-Din Zangi who conquered the very famous city of Orhoi (Edessa) and its large surrounding region in 1209 AD.

He addresses the entry of the Mangolian armies in Asia Minor, and the entry of the Tatar (what the Arabs called the Mongols) in 1237 into Iraq, towards Baghdad.

In 1253 Hulagu, the grandson of Genghis Khan, directed his forces from Hamadan located in Northern Iran towards Iraq. In 1258, he sent an envoy to the Abbasid Caliph, Al-Muta'asim, demanding his surrender, and when this did not occur, he personally ordered and commanded the invasion of Baghdad, which resulted in the death of the last Abbasid caliph and the slaughter of thousands of its citizens. The Christians were excluded from this slaughter. Many of the Muslims found refuge in churches. One of these was the Church of the Third Bazar (a name still currently used for a locality in Western Baghdad). However, as BH reports, the Mongols extracted the Muslims from this church and killed most of them.⁷

In his extensive coverage of this part of history, BH also addresses the Christian medical doctors as well as scholars who excelled in their rare and prominent fields such as Abu Hassan al-Nasrani, and Saa'id bin Toma al-Nasrani (1223), the Baghdadi doctor who was given the title (Amin al-Dawla).

THE TENTH STATE – THE STATE THAT IS TRANSFERRED FROM THE KINGS OF THE MUSLIM ARABS TO THE MONGOL KINGS

When Hulagu ruled in Baghdad, Badr Al-Din Lu'lu', the governor of Mosul, sent him his son as an envoy, which Hulagu rejected causing his father to realise his mistake and drove him to immediately submit his subservience to Hulagu in person, armed with gold and jewellery as signs of obedience and Hulagu respected him for his age.

⁷ Wallis Budge, p. 431.

Hulagu proceeded northward, conquering all region leading to and including Miyafarqin. He also wrote to Malik al Nassir, ruler of Aleppo demanding his surrender but was, however, refused, causing Hulagu to first go down and occupy Damascus then proceed to Aleppo where he killed more people than in Baghdad. He then proceeded to Mardin and the surrounding region.

However, subsequently these gains came to a period of recession whereby Turkish governors led attacks on Mongol sites as well as taking revenge against Christians who had been under the protection of the Monguls in various cities, particularly Mosul but also Cicilia, near the Mediterranean Sea.

At some point Ahmad (son of Hulagu) inherited the kingship but was killed in 1282 and was followed by Arghun Khan who was a kind and a peaceful man and who died in 1285, which was also the last year of BH's life.

From a historic perspective, the Mongol period witnessed by Bar Hebraeus was followed by Tamerlane's vassals: Qara Qoyunul (The Black Sheep), a Turkman Shiite tribe so called for having black sheep on their banner. They setup their rule to govern Baghdad, Mosul, Tabriz and eastern Asia Minor in the period from 1411 to 1468. These were followed Aq Qoyunlu's (The White Sheep), a Sunni Turkoman tribe that set the scene for a major Ottoman response in 1514, thus starting the Ottoman rule in this region.