ANTIOCH AND SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY

A CHALCEDONIAN PERSPECTIVE ON A SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

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Introduction

According to an account of the greatest antiquity, preserved in several sources, King Abgar of Edessa (the present town of Urfa in southeastern Turkey) sent a message to Jesus Christ inviting him to visit the city. Christ declined, but promised to send one of his followers after His resurrection. As a result of Abgar's invitation, it is said, the Apostles sent a missionary who converted Abgar and many of the citizens of this Syrian city, an event beautifully commemorated in the *Canticle of Mar*[1] *Jacob:* Edessa "dispatched a messenger to Him, and begged of Him to enter into friendship with her. . . . From among all kings, one wise king did the daughters of the people find. Ambassador she made him; to her Lord she sent by him: 'Come Thou unto me; I will forget in Thee all idols and carved images. . . . Draw me after Thee into Thy fold, for I am a sheep gone astray in the world. After Thee do I run, and Thy converse do I seek: that in me may be completed that number of a hundred, by means of a lost one that is found' (cf. Lk. 15:6)."[2]

Whether one believes the Abgar legend or not, it is beyond dispute that Christianity thrived in Syria from as far back as we have historical records. There is no question that by the first quarter of the third century there were at least twenty bishops in the region of the Tigris River, and that a church had been openly built at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates by

[1]The term *mar* in Syriac means "Lord," "Master," and is normally used as the equivalent of "saint" in English.

[2]The English translation of the *Canticle of Mar Jacob* can be found in the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 654.

the year 232, making it, in the words of archeologist William Frend, "the earliest Christian building yet found."[3] Yet for all this, there persists a sort of benign neglect of Syriac Christianity by the larger Christian community, which is dominated by a skewed "Greek East / Latin West" paradigm. In consequence, we continue to lack an accurate and comprehensive analysis of the Middle Eastern Christianity that has so greatly contributed to the development of the Church since the time of the Apostles.

Yet there is hope this lamentable situation is slowly improving as more and more scholars today discover the rich heritage of Syriac Christianity. We ardently desire to help this process along by offering here an overview of the subject presented from a particularly Orthodox "Chalcedonian"[4] perspective. Some commonly accepted views will be challenged along the way, for which no apologies are offered. The search for truth inevitably offends the *status quo*, and no established "fact" deserves immunity from further inquiry.

Defining "Syriac" and Related Terms

Syriac. Before we begin, there are three terms with which we should familiarize ourselves: *Syriac, Roum*, and *Melkite*. The term "Syriac" may be derived either from the name of the old Babylonian region of Suri,[5] or from the original name for the city of Tyre, *Suraya* (ܨܘܪܝܐ[6]) in southern Lebanon.[7] It is likely that the Syrians were originally the inhabitants of Tyre, a city that was proclaimed by Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus (nicknamed Caracalla [reigned from 211-217]) the metropolis of *Phoenicia prima*.

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[3]William H. C. Frend, *The Archeology of Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 199.

[4]By the term "Chalcedonian" we of course are referring to the Christological definition of the Fourth Ecumenical Council convened at Chalcedon in 451, that Christ is one person (*hypostasis,* upostasij) in two natures (*en dyo physesin* ἐν δύο φύσεσιν), divine and human.

[5]The name was applied originally to the north-eastern portion of present-day Syria.

[6]The word *sur* means "rock."

[7]Other scholars have linked this term to Seleucus I Nicator, the king who first built Antioch. This region was named Sur-Sin, and Cilicia was named after his brother, Cilicos.

The Aramaic language — which was exclusively called "Syriac" after the Arameans embraced Christianity — was for many centuries the official tongue of the various nations from Asia Minor to Persia, and from Armenia to the Arabian Peninsula. Under the influence of Christianity, Syriac developed considerably and eventually became the liturgical and literary language of the far flung Antiochian Church, which spread from the shores of the Mediterranean all the way to India. The flexibility of this Semitic language with its variable syntax readily lent itself to nuance, and offered to Christianity a very useful tool for the expression and propagation of the Gospel. In Greater Syria, this language was in use long before the Greek language, which arrived in the Middle East with Alexander the Great (*c.* 332 B.C.). Many early Christian writings have come down to us in Syriac, and constitute a great body of patristic, historical, and exegetical work.

The term "Syriac" was originally synonymous with "Antiochian Christian," differentiating Antiochians from other Orthodox Christians. Unfortunately, today the term is applied almost exclusively to the Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox,[8] thus excluding the Chalcedonian Orthodox from this heritage. This contemporary application of the term strictly to Non-Chalcedonians falsely implies they are the only inheritors of early Syriac Christianity. Even such a great authority in the field as Professor Sebastian Brock, an otherwise solid scholar, has fallen into this trap: Brock dedicated his ground-breaking work the *Hidden Pearl* to the Non-Chalcedonians, as though they were the unique heirs to the ancient Aramaic heritage.

Roum or Roman. The second term with which we must familiarize ourselves is ***Roum,*** Ῥωμαῖος (plural: ***Roumai`o*** Ῥωμαῖοι), or "Roman." This term was, and still is in the Middle East, applied to the faithful of the five original patriarchates of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. The two parts of the Roman Empire, East and West, continued to coexist after the transfer of the capitol of the Roman Empire to Constantinople on May 11, 330, and Orthodox Christianity became the religion bonding the various peoples of the Empire together. After the fall of the Western Empire, the inhabitants of the Eastern

[8]By the phrase "Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox" we mean those Christians who have rejected the Christology of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, which met at Chalcedon in 451."Non-Chalcedonian" is a preferable term to either the pejorative "Jacobite" or the inaccurate "Monophysite" (the Non-Chalcedonians are no more "Monophysite" than the Chalcedonians are "Nestorian").

Empire continued to identify themselves as *Roumai'o* Ῥωμαῖοι, or "Romans," and not as "Greeks," which was a term that had come to mean "pagan" in patristic usage. The use of the term *Roum* became more common during the Ottoman period, when the Patriarch of Constantinople became the "Ethnarch" "*Ἐθνάρχης*" of the *Roum Millet* (the Roman "nation"), that is, the governor of all the Orthodox peoples of the Middle East. As "Ethnarch" of the *Roum Millet*, the Patriarch of Constantinople gained unprecedented authority over other Patriarchates traditionally outside its direct jurisdiction, and which had even become isolated from Constantinople after the Islamic conquest of the Middle East in the seventh century.

Melkite or Royalist. The third term necessary for an understanding of Syriac Christianity is "Melkite." As used today, the word has simply become the name of the Eastern Rite Roman Catholics from Syria and Lebanon. This is obviously not the original meaning of the word. In Syriac, Melkite means "royalist," and is derived from the Semitic word *melek* (מֶלֶךְ) or (مَلِكٌ) or "king." The term was used by the Non-Chalcedonians to describe the Chalcedonian Christians of Antioch following the schism that resulted from the Fourth Ecumenical Council convened by Emperor Marcion at Chalcedon in 451. Dissenters from the Council of Chalcedon applied the term "Melkite" to any Christian who adhered to the official Chalcedonian Christology of the Roman Empire. Melkite was thus a derisive label Syrians used against other Syrians, not a an ethnic identification in the sense that a Chalcedonian is a foreigner to the Semitic milieu, someone adhering to "Greek" theology. Quite the contrary: The Melkite was someone upholding the Orthodox Faith of the Empire and who was a member of Syriac society. Though originally a taunting epithet used by the Non-Chalcedonians of the Middle East, Syrian Chalcedonians adopted the term as a badge of honor. After the Antiochian schism in 1724, in which a large number of Antiochian Orthodox Christians seceded to form a separate "Roum Catholic" Rite in union with Rome, these "Roum Catholics" chose to identify themselves as Melkites, and consequently the use of the term lapsed among the Chalcedonian Orthodox of the Middle East. However, in the interest of re-asserting the true meaning of the word, in what follows we will use the term Melkite in its original sense of "Chalcedonian."

The Syriac Language

The background that formed the Scriptures, as well as all later theological discourse in the region, is today commonly called "Semitic." According to the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, the Aramaean people are descended from Shem, the son of Noah (cf. Gen. 10:22-23), and the Aramaic culture of greater Syria dominated the Semitic milieu of the Middle East — and which in turn greatly influenced later Hellenic culture.[1] As a result of this Semitic environment, there never really developed in the Syrian Church the sharp distinction between "Jewish" and "Gentile" Christians; instead, both groups co-existed in a shared Semitic culture. In fact, unlike other parts of the Roman Empire where Christianity quickly became dominated by non-Jews, we find that many early Syrian bishops possess Jewish names.

The Semitic character of the ancient Syrian Church is exemplified by one of the main centers of early Syriac Christianity: Arbela (modern Erbil), located fifty miles east of the Tigris in Adiabene. Arbela had an influential Jewish population, and, sometime during the reign of Emperor Claudius (41-54), King Izates of Adiabene and several members of the royal household actually converted to Judaism.[2] This Jewish community likely laid the groundwork for the introduction of Christianity into Arbela. According to *The Chronicle of Arbela* (early sixth century), the first Christian bishop of the city, a man named Pkidha (who had been born the slave of a Zoroastrian master), was consecrated in the year 104. Being two native Semitic religions, both Judaism and Christianity found ready homes in Syrian cities like Arbela, and by all accounts the Christian population of the city grew rapidly. In fact, it grew so rapidly that the local Zoroastrians felt threatened, and the city's second bishop, Semsoun (Samson), became Arbela's first martyr in the

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[1]We sometimes lapse into thinking that Greek culture somehow fell out of the sky in its mature form, when in truth it developed slowly while interacting with other cultures, particularly with those of greater Syria and Egypt. Consider as a case in point the Greek alphabet itself, which preserves the Semitic names of many of its letters: *alpha* comes from the Syriac word ,ܐܠܦܐ which means "boat" (the letter got its name because it was shaped like the sail of a boat); the letter *beta* comes from the Syriac word ,ܒܝܬܐ which means "house" or "temple." This is just one example to illustrate that Hellenistic thought received from, as well as contributed to, Middle Eastern culture.

[2]Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews,* 20:2:1-5.

year 117 (or 123). Many of Arbela's early bishops also bear Jewish names, such as Ishaq (Isaac), Abraham, Noah, and Abel. Of Noah, the *Chronicle* reveals he became bishop around A.D. 150, and that his parents were Jews of Babylonia who lived in Jerusalem, where Noah eventually converted to Christianity.

One of the major factors in the success in evangelizing places like Arbela was the influence of the Syriac/Aramaic language in the early Church. Aramaic is a close cognate (but not a derivative) of biblical Hebrew.[3] Aramaic developed into several dialects that fall into two main groups: Eastern and Western Aramaic. Scholars recognize three main Eastern Aramaic dialects, and five Western ones. The Aramaic script was originally borrowed from the Canaanites, and Western Aramaic was originally written in the same square characters as Hebrew. (Aramaic-speaking Christians, however, would later adopt a slightly different alphabet closer in style to the flowing characters of Arabic.)

From the Babylonian captivity, spoken Hebrew (itself of course a Semitic language) entered a decline and was unable to influence greatly the larger Semitic culture of the region. Aramaic, on the other hand, came to prevail throughout greater Syria, including Palestine, beginning in the ninth century B.C.[4] Aramaic was the official language of the far-flung Persian Empire, and nearly everyone learned to speak it. A few

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[3]The early divergence between Aramaic and Hebrew can be seen in Genesis 31:47, where the patriarch Jacob calls a stone monument in Hebrew *Galeed* גַּלְעֵד (Heap of Witness) and Jacob's father-in-law, Laban, calls it the same thing in Aramaic, *Jegar Sahaduthaא*יְגַר שָׂהֲדוּתָ. However, despite such linguistic differences, the bond between the Hebrew Patriarchs and the Aramaeans was a strong one. Abraham and his extended family, after leaving Ur, according to Genesis 11:28-32 first settled in Harran in an area known as "Aram-naharaim" (Aram of the two rivers). Most of his family remained in Harran חָרָן as Aramaeans while Abraham went on to Canaan. Interestingly, in Deuteronomy 26:5, the patriarch Jacob is called "a wandering Aramaean" (Heb., *'arammi' obed* אֲרַמִּי אֹבֵד). This is probably because the wives of both Isaac and Jacob came from the Aramaean branch of the family. According to the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, the patriarchs and the Aramaeans are related through Shem, the son of Noah: Arpachshad, the son of Shem, became the father of the patriarchs, and Arpachshad's brother Aram became the father of the Aramaeans.

[4]The writing system used in Greater Syria, as early as the eleventh century B.C., influenced all subsequent alphabetic scripts. The Phoenician and Aramaic alphabets of the region developed into the European, Semitic, and Indian alphabets. North Semitic had twenty-two letters, all consonants, and was written from right to left; these characteristics are typical of most of the later Semitic alphabets (e.g., modern Hebrew and Arabic).

sections of the Old Testament itself are even written in Aramaic (cf. Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Jer. 10:11; Dan. 2:4-7:28).

Aramaic was thus the vernacular in Palestine at the time of Christ, and it is certain Christ himself spoke it. In the New Testament, there are several passages reflecting Aramaic syntax, and occasionally actual Aramaic words are preserved (e.g., Matt. 5:22; Mk. 5:41; 7:34; 15:34).[5] Some Church Fathers (as well as a few modern scholars) believed that portions of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of Matthew, were originally written in Aramaic/Syriac and then translated into Greek.[6]

The Challenge of the Syriac Language. The role of the Syriac language in the early Church is today challenging the conventional view of the rise of early Christianity. For example, we see during the first century the rapid expansion of Christianity within the Greek-speaking cities in Greece, Greater Syria, Asia Minor, Egypt, North Africa and Southern Italy, and assume the apostolic Faith spread so quickly because it was propagated in the Greek language. While this may be true as far as it goes, it hardly gives us the whole picture. The evidence reveals that the first major expansion of Christianity was among peoples speaking Syriac/Aramaic in such places as Palestine, Syria, Phoenicia, and Mesopotamia. The apostolic preaching in these areas was mainly in Syriac/Aramaic, and in all likelihood the apostolic *kerygma,* "κήρυγμα,"

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[5]The close cultural interaction between ancient Israel and the larger Syrian world raises an important question with regards to Christianity: Did Christianity originate solely from a "pure" Judaism? If not, then what other cultural elements contributed to the formation of early Christian thought? On balance, the evidence suggests that Christianity represents a synthesis of Hebraic and Syriac elements, a cultural and theological synthesis formed largely during Judaism's Babylonian Captivity.

[6]The tradition that St. Matthew composed his gospel in Hebrew/Aramaic begins with Bishop Papias of Hierapolis (*c.* 60-130). Writing in his *Exposition of Dominical Oracles* around A.D. 110, Papias says, "Matthew collected the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each interpreted them as best he could" (See Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*, 3:39:16). For a couple of recent examinations of possible Hebrew texts underlying certain New Tesament books, see Claude Tresmontant's *The Hebrew Christ* (1989) and Jean Carmignac's *The Birth of the Synoptics* (1987), both published in Chicago by Franciscan Herald Press. Tresmontant, a member of the faculty at the Sorbonne, won the Maximilian Kolbe Prize in 1973 for his body of work. Carmignac spent over twenty years researching the Dead Sea Scrolls, which study brought to his attention ("merely by chance," he says) the many linguistic connections between the Qumran texts and the Synoptic Gospels, and eventually lead him to translate the Greek text of the Gospels back into Hebrew to further his investigation of possible Hebrew originals.

was originally transmitted, at least verbally if not in writing, in Syriac/Aramaic.

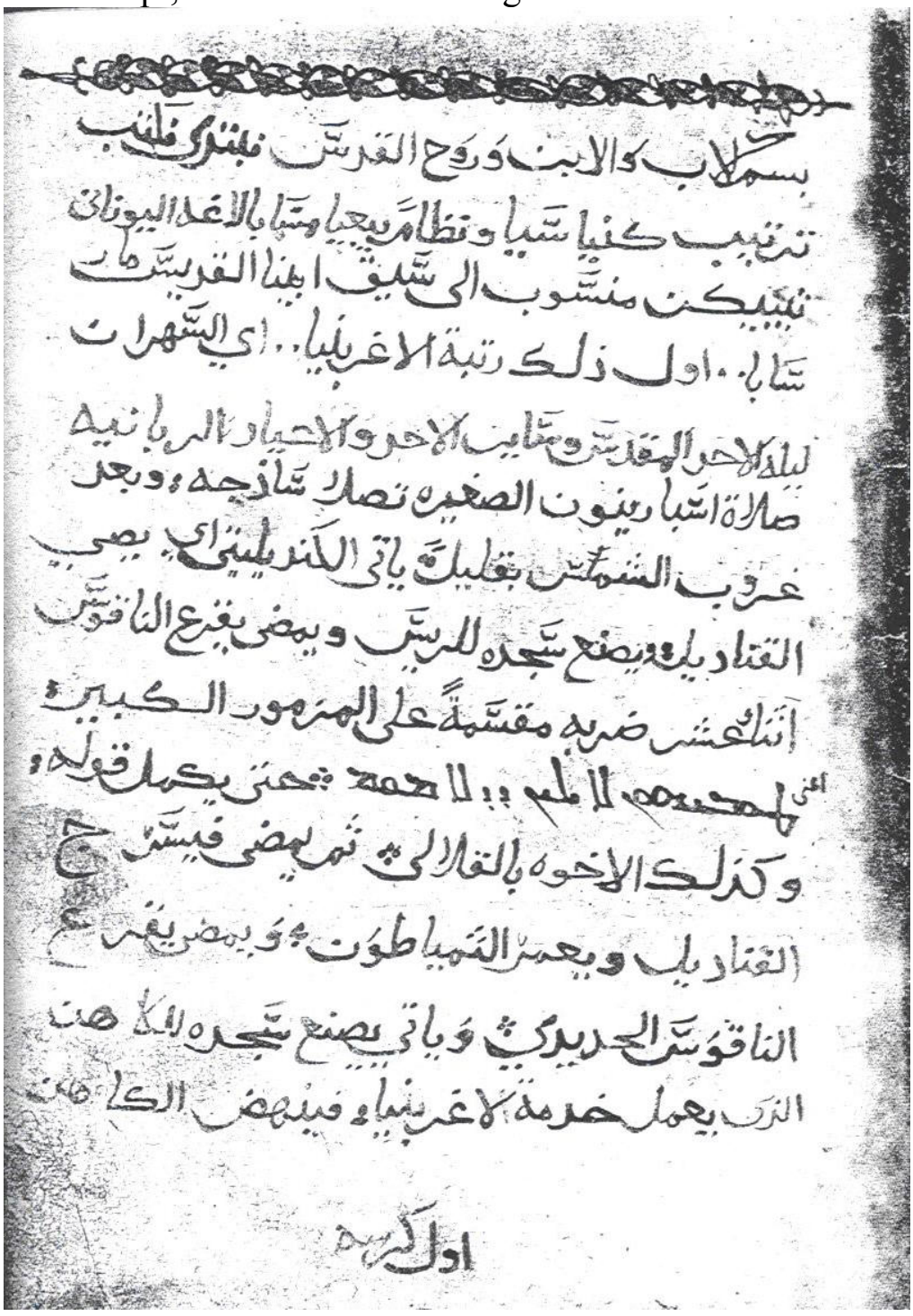
Also, how do we explain the spread of Christianity to such far flung places as Persia and India, where Greek language and thought were hardly prestigious? There had to exist a greater intellectual framework in order for Christianity to spread outside the hegemony of Hellenistic culture. And indeed, a close examination of early Christian literature — not only Syriac, but Greek, Coptic, and Latin as well — consistently reveals original threads of Semitic thought.

Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that many of our most ancient Christian texts are part of the Syriac tradition. Some of our finest hymns and theological texts originated in the fertile minds of Syriac-speaking scholars, who dominated the Eastern Christian realm both before and after the Arab conquests. Indeed, even after the Arab conquest of the region, all available historical evidence reveals that the Antiochian Church was a bilingual Church, speaking both Syriac and Arabic, until the eighteenth century, when Arabic replaced Syriac as the Church's primary liturgical language. Patriarch Makarios Ibn Alzaim (1671) mentions that Antioch continued to use the Syriac language in its worship in his day. In Saydnaya, the priests and bishops used the Syriac language in their liturgical services until the eighteenth century.[7] Even the minutes of the Holy Synod were recorded in Syriac until the fourteenth century. The minutes, for example, of the synod in 1360 that elected Patriarch Pachomius I were written in Syriac.

The Greek language, on the other hand, played a much less significant role in the Syrian Church than has commonly been assumed, especially during the last thousand years. For example, below is a page from a sixteenth-century manuscript of the *Typicon* of St. Sabas from the library of Hamatoura Monastery in North Lebanon. It was written in Arabic so that Antiochian clergy could read it in what by then had

[7] In the libraries and monasteries of the Melkite Patriarchate of Antioch we find many old liturgical manuscripts in Syriac, written mainly between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: a copy of the Psalms of David (Patriarchate no. 307), an Horologion (Patriarchate no. 113), and an Euchologion (Patriarchate no. 3), being but a few of these treasures. Father Isaac Armelli in 1936 mentioned that there were over five-hundred such Syriac manuscripts, written by Melkite Orthodox Christians, existing in libraries in the Vatican, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Berlin, and the Middle East. (See Bitar Touma, "The Syriac Language in the Heritage of the Antiochian Orthodox Church," *Annour Magazine,* Vol. 1 [Beirut Lebanon], 1996. In Arabic.)

become the vernacular of the region. Scanning through the entire manuscript, we discover not a single word of Greek.



The Liturgical Use of Syriac. This manuscript also divulges something else of significance: The highlighted section is written in Syriac. It is a citation of Psalm 119:1 (118:1, LXX): "Blessed are the blameless in the way." By its abbreviated form in the *Typicon*, we can assume the clergy were quite familiar with this psalm in Syriac.

This helps demonstrate that until the Greek Catholic schism of 1724, the liturgical language of Melkite Orthodox Christians in Antioch, meaning those faithful to the Council of Chalcedon, was Syriac (along with the Arabic). In fact, the inhabitants of Maaloula in Syria to this day continue to speak a form of Palestinian Syriac, the very language spoken by Jesus Christ. Despite the many linguistic changes that swept through the region over the centuries, the numerous manuscripts and documents of the Melkite Church of Antioch evidences the persistence of the Syriac language. For example, alongside Syriac manuscripts (and of course Arabic ones), we find Syriac manuscripts with Karshouni (كرشوني) headings (Arabic transliterated in Aramaic letters), Karshouni manuscripts, Syriac documents with Arabic headings, Syriac liturgical texts with readings from the lexicon in Arabic, interlinear manuscripts with both Syriac and Arabic, and even Syriac manuscripts transliterated in Greek letters.[1]

The use of the Greek language was obviously widespread in Antioch during the first millennium, but its influence had diminished during the second millennium and was limited to correspondence with the emperor in Constantinople and the Ecumenical Patriarch. It was later re-introduced in an imperialistic manner when the Greek Patriarchs of Antioch, as the Exarchs of the *Roum Millet* of the Ottoman Empire, wrested control of the Patriarchate of Antioch from local bishops and installed a Greek hierarchy. This forced Hellenization is seen in many liturgical manuscripts, such as the Balamand *Book of Rubrics* (an eighteenth century *Typicon*), in which the litanies are written in both Syriac and Greek. Almost without exception, all the liturgical translations into the Arabic language were done from Syriac until the beginning of the seventeenth century, when Patriarch Meletios Karmah (a scholar fluent in Syriac, Greek, and Arabic) corrected the translations based on the Greek text, and ordered that all further translations also be based upon Greek texts.

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[1] Bitar Touma, "The Syriac Language in the Heritage of the Antiochian Orthodox Church," *Annour Magazine*, Vol. 1, [Beirut, Lebanon] 1996. (In Arabic)

While today Arabic has replaced Syriac in the Melkite Patriarchate (except for a few places, like Maaloula in Syria), the fact remains that we are still the direct heirs of the Syriac tradition. This is not, though, to overlook the admirable resolve of the Non-Chalcedonian Syriac Church in preserving the Syriac tradition and language. However, as Professor Robert Haddad recently pointed out during a lecture sponsored by the Middle Eastern Orthodox Christianity Committee at Claremont College, California, the terminology of the Non-Chalcedonian "one-nature" Christology left them vulnerable to Islamic proselytism, resulting in mass conversions of their populations over the centuries. On the other hand, the Melkite Orthodox of Antioch maintained steady populations in the Middle East until the nineteenth century, when many began migrating to the West.

The Syriac Bible

We mentioned earlier that Aramaic started taking root among the Jews during the long period of the Babylonian Captivity, and became the *lingua franca* of the East with the ascendancy of the Persian Empire. As spoken Hebrew became largely unknown among average Jews, synagogues began employing what was known as an "interpreter" (Aram., *targmono* (ܬܪܓܡܢܐ) to paraphrase and interpret the Hebrew Scripture readings in Aramaic for the congregation. Following Rome's banishment of the Jews from Palestine in 138 A.D. Jewish religious leaders began writing these Aramaic paraphrases and interpretations down as *targums* (interpretations). The first evidence of a written Targum dates to around 200 A.D. (though a fragment of a sort of Targum on the book of Job was uncovered at Qumran [11Q] that dates back to 100 B.C.). Most of the Jewish Targums extant today date from the early third century to 700 A.D.

The Various Translations. Syrian Christians began translating the Bible into Eastern Aramaic at about roughly the same time as the formation of the Jewish Targum of Onkelos, the earliest known written Targum. Of the ancient Syriac versions of the Bible, there are around four Old Testament and five New Testament translations known to have existed. The main Old Testament translation is the Peshitta (meaning, "the simple"), which might have been made by Jewish Christians. The original version of the Peshitta was translated from the Hebrew text, and it is probably for this reason that it lacked the deutero-canonical books.

It also lacked the book of Chronicles, though later a translation of the Targum of Chronicles was added. The Peshitta Old Testament later underwent further revisions to make it conform more closely to the Greek Septuagint (LXX) version, which early on in Church history became the quasi-official version of the Church since it is repeatedly cited in the Greek text of the New Testament. Later versions of the Peshitta also began including the deutero-canonical books found in the Septuagint, with the exception of Tobit and 1 Esdras. The final major redaction of the Peshitta occurred during the fourth or fifth century, and in time it attained official status in the Syriac Church. Other Syriac versions of the Old Testament include the Syriac translation of the LXX found in Origen's *Hexapla* (written around 240 A.D), and published as a separate translation by Bishop Paul of Tella in 616; the Syro-Palestinian (Western Aramaic) version translated from the LXX sometime between the fourth and sixth centuries; and the Philoxenian version, named after the Non-Chalcedonian Philoxenus of Mabbug, and translated from the LXX in the early sixth century.

The question of the Syriac New Testament presents some difficulties since research has largely stagnated over the past century, thanks in large part to the stifling influence of Cambridge scholar Francis Crawford Burkitt (1864-1935). He published numerous works on the Syriac texts of the New Testament at the turn of the twentieth century, and in 1905 even published a two-volume edition of the Old Syriac Gospel entitled *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe,* "ܐܝܢܓܠܝܘܢ ܕܡܦܪܫܐ The Gospels following separately". Burkitt's research and theories so impressed the scholarly community that, in essence, most creative research in the area of the Syriac Bible simply ceased. With only minor modifications, the conclusions of his work are assumed as solidly established, and all subsequent progress in the field has been predicated on his general theories.

According to Burkitt, the earliest Syriac version of the New Testament is represented by the textual tradition known as Old Syriac, produced during the first two centuries of the Christian era. The Old Syriac is mainly represented today by the Syro-Curetonian manuscript, produced in either the third or fourth century, and the Syro-Sinaiticus palimpsest, produced around 200 A.D and discovered by two British ladies at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai in 1892. However, Burkitt didn't believe the Old Syriac enjoyed wide circulation in Syria, and that it quickly became obsolete. The Old Syriac was then replaced

by the Diatessaron (a Greek musical term meaning "a harmony of four parts"), a harmony of the four gospels composed by a Syrian Christian named Tatian sometime after 155 A.D. The Diatessaron became part of the Syriac New Testament of the East for roughly two-hundred years, until it was suppressed by the celebrated theologian Rabulla, Bishop of Edessa from 411 to 435.

The influence of Rabulla. After suppressing the Diatessaron, Rabulla then translated a new version of the New Testament known as the Peshitta, based on the regnant Byzantine Greek text. This version, carrying with it Rabulla's own authority, immediately attained absolute authority throughout the Syrian Church. Burkitt confidently asserted that before Rabulla there was no trace of the Peshitta's existence; after Rabulla's translation, the Peshitta is the only Bible known in Syria. The Peshitta then went on to enjoy an illustrious career among all parts of the Syriac community, the Melkites, Non-Chalcedonians, and the Nestorians.

This is basically the story, with but minor modifications, to be found in almost any account of the Syriac Bible today. It is found, for example, in almost any entry on the "Syriac Bible" in nearly every Bible dictionary. Yet even on the face of it the theory makes little sense. The Old Syriac texts, called in Syriac the *Evangelion da Mepharreshe*, were of the type known as a *tetraevangelion*, that is, having all four separate Gospels. Now, we know that the Church in general during the second century was moving from having single versions of the Gospel in individual communities to a fixed canon of four Gospels, as can be seen by the Muratonian Fragment (A.D. 155) and by the arguments made by St. Irenaeus of Lyons in his *Against Heresies* (*c.* 180).[1] Yet Burkitt's theory asks us to believe that the Syrian Church was moving in exactly the opposite direction, from the Old Syriac *Evangelion da Mepharreshe*, having all four Gospels, to Tatian's Diatessaron, a harmony of the four Gospels, which the Syrian Church then stubbornly retained until the fifth century. How are we to explain this bizarre contrariety on the part of the Syrians? No really convincing explanation has ever been forthcoming.

Another problem with Burkitt's account of the Syriac Bible involves the Peshitta, which he believes was produced and imposed on the Syrian Church by Rabulla of Edessa. First of all, it needs to be pointed out that Rabulla was originally a staunch supporter of Nestorius

[1]Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 3:11:7-9.

during the Council of Ephesus in 431, but then switched sides to support St. Cyril of Alexandria, with whom he became a close friend. Rabulla then saw to the burning of the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia in Edessa, whose reputation was jealously defended throughout Syria at the time. It is needless to say that Rabulla was widely seen as a traitor to the Antiochian cause in many parts of Syria. How could such a controversial figure as Rabulla have ever united Syrians around "his" version of the Syriac Bible? Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the Peshitta ever became the official Syriac version of the Bible among the Nestorians based on Rabulla's alleged "authority." We thus have another cause to be suspicious of Burkitt's theory.

When we probe further into Rabulla, we immediately have our suspicions confirmed: it is impossible to connect Rabulla to the Peshitta. For one thing, the Syriac tradition knows nothing of Rabulla's hand in the creation of the Peshitta. An early Syriac biography of Rabulla does say that he was responsible for a Syriac translation of the New Testament, but we have no reason to believe that this translation was the Peshitta (which is actually not a "translation" as such, as we shall see later).[2] In fact, what little that remains of his writings indicate that Rabulla himself knew nothing of the Peshitta.[3] The one major work still extant is his translation of St. Cyril's *On the True Faith*. In this translation, Rabulla uses an existing version of the Syriac Scriptures in rendering Cyril's New Testament citations, and this is not the Peshitta. As St. Cyril wrote *On the True Faith* around 430/1, and Rabulla died on 7 August 435, it is certain that Rabulla did not consider the Peshitta the "official" Syriac Bible during the final years of his life. Also, while Bishop Rabulla (like his predecessors at Edessa) did encourage the use of some version of the *Evangelion da Mepharreshe*, there is no evidence that he tried to impose one version in particular, like the Peshitta, as an "official" Bible. Even more fatal to Burkitt's theory, there is evidence that the Peshitta existed long before the episcopacy of Rabulla, and there is also evidence that the Old Syriac continued to dominate in the Syrian Church for many centuries after Rabulla, with the Peshitta rarely being

[2]Perhaps more tellingly, this same biography has five direct quotations and one paraphrase from the New Testament, not one of which is from the Peshitta. If the author actually believed Rabulla was responsible for the Peshitta, then why not take the Scripture quotations from the Peshitta?

[3]Little remains of his homilies and treatises, and the poetic pieces attributed to him in the Syriac Breviary are of questionable authenticity.

cited. In truth, Burkitt's theory doesn't survive even a cursory examination of the facts.

So what would be a more plausible account of the emergence of the Syriac New Testament? The earliest reference to a Syriac gospel is preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Here we find the testimony of Hegeisppus, a second-century Church historian (and likely a Jewish Christian). According to Eusebius, Hegeisppus mentions the existence of a Gospel according to the Hebrews written in Syriac.[4] It is quite possible that at this early stage a Syriac version of the Gospel according to the Hebrews was in general use in Syriac churches (along, possibly, with other gospels), and which later was displaced by a version of the canonical Gospels. However, contrary to Burkitt, this version of the canonical Gospels was not the Old Syriac version, but Tatian's Diatessaron, called in Syriac the *Evangelion da-Mehallete* (Gospel of the Mixed).

The Diatessaron and the Old Syriac. Tatian arrived in Rome during the reign of Pope Anicetus (155-166), who, perhaps significantly, was himself a Syrian from Emesa (Homs). It is generally believed that Tatian composed the Diatessaron while he was in Rome, for the Diatessaron at that time enjoyed wide circulation in the West in a Latin translation — even despite the fact the Roman Church had excommunicated Tatian during his visit. Though some modern scholars believe the Diatessaron was written in Greek, analysis suggests it was originally written in Syriac.[5] Tatian returned to Syria around 172 A.D, and his Diatessaron was soon adopted thereafter. Syria now had its own version of the four canonical Gospels, along with various Syriac versions of other New Testament works.

However, the Diatessaron, while much beloved by the Syrians, was ultimately unsatisfactory in that the rest of the Christian Church was moving toward the four-Gospel format. Thus it was inevitable that the Syrians would move in this direction as well. This trend eventually gave birth to the *Evangelion da Mepharreshe*, the Old Syriac textual tradition.

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[4]Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4:22:8.

[5]In favor of a possible Greek original is the discovery in 1933 of a roughly four-inch square fragment of the Diatessaron in Greek at Dura-Europos, a Roman fortress on the lower Euphrates. Also, in 1937 another Greek fragment was found in Egypt. However, according to Baumstark's analysis, both fragments show unmistakable signs of a Syriac original. F.C. Burkitt's implausible suggestion that the Diatessaron was originally composed in Latin has been discarded by scholars.

The usurpation of the Diatessaron by the Old Syriac was a slow but steady process, for the Diatessaron was familiar and revered. In fact, St. Ephraem at the start of the fourth century even wrote a commentary on it,[6] though it also shows Old Syriac readings (which he significantly calls the "lectio") that he appears to believe are more normative and accurate.[7] Thus, given the Diatessaron's popularity, it is not surprising that the Old Syriac type preserves numerous readings from the Diatessaron. We could even say the Old Syriac at this stage represents a synthesis of older textual material from the Diatessaron. However, we must not make the mistake of thinking the Old Syriac is a homogenous textual tradition. The truth is that the Old Syriac manuscripts differ markedly from each other.

The Old Syriac text largely displaced the Diatessaron during the fourth century. We find, for example, the Old Syriac quoted in ecclesiastical correspondence. St. Aphrahat, writing his *Demonstrations* from the Persian city of Mosul between 337 and 344, consistently cites the Old Syriac, and not the Diatessaron, showing that the movement toward the Old Syriac began in Persia before the year 337. The general use of the Old Syriac seems to have appeared spontaneously throughout the Syrian Church during the fourth century, until by the last decades there arose an effort to dispose of the Diatessaron altogether. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393-466) around 453 relates in his five-volume *Histories of Heresies* how tried to stamp out the use of the Diatessaron in some of the remote villages of his diocese. From the beginning of the fifth century on, we can say the Old Syriac tradition reigns supreme in the Syriac Church. Its use is standard in both Church documents and translations of Greek texts. The works of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, were translated in the fifth and sixth centuries using Old Syriac Scripture citations. The commentaries of St. John Chrysostom, which reproduce virtually every word of the New Testament, is translated around this time as well using the Old Syriac version. One Syriac manuscript of Chrysostom's *Commentary on Matthew* in the British Museum (Ms. Add. 12142), using the Old Syriac, was written at the beginning of the sixth century in Edessene characters

[6]An Armenian translation of this commentary was finally discovered in 1836.

[7]The fact that St. Ephraem makes a clear distinction between the Diatessaron and the Old Syriac, preferring the Old Syriac as more accurate and normative, suggests the Old Syriac was the more generally accepted version at that time.

— almost a century after Rabulla of Edessa, according to Burkitt, supposedly decreed the Peshitta the "official" Syriac version of Edessa.

The Old Syriac was introduced into Armenia while it was still dependant on the Syrian Church, and the first Armenian translation appears to have been from this Syriac; the Old Syriac was also the official text in Ethiopia, and formed the basis of the first Ethiopian translation.[8] The Old Syriac would maintain its esteemed place in the Syriac tradition until the Abbasid caliphate, beginning in 750. Then we witness within ecclesiastical circles a slow realization of the inadequacy of the Old Syriac text, and a growing interest, especially among the West Syrians, in a more accurate version.

[8]Such are the conclusions of Arthur Vöobus concerning the Armenian and Ethiopic translations. See his *Studies in the History of the Gospel Text in Syriac* (Louvain, Belgium: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1951), pp. 144-156.

A turning point occurred with the fall of Caliph Radi in 940, which introduced a long period of anarchy into the Middle East. Christians became targets of persecution, and churches and monasteries were systematically looted and destroyed by local warlords. By 1125, according to one account, not a monk existed in the diocese of Marde, or even in Tur ‘Abdin, a district regarded as the “Mount Athos” of Syria. The destruction of the monasteries, which so carefully preserved the Old Syriac tradition, proved the death knell for the Old Syriac text. This is finally where the Peshitta enters the picture.

The Peshitta. First, let’s understand what the Peshitta actually is — and is not. The Peshitta is not a “translation” as we think of it. It is rather a particular revision of an Old Syriac version that appeared prior to the Christological controversies of the fifth century. This revision was the fruit of a desire within academic circles — especially in places like Antioch, a major center of critical biblical research, and theological centers like Qenneshre Monastery — for a Syriac version of the New Testament that accorded more with the actual Greek text as known at Antioch. In fact, it is possible the Peshitta was actually born in either Antioch or the Qenneshre Monastery. Basically, the important thing to understand is that the Peshitta is a revision of the Old Syriac to make it conform as exactly as possible to the Greek text, and as such represents a significant departure from the traditional Syriac versions then in use.

The early date for the Peshitta, prior to the fifth century, is the reason why it eventually gained acceptance among Nestorians as well as the Melkites and Non-Chalcedonians. It is certainly older than the episcopate of Rabulla of Edessa, as can be seen by a Syriac translation of the Greek *Recognitiones* of Pseudo-Clement (British Museum, Ms. Add. 12150). This manuscript, composed in Edessa in 411, has Scripture citations in the pattern of the Peshitta. Moreover, Add. 12150 is not an original, but a copy of an older Syriac original, which suggests the Peshitta may have been in existence as early as the fourth century. However, because the Peshitta differed so markedly from the Old Syriac (and hence also from the textual tradition of the Diatessaron), the Peshitta was not widely embraced by the Syriac Church. We find very few citations of it before the sixth century, and even then not in Church documents. A theological treatise written by Henana, the last director of the theological School of Nisibis at the close of the sixth century, does not appear to have originally used the Peshitta. The Peshitta began to make progress from the sixth century onward — but even then, only

slowly. Even as late as the ninth century, we find Arabic versions of the New Testament based upon the Old Syriac. Even some later manuscripts of the Peshitta itself contain Old Syriac readings not known in earlier copies of the Peshitta!

While the Peshitta gained gradual acceptance among Western Syrians, its progress was slower in the East. The Syrian attachment to the Old Syriac only began to wane in the closing centuries of the first millennium, when a general consensus began to build on the need for a more accurate Syriac version. It was certainly not the first time Syrians had sensed such a need. Previous attempts at new Syriac versions of the New Testament include the Philoxenian version (merely a revision of the fifth-century Peshitta under the authority of the Non-Chalcedonian Bishop Philoxenus of Mabbug) and the Syro-Harclean version (made in the seventh century by Thomas of Harkel [Heraclea]). Ultimately none of these was able to challenge the Old Syriac. However, by the tenth century, the time was ripe for the Peshitta to come into its own.

The calamity that befell the Syrian Christian community in the wake of the Abbasid collapse, as mentioned earlier, only hastened the demise of the Old Syriac through the destruction of the monastic community, the stronghold of the Old Syriac tradition. Yet paradoxically, it was the Nestorian monastery of Gabriel in Mosul that at this point propelled the Peshitta into widespread use. This "Upper Monastery" began a series of revisions of their liturgical books that adopted readings from the Peshitta. With the general demise of the Old Syriac, the Peshitta became the accepted text in most Syriac churches, including non-Nestorian ones. It remains so to this day.

Even a cursory glance in the general direction of Syriac literature would seem to be enough to refute F. C. Burkitt's theories on the development of the Syriac Bible. The late Arthur Vöobus certainly thought so, and in 1951 this noted scholar of Syriac literature published an important study on the subject entitled *Studies in the History of the Gospel Text in Syriac* that laid out the evolution of the Syriac New Testament we have just summarized, marshaling an impressive mountain of evidence from every conceivable Syriac source. Unfortunately, entrenched opinions are not easily dislodged, and Burkitt's improbable conjectures continue to hold the field among biblical scholars today. This is sad, for the true story of the Syriac Bible is an amazing testament to the love for Scripture and scholastic vitality characterizing the Syrian Church. Internationally respected biblical

scholar Bruce Metzger, professor of New Testament language and literature at Princeton Theological Seminary, says the "separate versions [of the New Testament] in Syriac . . . produced during the first six centuries of the Christian era is noteworthy testimony to the vitality and scholarship of Syrian churchmen."[1] Metzger then quotes Eberhard Nestle (1851-1913), renowned German biblical scholar and textual critic, as saying that no other part of the early Church contributed more toward the translation of the Bible into the vernacular than the Syrians, and that Syriac manuscripts have been found from Armenia to India, and from Egypt to China.

The Syriac Theological Heritage

The early Syriac theological tradition was quite distinct from that which developed in Hellenistic culture. Whereas the Greek theological tradition tended to focus on the abstract using philosophical terminology, the Syriac tradition preferred to express itself in symbol and imagery. For example, many early Syriac works, like the forty-two *Odes of Solomon*,[2] expressed an ecstatic love for God using the imagery of a sacred wedding, an image foreign to Hellenistic thought, whereas Christ as the "Heavenly Bridegroom" dominates much of early Syriac literature. Also, the Church is equated with Paradise (Ode 11:15-16), which continued to be a favorite theme in Syrian catechetical works. There are also interesting points of contact between the *Odes* and Epistles of St. Ignatius (d. 107), in particular between the "speaking water" of Ode 9 and the "living and speaking" water mentioned in Ignatius' Epistle to the Romans.[3]

The Place of Prayer. A number of Syriac writers from the fourth and fifth centuries deserve mention, like Shemon Bar Sebaai (d. 341) and Aphrahat the Persian Sage, a bishop of the monastery of Saint Matthew on the eastern shore of the Tigris (d. 350). Aphrahat's writings,

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[1]Bruce Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 3.

[2]While some scholars have argued the *Odes* are Syriac in origin, scholarly opinion is still deeply divided on the provenance and date of the *Odes*. Dates range from A.D. 80 to 210, and the author a Jewish Christian, an orthodox Christian, a pagan Christian, a Gnostic Christian, a Montanist, etc.

[3]"[T]here is in me no fire of love for material things; but only water living and speaking in me, and saying to me from within, 'Come to the Father.'" (Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Romans*, 7:2)

especially the *Demonstrations*, are marked by a spiritual transparency stemming from the life of prayer. To Aphrahat, prayer is necessarily beautiful and its works salutary; however, it is only heard by God when forgiveness is found in it, and beloved by God when free of every guile. Prayer is powerful when the power of God is made effective in it. Other Syriac writers from this period — like Corlona, Gregory the Monk, Marotha of Mepharkeen (350-429), and Ibas of Edessa[4] — were biblical exegetes, teachers, poets, hymnographers, and theologians.

St. Ephraem, among the most brilliant of the Fathers of the Syrian Church, deserves special notice here. He was born around the year 306 in Nisibis, a frontier town on the precarious border between Rome and Persia. Early on St. Ephraem gained a reputation as a scholar and as one who genuinely cared for the poor. In 363, he migrated to Edessa and was ordained a deacon, which he remained for the rest of his life. A decade later, Edessa experienced an outbreak of the plague, and St. Ephraem successfully managed to shame the rich of the city into donating some of their wealth for the relief of the destitute. He is even said to have founded the first Christian hospital in the East, which had three-hundred beds. He died in Edessa while caring for the sick on 9 June 373, and his reported dying wish was that he not be buried with either the clergy or the rich, but with the poor.

St. Ephraem wrote prolifically on a wide range of topics. He never hesitated to challenge the teachings of heretics like Bardaisan, Marcion, and Mani, and even commented on current scientific theories. His biblical commentaries combined a literal exegesis of Scripture with poetic symbolism. Such exegesis lent itself well to homiletics, as can be seen in the following observation about Jesus calling Zacchaeus out of a tree in Luke 19:2-10: “The sole reason He descended from the heights [of heaven], which no one could reach, was so that short publicans like

[4]Ibas (d. 457) became bishop of Edessa in 435, and almost immediately proved to be a lightening rod of controversy for advocating a mediating position between Nestorianism and the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria. He was deposed during the “Robber Synod” of 449, but rehabilitated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. However, his epistle to Bishop Mari in Persia, written in 433 before Ibas became a bishop, was condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 553. Ibas is also remembered for having translated into Syriac the writings of the Antiochian theologian Theodore of Mopsuestia.

Zacchaeus could reach Him." [5] His writings contain many such outstanding images that are both vivid and emotionally impacting.

Although Ephraem represents a non-hellenized form of Christianity, he cannot be isolated from the theology of contemporaries like St. Athanasius the Great, St. Basil the Great, and St. Gregory the Theologian. Ephraem shared the same Faith with them; only his manner of expressing it was uniquely Syriac. Avoiding Greek philosophical terminology, Ephraim did his theology by way of paradox and symbolism. For example, in Hymn 8 of his *Hymns on Virginity* we find a paradoxical observation of Christ's death: "By means of death they silenced You [Christ]. Your death itself became endowed with speech; it instructs and teaches the universe" (22). Poetry for him was the best vehicle for expressing his spiritual experience. His beautiful poetry enabled him to go beyond words to reach their inner truth and theological meaning. Among the many disciples of Ephraem was Mar Aba, the author of numerous commentaries on the Gospels, as well as a homily on Job; Zenobius, deacon of Edessa, who wrote treatises against both Marcion and Pamphylus, as well as a *Life of St. Ephraem*; and also Abraham and Maras, mentioned in Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History* as men "in whom the Syrians and whoever among them pursued accurate learning make a great boast."[6]

Sozomen also mentions that in the region of Osrhoene there flourished a certain Syrian named Harmonius deeply versed in Greek erudition, and who propagated Greek philosophical opinions concerning the soul and the impossibility of the resurrection of the body. He also composed Syriac hymns based on Greek meters and musical theory, popularizing his heretical opinions in lyrics. Sozomen even asserts that St. Ephraem began composing his great hymns in response to Harmonius, thus writing verse "in accordance with the doctrines of the Church. . . . From that period the Syrians sang the odes of Ephraem according to the law of the ode established by Harmonius."[7] Be that as it may, Greek influence on Syriac literature only became pronounced following St. Ephraem's death in 373, steadily growing from the fifth

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[5]Ephraem the Syrian, *Homily on Our Lord*, 48.

[6]Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3:16. Sozomen was a lawyer at Constantinople, but was originally from Bethelia, near Gaza in Palestine.

[7]Ibid.

century onwards. This interaction with Greek ideas, however, did not alter the basic structure of Syriac thought, but it did give it a new mode of expression.

Syrian theology is normally associated with Antioch. However, Antioch itself was greatly influenced by the theological schools located at Nisibis and Edessa. The theological schools of Nisibis and Edessa were typical Semitic schools, reminiscent of Jewish rabbinical schools, the *beth-hammidrash* (house of studies). The evidence of the existence of Christians in Nisibis, a major political/commercial center in northeastern Mesopotamia, before the fourth century is rather sparse. There is an epitaph for a Bishop Aberkios of Hierapolis, who died in the late second century, that mentions Christian "associates" in Nisibis, but these may have been Gnostic Christians. Orthodox Christians certainly existed at the beginning of the fourth century, when Jacob of Nisibis became the city's first bishop (in 308/9). Jacob reigned for around thirty years in Nisibis, constructing a cathedral in the city between 313 and 320, and attending the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325 (he is listed among the signatories of the Council). Returning from the Council, Jacob saw to the establishment of a catechetical school in Nisibis, and appointed St. Ephraem as its "head." This appointment soon thereafter became regarded as the birth of this important school.

Edessa as the Center of Syriac Speaking Christians. Edessa was from a very early date the center of Syriac-speaking Christianity. As we've already observed, ancient tradition has it that Christianity came to Edessa shortly after the death and resurrection of Christ, during the second reign of King Abgar the Black (13-50 A.D.). Christianity reportedly became the official religion of Edessa during Abgar's reign, and continued to flourish during the reign of Abgar's eldest son, Manu V (50-57). However, Abgar's second son, Manu VI who came to the throne in A.D. 57, persecuted the Church and virtually wiped out the new religion. There is scant evidence of a Christian presence after this. The martyrdoms of Sts. Sharbil, Babai, and Barsamya took place in Edessa around the year 112. There is also an account of a synod in 190 that consisted of eighteen Osrhoene bishops addressing the Quartodeciman controversy to determine the date of the Passover, and a mention in 201 of a church in Edessa destroyed by a flood. Christianity only revived in Edessa at the beginning of the third century, when Palut was consecrated the first bishop of Edessa by Serapion, Bishop of Antioch. From that point, Edessa quickly became an entirely Christian city. It was in Edessa

that St. Ephraem established his second school (modeled after the one he started in Nisibis), which was called the School of the Persians. While in Edessa, St. Ephraem wrote most of the biblical commentaries (the majority of which, unfortunately, have only survived in Armenian translation) that became the standard biblical textbooks of the school.

The Christological debates of the fifth century contributed to the split of the Antiochian Church into three camps, Melkite, Non-Chalcedonian, and Nestorian. This obviously served to weaken Syriac influence in the larger Christian world. By the middle of the fifth century, the School of Edessa split into three separate institutions: St. Ephraem's original School of the Persians continued as the oldest and most prestigious school, but was moving toward Nestorianism; there also arose the Melkite "School of the Syrians," which sought a compromise with those rejecting the Fourth Ecumenical Council; and finally there appeared the "School of the Armenians," which was openly hostile to Chalcedon. Soon the School of the Persians became dominated by Syrians from the Persian Empire, which was Nestorianism's stronghold, and was led in the fifth century by such Nestorian masters as Qiiore and Narsai (or Narses), the celebrated scholar from Kurdistan who would eventually lead the School into exile in Persian-controlled Nisibis. Among the School's former students are such bishops as Ibas of Edessa (who had also been a teacher at the School), Patriarch Acacius, and Bishop Barsauma of Nisibis.

The School of the Persians placed a high emphasis on the exegesis of Scripture (though it also was renowned for teaching Greek philosophy and logic), a tradition that might be traced back to the influence of St. Ephraem. However, St. Ephraem's biblical commentaries were replaced by those of Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428), whose writings would be anathematized at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. At the School of Persians, though, Theodore was known as "the Interpreter" and official expositor of Holy Writ. The School's doggedly pro-Nestorian stance, wherein students were taught to reject the anathemas against Nestorius and the "Monophysite" Council of Ephesus of 431, is in part explained by its veneration for their "Interpreter," Theodore of Mopsuestia.

It was precisely because of its strident Nestorianism that Emperor Zeno at the end of the fifth century ordered the School at Edessa closed, forcing it to migrate to Nisibis in Persia, where it reorganized near the cathedral as the School of Nisibis. It quickly became the most

prestigious school in Asia, drawing students from all over. The School was a close-knit community more akin to a monastery than a modern seminary. Among its twenty-two "rules" were requirements of celibacy and the relinquishment of all personal property to the community. Studies began rigorously at the crack of dawn, but on the positive side tuition was free (though students were expected to work during the school break from August to October). Perhaps inspired by St. Ephraem's example, the School also had a hospital and a famous department of medicine.

Though the Persian Empire in which the School of Nisibis was located was officially (and at times vehemently) Zoroastrian, the demise of the School was ultimately not the result of Zoroastrian hostility. Rather, the end of the School came at the hands of its own faculty and student body. During the decade of the 570s, the School's head, Henana, became the lightening rod of a theological scandal. Originally a priest from Adiabene, he became headmaster (*mepasquana*) of the School in 571, at a time when enrollment was down. His zeal for education quickly increased the School's population to eight hundred students, but his scholarly inquisitiveness also led him a foul of the School's staunchly Nestorian sentiments. Not satisfied with merely spoon-feeding students the teachings of the "Interpreter," Theodore of Mopsuestia, Henana also introduced students to the commentaries of St. John Chrysostom. Moreover, Henana even appeared to favor the Christology defined at the Council of Chalcedon. His commitment to strict Nestorian theology was naturally questioned, and opposition to Henana quickly reared its head in powerful circles. A bishop named Elias went so far as to allow the establishment of a rival school at Nisibis, called the "School of Bet Sahde," and which was endorsed by the influential Great Monastery on Mt. Izla. Intrigue mounted, a general synod met and condemned Henana in 596, and both students and teachers deserted him, but Henana managed to hang on to his position. Finally, the School succumbed when the students marched out of the School in protest of Henana, carrying with them gospels, censers, and crosses wrapped in black veils. They left chanting the litany of the saints, leaving behind them only about twenty people and some children at the school. Three

other schools arose to fill the void,[1] but none could match the School founded by St. Ephraem.

St. John of Damascus. Melkite Syriac thought, though greatly challenged by the Nestorians, the Non-Chalcedonians, and later by the newly emergent religion of Islam, continued to flourish in the literature of great Syriac Fathers. Among the greatest theologians of the Melkite Orthodox Church has to be St. John Mansur of Damascus, for in his writings are synthesized the whole patristic tradition. In his time, he was called "Chrysorrhoas" ("golden-flowing," also the name of the river that irrigated the gardens of Damascus) because of the "golden grace" of his teachings. St. John gave up a comfortable existence as an official in the court of the caliph in Damascus around the year 715 to enter St. Sabbas Monastery in Palestine, where he was ordained a priest. There he devoted himself to asceticism and the study of the Fathers, his later writings being the fruit of his intense study and spiritual insight gained through prayer. He brilliantly defended the use of icons in three separate treaties during the Iconoclastic controversy, and authored many other works against heretical movements such as Nestorianism, Monophysitism, Monothelitism, a Neo-Manichaean sect known as the Paulicians, and others. He is also credited with the composition of numerous hymns of great beauty found in the Octoechos (Book of Eight Tones), and which are still regularly sung in the Church. Though composed in Greek (as were all his writings), the hymns are Syriac in their spiritual outlook and manner of expression, even incorporating outright Aramaicisms.

His greatest claim to lasting fame, though, is his monumental work called *The Fount of Wisdom*, a compendium of knowledge that has been renowned in both the East and the West for over a thousand years. The work is divided into three sections: an overview of philosophy as a basis for understanding theological discourse, a catalogue of the various heresies that have arisen through history (". . . so that by recognizing the lie," he writes, "we may more closely follow the truth."), and finally a comprehensive exposition of Orthodox theology that has become the closest thing to an "official" theological textbook the Orthodox Church has ever known. One of the lesser known aspects of the *Fount of*

[1]One was at the Great Monastery on Mt. Izla, near Nisibis; another was the School of Seleucia-Ctesiphon founded by Mar Aba; and the third was at Gundeshapur, which school was especially noted for its department of medicine.

Wisdom is that it contains, in the second section entitled "On Heresies," the first real Christian critique of Islam (Heresy 101, "The Ishmaelites"). St. John of Damascus here demonstrates a surprisingly thorough knowledge of the Koran (which he quotes), Islamic Hadith (corpus of the sayings of Mohammed), and Sunnah (corpus of Islamic tradition). He seriously challenges Mohammed's authority as a prophet, points out contradictions in Islamic beliefs and traditions,[2] and even criticizes Islam's treatment of women (polygamy, easy divorce, etc.).

Theodore Abu Qurrah. Another great Syrian intellectual was Theodore Abu Qurrah, Bishop of Harran, who has been called by one modern scholar "the Arabic successor of St. John of Damascus." Abu Qurrah was born around 755 and raised in Edessa. He was fluent in Arabic, Syriac, and Greek, and it is evident from his writings that he knew the Koran, medicine, logic, and philosophy. He mentions in his Arabic homily, "The Death of Jesus Christ," that he wrote thirty homilies in Syriac, though none have survived. He sought the unity of Christians by clarifying the doctrines of the Church to others using the Scriptures and elementary logic. Although he believed faith to be superior to reason, Abu Qurrah never hesitated to use reason to establish to heretical sectarians the reasonableness of Orthodox doctrine. Abu Qurrah, like the Apostle Paul, saw himself as a soldier of Christ (cf. Eph. 6:10-17); and, as a true successor of the Apostle, he happily took upon himself the responsibility of disseminating the Gospel to anyone who would listen. A Syriac chronicle, the anonymous *Ad annum 1234*, mentions that Abu Qurrah even debated Caliph Al Ma'mun about the claims of Christianity. This debate was held in 829, and Abu Qurrah died shortly thereafter.

Abu Qurrah wrote prolifically, but not all of his extant writings have yet been published. Three of his treatises deserve special notice: *On the Veneration of Icons*, *On the Existence of the Creator and on the True Religion*, and *On the Confirmation of the Law of Moses, the Gospel and Orthodoxy*. The first section of Abu Qurrah's *Confirmation* is especially remarkable in that it is actually a refutation of Islam, written

[2]In one amusing section, St. John writes that the Moslems "accuse us of being idolaters because we venerate the cross, which they abominate. And we answer them: 'How is it, then, that you rub yourselves against a stone in your Ka'ba and kiss and embrace it?'" See *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, Frederic Chase, trans., Fathers of the Church, Vol. 37 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), p. 156.

in Arabic, in the guise of a polemic against Judaism. The reason for this artifice was that anything at the time openly critical of Islam written by a Christian bishop like Abu Qurrah would not only have been suicidal, but utterly pointless as well since the treatise would never have been allowed to see circulation. Abu Qurrah was therefore an exceptionally courageous bishop, brilliantly overthrowing the claims of Islam within an Islamic empire then at the height of its power. Moreover, he did this in a manner that eschewed the *ad hominem* argument.

St. Isaac of Nineveh. While figures like St. John of Damascus and Theodore Abu Qurrah never hesitated to respond to heresy, it would be inaccurate to characterize the Syriac tradition as "polemical." In fact, one of the surprising features of the Melkite Syriac Church has been its openness to the contributions of luminaries from both Non-Chalcedonian and Nestorian sources. Perhaps the most obvious example of this tendency has been the Melkite adoption of St. Isaac of Nineveh, a Nestorian bishop who advocated the life of "stillness" (*Hesychasmos,* ἡσυχασμός). St. Isaac was born in the seventh century in Bet Qatraye (modern Bahrain), and early on in life seized universal acclaim as a remarkable ascetic. After intense study of Scripture and the Church Fathers, Isaac entered a monastery and became a renowned teacher in his native Bet Qatraye. He eventually came to the notice of the Nestorian Catholicos Isho'yahb III, and Isaac was consecrated bishop of Nineveh around 630. However, Isaac abdicated after only five months, probably as a result of a theological dispute. (Nineveh at the time was plagued by several theological controversies, and Isaac's successor also was forced to resign.) Isaac first lived as a solitary on the mountain of Matout, in the region of Beit Huzaye, and then finally settled at the monastery of Rabban Shabur, located along the Persian Gulf in Iran. He remained at this monastery the rest of his life, composing his five books of ascetical homilies (seventy-seven in all) for which he is today famous.

According to a biographical blurb in a ninth-century work called *The Book of Chastity* (written by an East Syrian author known as Isho'denah), Isaac studied Scripture so much while at the monastery that his eyes failed, and blindness forced him to dictate his writings. This seems plausible, for Isaac had a high regard for Scripture: "The mind indeed with a little study of Scripture," writes St. Isaac, "and a little labor in fasting and stillness forgets its former musing and is made pure,

in that it becomes free from alien habits."[1] Yet it seems certain that not all his Homilies were composed while he was blind, for in Homily 62 St. Isaac mentions that his fingers sometimes fail him when he is writing.

Although he was a Nestorian bishop, St. Isaac's writings were widely hailed shortly after his death, though novices in monasteries usually weren't allowed to read them because they were considered too advanced for one just beginning the spiritual life. Consequently, according to Ibn As-salt (ninth century), novices first needed to study the Scriptures carefully and make sufficient progress in purifying the mind through ascetic labors before advancing to the writings of St. Isaac.

As St. Isaac's popularity spread throughout the Eastern Syrian community, his writings soon came into the hands of Western Syrian monastics, who a century later translated them into Greek from a West Syrian manuscript. This was accomplished by two monks at the Mar Sabbas Monastery in Palestine, named Patrikios and Abramios. Once in Greek, St. Isaac's Homilies spread throughout the Orthodox Roman Empire. In the tenth century, the Homilies were translated from Greek into Arabic by 'Abdallah ben Fadhl ben 'Abdallah. Today, there are extant versions of St. Isaac's Homilies in Latin (the first translation being done in the late fifteenth century), Russian, French, Japanese, Italian, Romanian, Slavonic, German, English, and others. St. Isaac's feast is celebrated in the Eastern Orthodox Church on January 28, and he continues to be one of the most widely respected authors on spirituality. His continuing appeal is manifested by the over two hundred websites that make reference to him.

[1]Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homily 3*, 11.

Because of the immense prestige acquired by the Arabic language after the Islamic invasion of the seventh century, Arabic eventually overtook Syriac as the primary language of Middle Eastern Christians, especially among Christian intellectuals. Consequently, Melkite scholars (unlike most of their non-Chalcedonian counterparts) started using Arabic in their theological writings. However, as explained above, Syriac remained the primary liturgical language until the eighteenth century.

The Syriac Liturgical Tradition

The early Liturgical traditions of Antioch and the Syrian hinterland were varied, and continued to develop up to the sixth century. Among its representatives we have the Liturgy of St. James, originating in Jerusalem but adopted throughout the East, and which was celebrated in both Greek and Syriac. There is also the so-called Clementine Liturgy found in the *Apostolic Constitution*, probably written at the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century. The Liturgy of Addai and Mari, prominent in Persia and Edessa among the Nestorians, is the oldest East Syrian Liturgy in existence (the anaphora of which, interestingly enough, lacks the words of institution).[1] The *Catechism of St. Cyril of Jerusalem* also contains a wealth of information on the formation of Antiochian liturgical practice during the fourth century, Jerusalem being within the jurisdiction of Antioch at the time. All these different sources contributed to the Syriac liturgical tradition that, along with the Greek tradition (which developed alongside the Syriac tradition), eventually formed our present Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the liturgy in common use throughout the Melkite Orthodox Church.[2] Even the Armenian liturgical tradition, as it exists today, has been heavily influenced by Syrian liturgical practice.

The Didache and the Eucharist. The earliest Syrian liturgical tradition may be found in the *Didache,* διδαχή, a Syrian church manual

[1]The Nestorian liturgy, mainly used in Persia, continued to evolve through the fifth and sixth centuries, using three different anaphoras.

[2]We should also include in the Syriac liturgical tradition the Maronites, a Monothelite sect beginning in the seventh century that formed a union with Rome in the thirteenth century. They use a Syriac Liturgy that has been in part modified by Latin influences, and which has links with the Anaphora of Addai and Mari.

that possibly dates as far back as the end of the first century (though many ascribe it in its present form to around 150 A.D). In chapters nine and ten of the *Didache*, one finds the prayers for either an ancient agape meal or a domestic celebration of the Eucharist. The present consensus is that the prayer represents an agape meal because, for one thing, the prayer over the chalice precedes the prayer over the bread, something otherwise unknown in liturgical practice. Also, the words of institution are absent from the prayer. However, the fact that the chalice is blessed first does not necessarily mean the prayer isn't a Eucharistic anaphora; instead, it can simply indicate the antiquity of the prayer, which may pre-date the solidifying of the liturgical custom of first blessing the chalice. As to the absence of the words of institution, we have already pointed out that the Liturgy of Addai and Mari also omit these words. By themselves, these reasons hardly warrant the conclusion that the prayer in the *Didache* is not a Eucharistic anaphora, especially considering that the bread and wine are said to be "vouchsafed spiritual food and drink and eternal life through Thy Servant [Jesus Christ]" In fact, the short sentences that conclude the prayer are certainly Eucharistic: "Hosanna to the God of David. If anyone is holy, let him come; if anyone is not let him repent. Maranatha. Amen." (*Didache*, 10:6). These words of course are echoed to this day in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom at the elevation of the Gifts ("Let us attend. Holy things are for the holy.") and at the call to communion ("With fear of God, and faith and love, draw near."). Patristic scholar Johannes Quasten, in his study of this prayer, concludes that "the context [of the prayer] warrants the assumption that these prescriptions were intended to regulate the First Communion of the newly baptized on Easter Eve."[3]

The Clementine liturgy. We also want to address more fully the Clementine liturgy found in the *Apostolic Constitutions,* which is an ecclesiastical manual of instruction claiming to come from the Apostles, and allegedly compiled by St. Clement of Rome (d. 96). In actuality, the *Constitutions* as a finished work could not have been written any earlier than 341 A.D (because of the inclusion at the end of Book Eight of twenty of the eighty-five Apostolic Canons formulated at the Synod of Antioch that year). The work in its present form was probably complete by the year 400, though large sections of it were probably composed over a century earlier. The Syrian author/redactor of the *Constitutions*

[3]Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. 1 (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1990), p. 33.

had Arian tendencies, and consequently the work was condemned by the Council in Trullo in 692. The *Constitutions* freely borrows from earlier material, such as the Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum* (early third century, and which has survived only in Syriac), the *Didache*, and the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome, which is dated between 200-220.

The Clementine Liturgy found in Book Eight of the *Apostolic Constitutions* is a synthesis of a variety of liturgical traditions, but the basic underlying structure is the Antiochian Liturgy as celebrated in the fourth century. Anyone reading the Clementine Liturgy will immediately recognize it as an adaptation of what we today call the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, with all its Antiochian usages and forms. Even the phrasing of many of its prayers and *ektenias* are identical. Also, Antiochian bishops are remembered in the Prayers of the Faithful, and Christmas — as a feast distinct from Epiphany — is listed at the end of Book Eight as a feast on which Christians are prohibited from working (Antioch was the first Church to observe Christmas in the East, starting around 375). With its syncretistic additions, the redacted Antiochian Liturgy known as the Clementine Liturgy may never have been actually celebrated. Nevertheless, the Clementine Liturgy represents the earliest text of a complete Eucharistic liturgy, and it offers us invaluable insights as to how the fourth-century Antiochian Liturgy was celebrated. As Hugh Wybrew observes of the Clementine Liturgy, "In its general form it can be taken as representing the rite of Antioch in the late fourth century, for which that of Constantinople ultimately derived."[4]

St. James Liturgy. This Antiochian Liturgy developed and spread throughout the Middle East, and even influenced liturgical development in the West. However, sometime between the years 397 and 431, the St. James Liturgy came to Antioch and there displaced the older rite represented in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.[5] The Liturgy of St. James developed in Palestine during the fourth century, though it still generally

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[4]Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1990), p. 38

[5]St. John Chrysostom left Antioch in 397 and seems to have known nothing of the celebration of the Liturgy of St. James. On the other hand, Jerusalem gained independence from Antioch in 431 at the Council of Ephesus, and in the process relations with Antioch became embittered due to the machinations of Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem — in consequence, Jerusalem liturgical fashions were out of favor in Antioch. Thus some date between 397 and 431 seems likely for the adoption of the Liturgy of St. James at Antioch.

retained the main features of the Antiochian Liturgy found in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. While it may seem strange that a relatively new liturgy would supplant an ancient one in Antioch, the reason for it probably lies in the increasing prestige Jerusalem obtained during the fourth century as a site of pilgrimage. Many flocked to Jerusalem around this time to visit the new churches Constantine had built on the holy sites, and some, like Egeria of Galicia, described the liturgical rites they witnessed in their journals. Thus Antioch adopted the Liturgy of St. James virtually unchanged (the local allusion to "holy and glorious Zion," for example, was left unaltered), though the actual anaphora itself never really took hold: at least seventy-two different versions of it evolved in various parts of the Patriarchate between the fifth and fifteenth centuries.

The Liturgy of St. James never established itself at Constantinople, which instead drew freely from the older liturgical tradition of Antioch. After the seventh century, while Constantinople was at the height of its prestige and Antioch was under Islamic control, a reverse process began, and Constantinople began to influence Antiochian practice. However, this influence would remain weak for a long time. It was only after 969, following Antioch's recapture by Constantinople, that Greek liturgical influence expanded. The Liturgy of St. James, which was celebrated in the Syriac language, then began to disappear in the Melkite Syriac Church, though it lingered on in some areas until the thirteenth century (the Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox of Syria, however, continue to cling to it).

We no longer possess the Melkite Syriac text of the Liturgy of St. James as it was celebrated during the first millennium. The oldest Non-Chalcedonian text is from the tenth century, and there also exists a Maronite text from the fifteenth century. The oldest Greek manuscript of the Liturgy of St. James is Vatican Codex 2282, a twelfth century manuscript with Arabic titles. The totality of these manuscripts, according to Archimandrite Touma Bitar, reveal certain particularities of the Antiochian liturgical tradition.[6] For example, we learn that the

[6] Bitar Touma, "The Syriac Language in the Heritage of the Antiochian Orthodox Church," *Annour Magazine*, Vol. 1 (Beirut, Lebanon), 1996. (In Arabic) Concerning the major Melkite Syriac manuscripts that have survived until now, the oldest is "The Book of Prophecies, Vespers and Hours in the Major Feasts" (ninth century, Vatican Codex 278), and the most recent is "The Second Part of the Triodion" (1655, Codex 132 in Paris). The surviving Melkite Syriac liturgical books include the Menaion, a book of the Epistles, the Octoechos, an altar Gospel, Euchologion, Triodion, Psalter, Monologion (an

biblical readings are taken from the Peshitta translation, that the liturgical year started in October (a practice shared with the Non-Chalcedonians, the Nestorians, and the Maronites), that certain musical notations were employed that predate the Byzantine notation system, that there were eight (and not eleven) readings from the gospels at Matins, and that there is no knowledge of the Pentecostarion[7] in the manuscripts.

The influence of the Syriac liturgical tradition in world Orthodoxy has not been restricted to the Greek-speaking Church. For example, the Slavs adopted from the Syriac tradition the division of the Triodion into two parts: 1) from the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee to the Friday before Palm Sunday, and 2) from Lazarus Saturday to All-Saints Sunday. Moreover, in the Slavic tradition, the Pentecostarion is known as the "Blossom of the Triodion," and the Triodion is known as the "Lenten Triodion," just as it is in the Syrian tradition. The Slavs also refer to the Horologion as the *Simple* or *Ordinary Book*; compare this with the Syriac term, ܣܸܡܼܛܵܐ which is still used by the Non-Chalcedonians, Nestorians, and the Maronites.

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enlarged Euchologion), a book of Liturgies, Liturgikon, and a Book of Ordinations. Scholars have identified the monasteries mentioned in these manuscripts: the Monastery of Panteleimon near Antioch (1023), St. Moses in Palestine (1030), St. Domitios near Antioch (1041), St. Andrew in Tebshar (1207), St. Christopher in Saidnaya (1207), Virgin of Hamatoura (1607), Monastery of Kaftoun (1256), Balamand (1499), St. Mama in Kfarsaroun (15th century), St. George in Kfour (1477).

[7]The Pentecostarion is the liturgical book containing the prayers, hymns, and readings for the season between Pascha and the Sunday of all Saints (the first Sunday after Pentecost).

Syriac Spirituality

While there are many intriquing points of similarity between the Syriac Fathers and their Greek-speaking counterparts, Syriac spirituality remains unique and often vivid in its expression. In particular, there is an emphasis on ascetic work (ܦܘܠܚܢܐ *foulhono)*, meaning variously "to plough," "to worship," and "to practice"). Syriac asceticism manifests itself as practical activities that are often contrasted with — and sometimes even subordinate to — the contemplative life. As St. Isaac of Nineveh explains, "Spiritual knowledge is a consequence of the practice of good works."[8] To the Syriac Fathers, "knowledge" is not the mere acquisition of theological data through study, but is experiential and the result of following Christ's commandments in one's own life: "It is not enough merely to find Christ through one's reading," explains St. Peter of Damascus, "but one should also receive Him in oneself by imitating His way of life in the world. . . . For what is the use of appearing to be a king if you are a slave to anger and desire in this world, while in the next you will receive age-long punishment because you would not keep the commandments?"[9]

Faith and Ascetic Work United. There is no artificial opposition between faith and ascetic works in the Syriac tradition, such as is frequently found in the West after the Reformation. Rather than opposition, Syrian Orthodoxy sees a harmony between the two. In the *Demonstrations* of St. Aphrahat, we find a beautiful letter he wrote on the subject of faith that illustrates this harmony. St. Aphrahat first describes faith as a building under construction requiring a variety of different building materials (ascetical labors), and which will only be completed at the end of our life. Jesus Christ is of course the cornerstone of the foundation, and the entire edifice rests on Him: "On Him, on the Stone," Aphrahat explains, "is faith based, and on faith is reared the structure." He then goes on to add:

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[8]Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homily 3*, 14.

[9]Peter of Damascus, *A Treasury of Divine Knowledge*, "The Fourth Stage of Contemplation." See *The Philokalia*, G.E.H. Palmer, et. al., trans. & eds., Vol. 3 (Boston, MA: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 126. St. Peter of Damascus flourished during the twelfth century and was a prolific author, as can be seen by the fact that his writings occupy around two-hundred pages of Volume Three in the English version of the *Philokalia*.

> For the habitation of the house is required pure fasting, and it is made firm by faith. There is also needed for it pure prayer, and through faith is it accepted. Necessary for it too is love, and with faith is it compounded. Furthermore alms are needed, and through faith are they given. He demands also meekness, and by faith is it adorned. He chooses too chastity, and by faith is it loved. He joins with himself holiness, and in faith is it planted. He cares also for wisdom, and through faith is it acquired. He desires also hospitality, and by faith does it abound. Requisite for Him also is simplicity, and with faith is it commingled. He demands patience also, and by faith is it perfected. He has respect also to long-suffering, and through faith is it acquired. He loves mourning also, and through faith is it manifested. He seeks also for purity, and by faith is it preserved. All these things does the faith demand that is based on the rock of the true Stone, that is Christ. These works are required for Christ the King, Who dwells in men that are built up in these works.[10]

In the above passage by Aphrahat we see a typically Syrian explanation of a theological issue (the complimentary roles of faith and good works), using metaphor expressed in poetic structure rather than discursive reasoning conveyed through philosophical terminology. Another memorable explanation of the role of ascetic works is by St. Ephraem, who describes ascetic labors as love's response to the Incarnation: "Majesty [Christ] made itself small so that those who held it could endure it. As majesty bent down to our smallness, so should our love lift itself above every desire in order to meet majesty."[11]

The Place of the Heart. The spiritual masters of the Syriac Church have also made great contributions to what is commonly called the spirituality of the "heart" (ܠܒܐ *lebbo*), meaning the "innermost part," the "essence" of something, the "core"). The heart is not the seat of the emotions, as it is commonly understood in the West; rather, it represents our rational and spiritual faculties.[12] It is our innermost being, the link

[10]Aphrahat, *Demonstration 1* (Of Faith), 4.

[11]Ephraem the Syrian, *Homily on Our Lord*, 51.

[12]Compare the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, where the priest calls out during the anaphora, "Let us lift up our hearts," with the same section in the Clementine Liturgy found in Book 8 of the *Apostolic Constitutions*: "Lift up your mind." And all the people respond, "We lift it up onto the Lord."

between body and spirit, the only place where contact with God is possible.

Representing as it does our innermost being, the heart in Syriac thought constitutes the only acceptable offering we can make to God: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart — these, O God, You will not despise." (Ps. 51:17). To be an acceptable sacrifice, the heart must be clear and transparent (or "limpid"). This limpidity of heart is known in Syriac as *shafyut lebba*,[13] and is characterized by a complete spiritual openness and hope in God. It is found in prayer that springs forth from the deepest recesses of the heart, and only through such prayer of the heart is the uncreated light of God manifested to us: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). Syriac Fathers, like St. Aphrahat, underline the fact that limpidity of heart is not restricted to the contemplative life, but extends to the active life as well.

Syriac mysticism is the spirituality of the indwelling of God in us, a theophany to the heart and in the heart. The Syriac Fathers sometimes exemplified this idea by referring to the angelic annunciation that the Holy Spirit would "overshadow" Mary. In Luke 1:35, the Greek term for "overshadow" is *episkiazo* ἐπισκιάζω (in the Synoptic Gospels, the same word is also used in the Transfiguration accounts of the bright cloud that envelops the disciples). The word used in Syriac translations of the Annunciation is (ܫܟܢ *shagen*), which means "to inhabit." Taking their cue from this incident in the Gospel of Luke, the Syriac Fathers saw a certain correspondence between Mary and the Eucharist in the economy of salvation. As Mary unites God and humanity in her womb by the Incarnation, so the Eucharist unites God and humanity for our sanctification.[14] By taking communion, we allow God "to inhabit" the innermost parts of our bodies. Thus, according to St. Ephraim, the Son of God descends from heaven for our sakes, and we must sanctify the bridal chamber of our hearts for Him to allow Him to "incarnate" within us just as He incarnated in Mary. In this process of sanctification (or divine "inhabiting"), Syriac spirituality necessarily stresses a unity between the will of man and the will of God. It is God's will to indwell the heart of man, and it is man's natural will to be free in God. This

[13]This term, so common in East Syrian literature, has roots in Jewish Targumic material.

[14]Many Syriac Fathers, like St. Ephraem the Syrian, use the verb *mzag* (to "fuse") to express the union of the divine and human natures in Christ as well as our union with Christ in the sacraments.

agreement is well known among the Greek Fathers as *synergy* συνεργία, , and it plays a large role in early Syrian spirituality as well.

Love, Knoweldge and Theosis. In the Syriac language, there is a useful distinction between love (ܚܘܒܐ) characterized as a spiritual force, as the fruit of the grace which grows within us through keeping the divine commandments, and love (ܪܚܡܐ) that is the result of affection for God. The latter is the perfection of love, for it leads us to unite with God. This perfection is known among the Greek Fathers as *gnostiki*, the level of mystical contemplation in which the ideal of holiness is expressed. At this stage, the person becomes a friend of God and a mirror of divine perfection.

When perfected, love of God naturally leads to an illuminating knowledge (Gr., *gnosis* γνῶσις) of God, which knowledge is usually characterized in Syriac literature as "hidden" in the unknowable/apophatic "darkness" of God. Syriac writings are filled with explanations of the function the inner "eye" of the soul in perceiving such spiritual realities, and how spiritual knowledge elevates the person into the heavenly realms. This ascent to the heavenly realms must be steady and continuous, for "desisting from the ascent," says St. Isaac of Nineveh, "is the torment of Gehenna."[1]

There is a close relationship between the Semitic approach to spirituality as revealed in Scripture and the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* (θέωσις, "deification") as it is expressed in unhellenized Syriac spirituality. It may come as a shock to some to learn that the idea of "theosis" is not strictly Hellenistic, and is frequently found in early Syriac Christian literature, though expressed in language more metaphorical than philosophical: "the robe of glory," "the robe of light," "divinity in humanity," and like expressions.[2] Moreover, those whose primary understanding of theosis has been formed by the writings of St. Gregory Palamas, and the study of his controversy with Barlaam about the uncreated light, will no doubt be further amazed to learn that the Palamite controversy was preceded by a similar controversy in the

[1]Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homily 6*, 12.

[2]St. Ephraem once restated the classic patristic maxim on theosis (first found in the preface of Book 5 of Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*) giving full expression to the Syrian love of paradox: "Glory to the One who took from us in order to give to us, so that we should all the more abundantly receive what is His by means of what is ours." *Homily on Our Lord*, 10.

Syriac tradition. In fact, the parallelism between this controversy and the hesychastic controversy of the fourteenth century is most instructive.

In the seventh century, there was a division between two competing Syriac schools of spirituality. One school believed in the possibility of "seeing God spiritually," while the other denied this possibility. The latter point of view was accepted by the Nestorians, motivating Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I to convene a synod in the seventh century to condemn the possibility of seeing God. Nestorian theology so stressed the transcendence of God that it rejected any notion of a fusion of divinity with humanity, leading it to reject the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in Christ. And of course, what is rejected in Christ must also be rejected in relation to the saints. Therefore, to the Nestorians, created humanity, even the deified humanity of Christ, cannot see God's glory.

Rushing to the defense of Orthodoxy was an seventh-century Syrian monk named John Dalyatha, most probably a Nestorian hesychast. John became the forerunner of Gregory Palamas in this conflict with the Nestorians, both in his persuasive eloquence and in his prolific writings. John emphasized the possibility of actually "seeing" God (*shoubha daloho*), though not the transcendent divine nature (*kyono daloho*) that is wholly unknowable in itself. He also spoke about continuous growth in contemplating God, a growth from grace to grace (Jn. 1:16) that continually progresses even in eternity, for there is no limit to God's grace and glory. As for the prayer of the heart, he emphasized the need to concentrate the spirit within the heart. Practicing the virtues by necessity leads us to become God-like, and consequently witnesses of God's glory within ourselves. This vision is likened to worship of the luminous *shekinah* (Heb., "divine glory") in the holy of Holies,[1] for we are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

The Fifty Homilies of Pseudo Macarius. Before leaving the subject of Syrian spirituality, of which certainly much more might be said, we ought to mention the *Fifty Homilies* formerly attributed to St. Macarius the Elder, one of the great founders of Egyptian monasticism of the fourth century. In actual fact, research over the past century has demonstrated that the provenance of these wonderful homilies is not Egyptian at all, but Syrian. In his Preface to George Maloney's

[1]Compare Exodus 40:34-38, Ezekiel 43:2-6, and in the New Testament Revelation 11:19; 15:8.

translation of these *Homilies* in the Classics of Western Spirituality series, Bishop Kallistos Ware points out:

> There is general agreement that the author of the Macarian writings has no connection with the Coptic Desert Father, St. Macarius of Egypt (c. 300-c. 390). The milieu presupposed in the Homilies is definitely Syria rather than Egypt. Although the language used by the author is Greek, his highly distinctive vocabulary and imagery are Syrian.[2]

It is therefore now generally agreed that Pseudo-Macarius was a Syrian monk who lived in northeast Syria during the fourth century. He was probably a Roman citizen from a highly cultured background, considering his fluency in Greek. In fact, Latinisms in his language might suggest he was in government service prior to becoming a monk. Yet he was thoroughly Syrian, as Bishop Kallistos observes, using phrases and images made current in earlier Syriac literature. His overall outlook is manifestly Semitic. We find numerous Aramaicisms in his Greek, as well as a direct mention of the Euphrates River and an allusion to the irrigation system of Lower Mesopotamia.

There is hardly need to highlight the immense contribution that the *Fifty Homilies* have made to Christians spirituality over the centuries. Bishop Kallistos cites John Wesley's excitement upon first reading the *Homilies*, who then rushed to enter into his diary, "I read Macarius and sang" (30 July 1736). There is indeed an infectious enthusiasm in Pseudo-Macarius.

The *Homilies* exude hope and a yearning for the transforming light of the divine glory. As in earlier Syriac writings, Pseudo-Macarius expresses a holistic view of the human person, encompassing body, soul, and spirit in the re-creation of the person in Christ. Yet, also like earlier Syriac authors, he focuses his holistic view upon the human heart as the inner essence of the self. It is through the heart that the divine light of the Holy Spirit permeates the whole person, including the physical body: "But in the resurrection of those bodies whose souls were earlier raised up and glorified," he writes, "the bodies also will be glorified with the soul and illumined by the soul which in this present life has been illumined and glorified."[3] This glorification of the person does not alter

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[2]Pseudo-Macarius, *The Fifty Homilies and the Great Letter*, George Maloney, trans. (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. xi-xii.

[3]Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily 34*, 2.

the innate nature of our humanity, just as a needle that absorbs the energy of a flame is not fundamentally altered in nature though it glows and grows hot. Rather, our humanity is transfigured to conform to Christ's own glorified humanity:

> For just as God took from the dust and the earth and created the human body as a completely unique nature, not at all like the earth, and he created many other kinds of parts such as hair, skin, bones, and nerves, and just as a needle that is put into a fire is changed in color, becoming like the fire, yet retaining its own nature as iron, so also in the resurrection all members will rise. . . . The former things now are made into light. So also humans are changed in the resurrection and their members are made holy and full of light. . . . As the body of the Lord was glorified when he climbed the mount and was transfigured into divine glory and into infinite light, so also the bodies of the saints are glorified and shine like lightening.[4]

The breath-taking grandeur of the Pseudo-Macarian vision of our radiant glory in Christ, expressed in almost exuberant language, inspires even the most spiritually insensitive heart. No doubt this is the reason that many monasteries on Mt. Athos give the *Fifty Homilies* to novices as one of their first reading assignments.

Syriac Monasticism

The ascetic tendency existed within Christianity from the very beginning. The Gospel in general, and the Gospel of St. Matthew in particular (which may have been originally composed in Aramaic), contains several ascetic imperatives that the believer is exhorted to realize in his life. In Matthew 19 alone Christ offers the ideal of voluntary celibacy (19:11-12), poverty (19:21), and homelessness (19:29). Indeed, the disciple of Christ is enjoined to live the angelic life while on earth. There is ample evidence throughout the New Testament of an underlying ascetic theme, enough to describe the original Apostolic community as being "ascetic" in nature. The ascetic aspect of early Christianity is what eventually produced the mature monastic

[4]Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily 15*, 10-11, 38.

movement of the fourth century, which has been much studied and commented upon over the years.

The history of early Syriac asceticism, however, has been woefully neglected. The difficulties have not simply been in the number of the unedited, unpublished, and untranslated sources. While this continues to be a problem, the fact is that several good translations of primary sources exist for anyone caring to study them: One can easily consult Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *A History of the Monks of Syria* (A.D. 440), a mostly first-hand account of Syrian monasticism written in the early fifth century; *The Spiritual Meadow*, written around A.D. 600 by John Moschos (who hailed from Damascus), also offers many anecdotes from the lives of monks in Phoenicia, Syria Maritima, Antioch, and up into Asia Minor; and Palladius' *Lausiac History*, written around 420, contains accounts of Syrian monks. The ecclesiastical histories of Sozomen and Theodoret are prime sources of information as well. Other good sources are also available for anyone caring to study early Syrian monasticism.

No, source material as such is not the real problem. Rather, it is the secular attitude adopted by many modern scholars, which leads them to characterize Syrian ascetic feats as extreme, fanatical, and even bizarre. The modern scholar beholds an ascetic like St. Symeon Stylites in the fifth century living on top his sixty-foot pillar outside of Telanissus (Dair Sem'an) and shakes his head in bewilderment, utterly unable to appreciate St. Symeon's message of radical self-sacrifice in today's era of conspicuous self-indulgence. St. Symeon's contemporaries, though, certainly grasped his message: Seeing him dwelling atop his pillar for some forty years, an uncompromising witness to Christ through preaching and example, many were converted to the Gospel, especially among the Beduin Arabs. For us to understand Syriac Christianity, we must understand St. Symeon Stylites. To put it bluntly, Syriac Christianity is incomprehensible apart from Syrian monasticism — and understanding Syrian monasticism requires the suspension of modern secular prejudices to acquire a wholly new perspective on what it means to be a Christian.

The Asceticism of Syria. The physical mortifications of Syrian asceticism, so scorned today, were admired in antiquity because they proved that it is possible, even in the here and now, to transcend human limitations in order to participate in a spiritual existence. By transcending physical needs, the extraordinary ascetic feats of a St.

Symeon Stylites signify the victory of the spirit over flesh. Put another way, asceticism was spirituality made both visible and tangible, of grace made obvious and manifest. Thus St. Symeon's physical ascent on his pillar expresses the spiritual ascent to God of the whole person, both body and soul — that is, the deification of our full humanity. Consequently, as paradoxical as it may seem to the Western mindset, severe bodily mortifications actually express the highest possible esteem for the physical body in that these mortifications express the body's participation in deification. In line with this is the fact that many of the earliest anecdotes about the Syrian ascetics relate episodes of their physically healing individuals, exorcizing demons, and manifesting other charismatic gifts designed to benefit people immediately and materially.

The ascetic movement appeared in Syria independently of Egyptian asceticism, and was primarily anchoritic. We find historical evidence of its existence, for example, in Syria from the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* (composed originally in Syriac and then quickly thereafter translated into Greek), written in the early third century. Here, the Apostle Thomas is described as a classic anchorite: "[H]e fasts continually and prays, and eats bread only, with salt, and his drink is water, and he wears but one garment alike in fair weather and in winter, receives nothing of any man, and what he has he gives unto others."[1] Similarly, the Syriac texts of the Pseudo-Clementine *Epistles on Virginity* describe the role of ascetics within the early third-century Christian community as that of fasting, praying, visiting the distressed (the poor, widows, orphans, and the sick), exorcizing demons, and generally serving others "with the gifts which have been given them by the Lord."[2] A perversion of Syrian asceticism appeared during the

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[1] *Acts of Thomas*, 2:20; 9:104. See Montague James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 373, 410.

[2] *First Pseudo-Clementine Epistle on Virginity*, 12. Johann Jakob Wetstein (1693-1754), the famous Swiss New Testament scholar, unexpectedly discovered these two Syriac epistles attached to a Peshitta version of the New Testament given to him by Sir James Porter, the British ambassador to Constantinople. Wetstein then published them in their original Syriac in 1752, occasioning considerable controversy over their authenticity and provenance. It is now generally recognized that they are the product of the Syrian Church (though probably written originally in Greek) during the early third century. An English translation of them can be found in the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), pp. 55-66.

second century in the form of a movement called the Encratites (from the Greek *enkrateia,* ἐγκράτεια, "self-control"), which mandated strict self-denial in everything for everyone — including enforced celibacy — as a rigid pre-condition of salvation. The movement was quickly denounced by St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Epiphanius of Salamis, and many others.

Ihidoyeh. Syriac asceticism stresses "singleness of heart," of not having the heart divided between loving God and the things of this world, as the means of entrance into the heavenly realm. This idea is intimately related to repentance; in fact, St. Ephraem closely tied the monastic life as a whole to the sacrament of penance. St. Ephraem viewed the deserts and mountains surrounding Edessa as the ideal places to practice the life of repentance and recover one's inner health. Thus the ascetic life is in general about healing the heart. The notion of "singleness of heart," perhaps not too surprisingly, also lies behind the most common Syriac word for ascetics, (ܝܚܝܕܝܐ *ihidoyeh*, lit. the "single one"). In the sixth century, the term *ihidoyeh* became equivalent to the Greek term μοναχός *monachos* (monk), which is derived from the Greek word *monos* ("standing alone," like the Latin *unus* for *unicus*), meaning "single" or "solitary." The Syriac word *ihidoyeh* was thus applied to those who entered into a unique relationship with Christ, with the idea of "singleness" having a strong overtone of celibacy.

Originally, though, the term *ihidoyeh* was not only a designation for ascetics, but was also frequently used of Christ. Therefore, to be one of the *ihidoyeh* meant being one of those seeking to imitate Christ, to live in a manner similar to the incarnate Son of God. Another ancient use of the term *ihidoyeh* relates it to the rite of Baptism. The hearts of the newly baptized naturally gravitate toward stillness (Gr. *Hesychia* ἡσυχία) as a result of grace moving them toward singleness of heart. The newly baptized were thus *ihidoyeh* even though they weren't removed from society. This highlights an important aspect of Syriac asceticism: Ideally, all baptized Christians should seek to be *ihidoyeh* to whatever extent they are able.

Consequently, though *ihidoyeh* means "single one," it does not necessarily imply isolation from the Christian community, but attaining spiritual unity and wholeness *within* the community. The *ihidoyeh* were not seeking merely a solitary ascent to the Holy Trinity. Rather than a personal salvation removed from the mainstream of the Church, they sought to serve the existing social structure through their prayers and

works of charity. They were expected to minister to others with their gifts, the ideal ascetic being one who works for the salvation of the people.

We find numerous instances in ascetic literature of such concern among the early *ihidoyeh* for the needs of common people. In Theodoret's *History of the Monks of Syria*, we learn how Abraham interceded with some merciless tax collectors on behalf of a village, and even secured a loan of a hundred gold pieces from friends in Emesa to pay the collectors — an action that inspired the village to make Abraham its official patron (17:3). There is also the account of Maesymas and the powerful master of a village, Leotius, who once visited the village and violently demanded crops from the peasants. Maesymas interceded for the peasants to no avail, and then cursed Leotius' carriage so that he was unable to leave. Maesymas only lifted the curse once Leotius had a change of heart (14:3). A more bold example involves the citizens of Antioch, who during a riot in 387 had destroyed the bronze statues of Emperor Theodosius. When the emperor's generals arrived at Antioch to take retribution, Macedonius descended from the mountains around the city and met with the generals. Macedonius charged them to tell the emperor that he was merely a man who had allowed his anger to grow out of all proportion, that because of his own images he was about to destroy the "images of God" (the people of Antioch), and that for the sake of bronze statues he was about to put to death human bodies. He added that bronze figures can be either repaired or remolded, but that the emperor was powerless to give life back to dead bodies, or even refashion a single human hair. Theodoret observes: "He said this in Syriac; and while the interpreter translated it into Greek, the generals shuddered as they listened, and promised to convey this message to the emperor" (13:7). St. John Chrysostom even relates that, while the inhabitants of Antioch fled to the mountains and deserts, the monks of the mountains and deserts (the majority of whom, like Macedonius, were Syrian) rushed into the city to plead for mercy.[1] Antioch was spared.

There is also the example of Abraham Qidunaia of Edessa, who decided to become a monk on (of all times) his wedding day. He became famous for, among many other things, rescuing the oppressed and freeing those imprisoned or in subjugation. Other monks chose to serve

[1]John Chrysostom, *On the Statues*, Homily 17:5.

the community by becoming bishops. Jacob of Nisibis, for example, was an ascetic from an early age, living alone in the mountains around Nisibis. In 306, however, he reluctantly answered the call of the Church in Nisibis to become its first bishop, thus illustrating how many ascetics allowed service to the community to take priority over the solitary life. From other sources, we even learn that monks held government office to serve the public while practicing asceticism in private. The early *ihidoyeh* of Syria therefore viewed ministering to the local community as a necessary component of their ascetic practices.

Qaddisha. Besides *ihidoyeh*, we find other Syriac terms used to describe those who answer the monastic calling. There is (ܩܕܝܫܐ *qaddisha*), meaning "holy one" or "sacred person," and which is often used as a synonym for both "angel" and "monk." It is the equivalent of the Greek word *hagios* ἅγιος ("holy" or "saint"), which is applied to all those who have fully separated themselves from everything worldly. In particular, it refers to the life of sexual purity necessary in obtaining spiritual renewal and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Another word is (ܒܬܘܠܐ *betoulo* [masc.] and *betoula* [fem.]), which is the Syriac equivalent of the Greek *parthenos* παρθένος ("virgin"), also used of those devoting their lives to God in celibacy. From both these Syriac words, *qaddisha* and *betoulo*, we understand that the virtue of celibacy anticipates the resurrection and the future angelic life: "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven" (Matt. 22:30). The ideal of celibacy has not always been understood in the secular world, and Syrian ascetics in particular have been unfairly depicted as "anti-sexual" and "anti-marriage." Such a characterization must overlook much evidence that shows a positive view of sex and marriage among the early Syrian ascetics. For instance, in our principle source of early Syrian asceticism, Theodoret's *A History of the Monks of Syria*, we find several instances of celibates blessing sterile women so they could have children,[2] which one would hardly expect if these celibates were truly "anti-sex" and "anti-marriage."

[2]In Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *A History of the Monks of Syria*, we find that Romanus gave "many sterile women . . . the gift of children" (11:4). We also learn that Theodoret's own father obtained the prayers of several monks so that his wife could conceive until coming to Macedonius, whose blessing finally enabled his wife to become pregnant; his wife then sent to receive Macedonius' spiritual assistance when she feared she might miscarry, again with positive results (13:16-17). Finally, we learn that an Arabic queen was able to conceive a son through the prayers of Symeon Stylites (26:21).

The Children of the Covenant. Yet another group of Syrian ascetics was known as "the Children of the Covenant" (*benai-* and *benat- qeyamah*; (ܒܢܝ ܘܒܢܬ ܩܝܡܐ)More literally, the phrase is translated as the "sons and daughters of the covenant" (the term ܩܝܡܐ is a Syriac rendering of the Hebrew *bereshit.)* It is also sometimes rendered as "the sons and daughters of the resurrection," since *qeyamah* can also mean "rising up" (as in "resurrection," though the term is usually understood as an ascent to a higher state through either the baptismal or monastic covenant). The term was originally a designation applied to all the members of the baptized community, for baptism is the original "covenant" in which one submits one's life to God. However, the Children of the Covenant began to evolve into a distinct community over time. In the *Doctrine of Addai*, which dates to either the late third or early fourth century, we learn that many of the newly converted of Edessa are described as Children of the Covenant living a celibate life: "Moreover, as regards the entire *qeyamah* of the men and women, they were chaste and circumspect, and holy and pure: for they lived like anchorites (i.e., dwelt singly, in celibacy) and chastely, without spot."[3] St. Aphrahat in his *Demonstrations* describes the Children of the Covenant as those who voluntarily vow celibacy at their baptism, practice mild austerities (unlike full ascetics, though, they are free to own property), and serve the community in a humble capacity. The Children of the Covenant were therefore not solitaries living alone in caves. They were the members of an ascetic community, living out their baptismal vows to the fullest extent possible, dedicating themselves to holiness, chastity, and temperance (Syr. ܢܚܦܘܬܐ *nakfoutho*).

We gain a fascinating glimpse at the status of the Children of the Covenant at the beginning of the fifth century in the canons of a synod that met on 1 February 410 in the main church of the Persian capitol of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. These are the so-called "Canons of Maruta."[4] Maruta was the bishop of Maipherqat on the Syrian/Armenian border, and acted at the synod as ambassador of the emperor in Constantinople. The aim of the synod was the re-organization of the Church in the Persian Empire, though many of the canons deal with rural parishes

[3]See the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 664. The term *qeyamah* is unfortunately rendered in this version as "state."

[4]These canons, both in English and Syriac, may be found in Arthur Vöobus' *Syriac and Arabic Documents* (Stockholm, Sweden: Etse, 1960), pp. 115-149.

ruled by a chorepiscopus (a sort of suffragan bishop without the right to consecrate other bishops).

From the canons, we learn that the Children of the Covenant are a group distinct from monks in general. Canon 27, for example, instructs the chorepiscopus to gather together the entire *qeyamah* of the villages twice a year in order to celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy, but that monks are to be gathered together only once a year (1-2).[5] Along the same lines, canon 59 requires a monk leaving the monastery to "behave as a Son of the Covenant" while in the world (8). However, Children of the Covenant were not considered strictly laity, either. Canon 54, for example, allows a Son of the Covenant to eat with the monks while visiting a monastery, whereas a layman must sit apart (3). We also learn that the Children of the Covenant are to be the first choice in selecting candidates for ordination, with monks serving only as an alternative pool. Canon 25 states that if there "are villages where there are no Sons of the Covenant of whom he shall make priests, he [the bishop] shall bring out brothers from the monasteries or churches which are under his authority, and he shall make them [priests]" (7). Canon 41 is especially interesting because it concerns the Daughters of the Covenant. It states that town-churches must have an "order" of the Daughters of the Covenant (1), that the Daughters shall have a diligent master over them to instruct them in Scriptures and in "the service of the Psalms" (2), and that from their ranks will be elected worthy women over sixty years-old to become deaconesses to "perform the service of the rite of baptism alone" — presumably, referring to the baptism of women, which men were not allowed to perform (3).

The Monastery and the World. Until the beginning of the fourth century, therefore, Christian ascetics were mostly common laypeople who were (usually) active members of the local parish. A shift occurs, though, after the legalization of Christianity during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great, and we witness a movement to separate from the life of the Church. Ascetics began standing outside the local church during services, or otherwise stood apart from the congregation. In the sixth century, we see a desire among most monks to leave cities altogether, and even villages and small towns, in order to live the monastic life.

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[5]Similarly, canon 58 requires the bishop to gather the Sons of the Covenant twice a year and read the canons to them (3). Presumably this would be done in conjunction with fulfilling canon 27.

Thus a conflict arose between the ascetic ideal of being "apart" from the world and the ideal of service to the larger Christian community. Many monks resolved this conflict by coming out of their caves and forming loose collections of cells, known as "lauras" (*hirtah* in Syriac, a "shepherd's camp"), in which each member could continue to live separately yet also associate with other monks to organize an outreach to the larger community. We perhaps witness something of the genesis of this evolution in the life of Julian Sabas. Julian lived in a cave, and eventually gathered around him a community of disciples, who one day decided that they needed to build a crude structure to house supplies — a development to which Julian only reluctantly acquiesces.[62] A more explicit example of this evolution concerns a group of huts in a Laura named after Mar Afwrsm. In 389, Mar Johannan 'Urtaiah joined this group, built his own hut nearby, and eventually this community developed into the "Monastery of Mar Johannan 'Urtaiah."

In time, many lauras made the transition to the "coenobium," the unified monastery (rendered in Syriac as either *daira* or *'umra*). The first monasteries were simply the ruins of abandoned buildings, forts, and similar structures. The architecture of later Syrian monasteries generally follow an open plan with buildings spaced out and with no enclosing wall. They are also located along frequented routes, which helped cultivate frequent contacts with the local community and travelers. Organized monasteries became widespread in Syria by the end of the fourth century, their number likely reaching a rough parity with Egypt.

While cenobiticism developed natively in Syria, this is not to minimize the possibility that outside influences might have also played a role. There were likely influences from the Latin-speaking West, and even some from religious traditions in Persia to the East. Many have pointed to the influence during the fourth century of developed cenobiticism in Egypt. One

[62]Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 2:4. Julian spent about fifty years in the monastic life before dying in 366/7. St. Ephraem speaks of Julian's fame as being known everywhere in "the whole world," and compares Julian's life to a great censer spreading incense throughout Syria.

tradition has an Egyptian named Hilarion settling down in Majuma and founding Syria's first monastery, which is theoretically possible. Archeological excavations have suggested that Syria's most ancient monasteries appeared first in the south and then spread to the north, where the first monasteries appear to be of a later date. This could suggest the spreading influence cenobiticism from Egypt. However, to propose (as some have done) that Egyptian cenobiticism was somehow "transplanted" to Syria is to take this too far. Monasticism in Syria was not an alien, outside import, but an outgrowth of Syria's own ascetical trajectory. The legends appearing in the ninth century about the Egyptian Mar Augen and his monastic followers marching in liturgical procession into Persia and establishing monasteries everywhere where none existed before are absurd, to say the least.

Despite the growth of cenobiticism in Syria during the fourth century, not all monks chose to enter monastic communities. It is also during this period that we see the further growth of various distinct anchoritic lifestyles within the Syriac tradition. There appear monks known as Stationaries, who remain standing throughout most (if not all) of the day. There are also Dendrites (forest-dwellers, who live in or amongst the trees), Acemetes (monks who refrained from sleep to maintain a constant vigil), Bergers (who ate only uncooked, green herbs), Silents (who abstained from speech), Hesychasts (who practiced deep meditation in quiet as an alternative to spoken prayer), Wanderers (who drifted from place to place in perpetual pilgrimage), Subdivales (who lived either outdoors or in roofless cells), Dementes (commonly known as "Fools-for-Christ," they assumed an antic disposition to attain humility), Stylites (who lived in towers or on pillars), Weepers (who continually wept for their sins), and Recluses (who lived in total seclusion in cells or caves). Many of these ascetics would only visit monasteries to attend the Divine Liturgy.

In spite of these later tendencies favoring separation from the larger Christian community, we should emphasize that the ascetic movement within Syria always remained tied to the larger Church community. Indeed, the monks of Syria produced

a huge amount of literature contributing to the overall spiritual edification of Christendom, much of this literature we have already had the opportunity to mention. As in Europe, the monasteries of Syria were great centers of culture and learning, where poetry, hymnography, iconography, theological inquiry, and liturgical development flourished. The monasteries ultimately played a crucial role in the maintenance and transmission of Syriac Christian civilization.

The active nature of early Syrian asceticism also encouraged missionary zeal as an integral part of the spiritual life. One reliable account in the *Vita* of Abraham Qidunaia, which is confirmed by St. Ephraem, relates that the bishop of Edessa tasked Abraham to evangelize a notoriously anti-Christian village not far from the city. Through incredible patience and long-suffering, he accomplished his mission where all who went before him had failed. Such accounts are common. By the early fifth century, the Church historian Sozomen was able to say of the missionary efforts of the Syrian monks: "They were instrumental in leading nearly the whole Syrian nation, and most of the Persians and Saracens, to the proper religion, and caused them to cease from paganism. After beginning the monastic philosophy there, they brought forward many like themselves."[63] Early Syriac Christianity thus was vigorous in both its spirituality and missionary activity. In consequence, it was able to preach Christianity as far away as India and the Far East, where many churches and monasteries were eventually established.

Syriac Evangelization

Let us return for a moment to the story of King Abgar, and how Christianity first arrived at Edessa. King Abgar of Edessa, as we learned, supposedly wrote a letter to Jesus requesting that he visit his city, and Jesus responded by promising to send one of his disciples following his resurrection. This happened shortly thereafter when Addai, one of the Seventy disciples of

[63]Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6:34.

Jesus, arrived on a mission to Edessa.[64] According to the Syrian *Doctrine of Addai*, the reception of the Gospel was enthusiastic, and the king along with many of his subjects embraced the Gospel.[65] Yet the eastward spread of Christianity did not end at Edessa, but marched on to include Adiabene, and parts further east into Persia. By the end of the second century, missionaries had reached Northern Afghanistan, and mass conversions of Huns and Turks were reported by the fifth century.

The Apostle Thomas. Tradition indicates that St. Thomas played a fundamental role in the evangelization of the East. It is he who is said to have sent Addai on his mission to Edessa, while he himself traveled to India. According to several sources, the Apostle Thomas arrived in India at the ancient port city of Muziris (modern Cranganore) on the Malabar Coast around A.D. 52, and his mission resulted in the conversion of a great many people to Christianity. The apostle is said to have founded seven churches run by priests he ordained from converted Brahmin families. Some sources even suggest he reached parts of China. The Thomas mission is related in the Syriac *Acts of Thomas* and in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, both from the early third century, and it is also confirmed by St. Ephraem the Syrian. The legend of the mission of St. Thomas remains a vital part of the oral tradition of India, and is kept alive by ancient songs (such as the *Veera Diyan Pattu, Margom Kali Pattu,* the Kerala wedding song *Thomas Rabban Pattu*, and others), stories of miracles, and conversion accounts. St. Thomas is believed to have died at Mylapore near Madras, where his tomb continues

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[64]Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History* identifies the one sent to Edessa as Thaddaeus (*Ecc. Hist*., 1:13:10), and St. Jerome in his *Commentary on Matthew* (1:10:57) identifies him as the Apostle Jude Thaddaeus . Considering the importance for the early Church of the mission to Edessa, and as the city preserves no clear memory of a burial place for their evangelist, it is possible Edessa was evangelized by the Apostle Jude, who was later martyred in Iran.

[65] *The Doctrine of Addai* dates from the fourth (possibly the late third) century. Eusebius of Caesarea, in his version of the story in the *Ecclesiastical History*, says his sources are Syriac documents originating from Edessa. Several different Syriac versions of the Abgar legend, and numerous other ancient Syriac documents, are translated in Volume 8 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), pp. 651-743.

to be a favorite with pilgrims. As an interesting postscript, the first known head of the catechetical school at Alexandria in Egypt, Pantaenus, at the end of the second century traveled to India as a missionary and there discovered an established Christian community in possession of a copy of the Gospel of Matthew "in Hebrew letters."[66] St. Jerome in his *On Illustrious Men* (36:2) adds that Pantaenus brought this copy of the Gospel back with him to Alexandria.

As the Church in the East grew, the jurisdiction of Syrian Antioch came to embrace the whole of the East, including India. Indian bishops were originally consecrated by the Patriarch of Antioch. However, by the sixth century, the influence of the Non-Chalcedonians and Nestorians triumphed in India and the Far East.

On to China. In A.D. 635, Christianity reached China when the Syrian missionary Alopen (Abraham) entered Sian (Xian), the ancient capital of the T'ang dynasty. Alopen won the imperial favor of Emperor T'ai-tsung (627-649), and promptly set about the evangelization of the kingdom. According to the Imperial Edict recommending Christianity (which is called "the Way") to the kingdom, the emperor was immensely impressed by the new Faith:

> Having carefully examined the scope of his [Alopen's] teaching, we find it to be mysteriously spiritual, and of silent operation. Having observed its principle and most essential points, we reached the conclusion that they cover all that is most important in life. Their language is free from perplexing expressions; their principles are so simple that they "remain as the fish would remain [if] the net [of language] were forgotten." This Teaching is helpful to all creatures and

[66]Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5:10:3. Eusebius, however, attributes the Indian mission to Bartholomew, and it is he who is supposed to have left the copy of the gospel.

beneficial to all men. So let it have free course throughout the Empire.[67]

In 638, the "true Sutras" that Alopen brought with him (possibly the Bible?) were translated into Chinese at the Imperial Library, and a monastery was even built. However, by 845 (during the reign of Emperor Wu-Stung), Christianity had disappeared in China, the victim of persecution by later Chinese emperors. Later Syrian missionaries followed Mongol invaders into China in the thirteenth century, but met with little success.

The Syrian mission to China during the seventh century was recorded for posterity on a stone monument erected in Sian in A.D. 781, and which was uncovered by workmen in 1623. The monument is nine feet high and over three feet wide, made of black limestone. At the top is an ornate design around a cross springing from a lotus blossom. The Chinese inscription in large letters underneath the cross proclaims, "A Monument Commemorating the Propagation of the *Ta-ch'in* (Syrian) Luminous Religion in China." There is then an account of Alopen bringing "the true Sutras" and icons to China, a short explanation in Syriac (seventy words long) of the basic tenets of Christianity, and a long list of missionaries that followed Alopen. Based upon the short Syriac summation of the Christian Faith, modern Western scholars have generally concluded that Alopen was a Nestorian, and so have dubbed the Sian Monument the "Nestorian Monument." However, this interpretation of the text is open to serious question.

Besides India and China, Syrian evangelization also directly impacted nearly every Arabic country, as well as Armenia, Georgia, Ethiopia, and Persia (Iran). During the Syrian Church's long captivity within the Islamic world, chances for foreign missions were few and far between. However, Syria's evangelistic hibernation ended during the nineteenth century, when Syrians began immigrating around the world. Today, Syrian Christians are found in North, Central, and South America, as well as in Europe and Australia. Following the

[67]From the Sian Monument. Text cited by Samuel Moffet in *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. 1 (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1992), pp. 292-293.

model established by Sts. Peter and Paul, who were Aramaic-speaking Jews who evangelized Greeks in their own language, Antiochian missionaries continue to proclaim the Faith in the vernacular of the people, whether that language be Chinese, Hindi, English, or some other. As never before, they are spreading the Gospel they received from the hands of the Apostles, bringing into the Church of Antioch an influx of new converts to an ancient Faith. We in America have been especially blessed by this renewed evangelistic zeal.

Conclusion

IT HAS BECOME CUSTOMARY to divide Christianity into two halves: the Latin West and the Greek East. In this bipolar model of the Church, the Syriac Christian tradition is simply lumped into the Greek tradition, completely ignoring the Semitic background of early Christianity. Thus, in consequence of this narrow perspective, we overlook the Syriac contribution in transmitting a developed Christianity to the world.

In the Syriac tradition, we hear the united voice of the Apostles in its original expression — linguistically, intellectually, and culturally. Greater Syria was a region of astonishing creativity in Aramaic literary traditions, as well as in music, art, and architecture. Syria developed the Semitic Faith of the Apostles, creatively incorporating it into its Aramaic culture and handing it down from generation to generation. It now belongs to us. Indeed, it now even belongs to the many Antiochian Christians who are not even of Syrian origin!

It is beyond doubt that early Greek Christianity borrowed much from the Syrian tradition, just as Syrian Christianity borrowed much in its interaction with the Greek tradition. The Greek was Syrianized just as much as, later on, the Syrian was Hellenized. Many notable Middle Eastern Christians during the first millennium, both Greek and Syrian, were bilingual and bicultural. This was common until the Arab conquest, at which point Arabic culture dominated throughout the Middle East. The mountain of evidence for the multicultural and multilingual nature of the Church of Antioch is beyond dispute. This cultural

and linguistic diversity led to many fruitful developments that has enriched our Antiochian heritage.

Having spread across the globe, we Antiochians are becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse than ever. Yet diversity does not mean we need to lose our uniquely Syrian legacy. A major responsibility of the Antiochian Christian Archdiocese of North America is to acquaint its members, and the American people in general, with the Syrian legacy of our Church. This task is made especially difficult in that Syriac Christianity has been virtually ignored by modern scholars. It is therefore up to us in the Antiochian Archdiocese to fill the void.

This general ignorance of our Syriac legacy is not just the melancholy circumstance of the Antiochian Orthodox, but is rather a tragedy affecting all Christians, for it signifies the loss of our original Christian roots in the Semitic world from which the Gospel sprang. Such ignorance impoverishes us all, for Syriac Christianity has contributed profoundly to the theological, liturgical, and spiritual development of world Christianity. In fact, it was at Syrian Antioch that the followers of Christ were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26), so in a real sense every modern Christian is a “Syrian.” Our common Syrian heritage, therefore, must no longer be ignored.