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18 The East (3): Syria and Mesopotamia

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Abstract: Scriptural Foundations: Old and New Testament – Syriac Christianity around 200: The Wider Context – Syriac Christianity at the Beginning of the Fourth Century: The Witness of Eusebius of Caesarea – Aphrahat and Ephrem – The Beginnings of Syriac Ascetic Literature – The Early Fifth Century and the Increasing Hellenization of Syriac Christianity – The Fifth-Century Christological Discussions and their Aftermath – A Scattered Legacy and a Divided Tradition: The Sixth Century and Beyond

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IN contrast to other Christian traditions emerging and flourishing in the eastern Mediterranean, Syriac Christianity does not derive its main scriptural texts exclusively from the Greek world. Most notably in the translation of the Syriac Old Testament from the Hebrew Bible, rather than from the Greek Septuagint, Syriac Christianity shows its independent position *vis-à-vis* Greek Christianity. The question, then, as to whether Syriac Christianity might give us some insights into non-Greek, Semitic, or Jewish forms of early Christianity has often been in the mind of scholars. Whatever the answer to this question may be, in the course of the fourth and fifth centuries, Syriac Christianity, which developed and expanded in close contact with the imperial church, became increasingly influenced by the paradigms of Greek Christianity and thoroughly Hellenized. But in spite of this far-reaching adaptation to Greek modes of theology and praxis, the majority of Syriac Christians in the next period of their history, the sixth and seventh centuries, gradually dissociated themselves from the imperial church and created their own communities in Syria and in Mesopotamia—communities which were doctrinally distinct from Roman and Byzantine Christianity. These independent communities exist to the present day in the Middle East and in the world-wide diaspora of the Middle Eastern Christian churches.

Given the position of Syriac Christianity at the intersection of the Semitic and Greek worlds, it is no surprise that questions of linguistic and cultural

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transformation of Christian traditions, along with issues of religious identity and community building, have been at the forefront of Syriac studies in recent decades.¹

The term 'Syriac Christianity' is understood here as Christian culture expressed in Syriac, one of the East-Aramaic languages. Syriac Christianity emerged in northern Mesopotamia, an area of encounter between various peoples and civilizations, in which Aramean settlement began as early as the end of the second millennium BCE. In the first Christian centuries, this area was a buffer

between the Roman and Parthian Empires. When, in the course of the third century, Rome extended its rule eastward and the Sasanids reorganized and centralized the Persian Empire, Syriac Christians became divided between two empires. From the fourth century onwards, Syriac Christian communities existed in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire (particularly in Mesopotamia Prima and Secunda, Osrhoene, Euphratesia, Syria Prima and Secunda, and Phoenicia Libanesia) as well as in the Persian-Sasanid Empire (mainly in north and central Mesopotamia). While Edessa, the capital of Osrhoene, is often seen as its main centre, the geographical area of Syriac Christianity in its heyday was quite vast, extending from the hinterland of the Hellenized city of Antioch in the west to the political heartland of the Persian Sasanids, around Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in the east. In the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, Syriac coexisted with Greek, which was the dominant language of the imperial church (Millar 1998). Connections with Greek Christianity, therefore, should always be considered in the study of Syriac Christianity; on the other hand, Greek writing authors of the Syrian area—Eusebius of Emesa, John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and many others—deserve to be studied against their Syriac background. The focus of the present essay will be on the *Syriac* expression of Christianity in Syria and Mesopotamia up to the sixth century.

The origins of Syriac Christianity can be traced back to the second century, when Christians began to use the Aramaic of Edessa as their literary language. The Edessene language itself goes back to an earlier period, as is evidenced by pagan Syriac inscriptions (the earliest dated inscription is from 6 CE), and it continued in a pagan or non-Christian context well into the third century (Drijvers and Healey 1999). But it was Christian use that made the language popular over a wide area and a convenient vehicle for the spread of Christianity wherever there was a substrate of spoken Aramaic.²

18.1 Scriptural Foundations: Old and New Testament

The Syriac translation of the Old Testament (commonly known under its later name 'Peshitta') and some version of the four Gospels must be among the earliest

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products of Syriac literature. In both cases, there is evidence for a second-century date.

Scholars have long been divided over the question of whether the Old Testament Peshitta, translated from the Hebrew Bible, is of Jewish or Christian origin. In 1999, Michael Weitzman made a very important contribution to this discussion with his posthumously published monograph, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament*. He situated the Peshitta translators as a team of Jewish intellectuals, working for a generation or two, in the second half of the second century, perhaps in Edessa (Weitzman 1999). They were non-rabbinic Jews, whose emphasis on prayer over against ritual brought them close to Christianity. They subsequently converted and passed on to Syriac Christianity their newly translated Aramaic Bible, written in a form of the language close to the new literary language of Edessene Christians. While this historical reconstruction leaves a number of questions unanswered, Weitzman's philological groundwork is solid and impressive. It shows beyond a doubt that the translators had an excellent knowledge of Hebrew and were steeped in the Jewish tradition. They may have been Jews moving towards Christianity, as Weitzman would have it, or alternatively, as others have suggested, recent Christian converts from Judaism who stood somewhere between the two faiths (ter Haar Romeny 2005: 29–31).

Whatever the case may be, the Old Testament Peshitta constitutes a major point of contact, or an avenue of interaction, between (one type of Aramaic-speaking) Judaism and nascent Syriac Christianity. It exemplified and reaffirmed the close connection between Judaism and Syriac Christianity at a time when elsewhere in the ancient world Judaism and Christianity were rapidly and irrevocably parting ways.

Syriac Christians in the second century shared with Jews the literary tradition of Aramaic, which in the same period, along with Hebrew, began to be used to redact and transmit rabbinic texts, both in Palestine and in Mesopotamia, including the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the Targumim. Some of the phraseology characteristic of the Targumim also exists in Syriac,³ both within and outside the Peshitta. Occasionally, such phrases found their way into the language of the liturgy, in which these frozen archaic elements subsisted as silent witnesses to a period of close proximity between Judaism and Syriac Christianity.

Apart from language and phraseology, Syriac liturgical tradition has preserved other elements reminiscent of the Jewish past as well. In his 1997 study, Gerard Rouwhorst discussed five features that he considered to be indicative of Syriac Christianity's unique relationship to Judaism: (1) the presence of the *bēma*, a raised platform on which the liturgy of the Word was performed in the churches of Mesopotamia and North Syria, which has its parallels in synagogue architecture; (2) the preservation of two Old Testament pericopes among the readings of the eucharist, reminiscent of the use in the synagogue; (3) the structure of the earliest eucharistic prayer, which parallels the *Birkat ha-mazon*; (4) traces of a positive attitude towards the Sabbath, found particularly in the *Apostolic Constitutions*; (5)

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the Syriac Christians' adherence, until the early fourth century, to the celebration of Passover on the night of the 14th of Nisan, in accordance with Jewish practice (Rouwhorst 1997). Most of these features cannot be explained as later borrowings, and must go back to the roots of Syriac Christianity itself. While some of them gradually disappeared and gave way to practices that conformed to mainstream Christianity, others survived. The conclusion must be that the Jewish impact on Syriac Christianity right from the beginning was significant, even if it was only one among several constituent traditions, as we will see.

Along with the beginnings of the Syriac Old Testament, the second century also saw the first Syriac translation of the Gospels. There has been much discussion among scholars about the question of whether Syriac Christians first knew the four Gospels separately or harmonized together into a single Gospel known as the *Diatessaron*, a work that is attributed to Tatian, who describes himself as being 'born in the land of the Assyrians'.⁴ Tatian was a disciple of Justin Martyr in Rome, and after Justin's death (between 163 and 167), he returned to the East.⁵ Regardless of whether the *Diatessaron* was originally written in Greek or in Syriac (the majority view tends towards Syriac, even though Tatian worked on the basis of the Greek Gospels), the Syriac version enjoyed great popularity well into the fourth and fifth centuries. The *Diatessaron* has not survived in its original redaction in either Greek or Syriac, and can be only partly reconstructed from quotations in later works. It is clear, however, that Tatian, in selecting, combining, and rewriting passages from the four Gospels, conveyed his message of *enkrateia* ('self-control'), which included a negative view of the world and a rejection of humanity's enslavement to food and sexuality.⁶ Tatian further elaborated these ideas in the *Oration to the Greeks*, his only work preserved in Greek, and they became widespread in early Syriac Christianity. Some scholars,

therefore, are inclined to see Tatian as a typical representative of the Syriac Christianity of his day, or even to assume that he played a major role in shaping early Syriac Christianity, with its proclivity towards rigorous asceticism (Hunt 2003: 144–75). We do not know, however, how far Tatian's influence went beyond the popularity of the *Diatessaron*. He remains an elusive figure, and there is no evidence of any activity by him in the East following his return from Rome.

If the *Diatessaron*, datable to around 170 CE, preceded the earliest version of the four separate Gospels in Syriac known as the 'Old Syriac' (or *Vetus Syra*)—a view that is now prevalent—then the translators of the Old Syriac, perhaps working in the early third century, were certainly influenced by the *Diatessaron*. In their rather free rendering of the Greek Gospels, they often adopted Tatian's readings. The two incomplete fifth-century manuscripts, known as Curetonianus and Sinaiticus, present slightly divergent texts, indicating the fluidity of the earliest textual tradition, which only after a thorough revision in the fifth century led to the Peshitta, the standard text of the Syriac Gospels and New Testament, much more in line with the Greek text.

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There can be no doubt that the Syriac Gospel texts of both the *Diatessaron* and the Old Syriac derived from Greek. A question then remains as to whether the translators, who were speakers and writers of Aramaic, were also familiar with written or oral accounts of Jesus' message in Aramaic or with some Aramaic phrases from the earliest Palestinian ministry, which they occasionally may have woven into their translation work. This assumption has found enthusiastic defenders for over a century (Joosten 1997). While the suggestion of a written account cannot be substantiated, the case for isolated oral reminiscences is more convincing, even though the evidence is slim and rarely unequivocal.⁷

18.2 Syriac Christianity around 200: The Wider Context

With these few major texts—the Old Testament, the *Diatessaron*, the four separate Gospels—situated in the late second to third centuries, how do other early Syriac texts fit into this picture?⁸

The message of *enkrateia* is illustrated most vividly in the *Acts of Judas Thomas* (Drijvers 1992). In his preaching to the Indians, Thomas strongly advocates a Christ-like life, renunciation of this world, and abstention from sexual activity (even within marriage), in an attempt to regain the original purity of Paradise prior to the Fall. This rebirth can be achieved through man's free will; Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection are notably absent from the salvation process. Thomas allegedly died as a martyr in India, and his bones were brought to Edessa, where he was particularly venerated. Most scholars assume that the *Acts* were originally written in Syriac, even though the preserved Syriac text may represent a later rewriting, and the Greek version may occasionally reflect the original more faithfully. Given the prominent position of Thomas in Edessa, which is evidenced at least from the fourth century onwards, several scholars have suggested that the *Acts* were written in that city. There is little evidence for this, however, and an origin to the east of Edessa would be equally conceivable. One branch of the textual tradition inserts the charming *Hymn of the Pearl*, which reveals a quite different religious background and exhibits linguistic features pointing to a type of Aramaic more eastern than Edessene Syriac (Beyer 1991).⁹ The *Acts* must have been quite popular in Mesopotamia, as they were adopted by Mani and his followers, which suggests the early third century as the *terminus ante quem* for their origin.

Another text associated with Thomas, and in modern scholarship often connected with Edessa, is the *Gospel of Thomas*, one of the Coptic texts found at Nag Hammadi. The name 'Judas Thomas', the dualistic-encratite message of many of

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the sayings, the textual links with the *Diatessaron*, and a number of 'Aramaisms' or 'Syriacisms' have lent appeal to the hypothesis of a Syriac origin, in Edessa, somewhere in the second century. The evidence, however, is sketchy, without a coherent picture emerging. If, as several scholars believe, the *Gospel of Thomas* dates from the first half of the second century, then it would be the earliest known representative of Syriac Christianity—without clear links to any of the later texts! A recent attempt to situate the original *Gospel of Thomas* in late-second-century Edessa, and to uncover the alleged Syriac profile of the Coptic text remains problematic in a number of ways (Perrin 2002). Given the lack of consensus on the date and on the literary and historical contexts, it is uncertain at present to what extent, if at all, the *Gospel of Thomas* can inform our knowledge of early Syriac Christianity.¹⁰

A historical person who definitely belongs to Syriac Christianity around the year 200 is the theologian-philosopher Bardaisan. He lived and worked at the royal court of Edessa—in his day still an autonomous kingdom situated between the Roman and Parthian worlds—and his mere presence there shows how far Christianity had penetrated into the social fabric of the city. Bardaisan presents a picture of Christianity quite different from what the other sources seem to tell us. He is a man of the world, not an ascetic or encratite, and his main interest is in the philosophical questions of his day, which he approaches with the tools of the Greek philosophical tradition. Although he is well informed about Judaism, his primary involvement is with pagan Hellenistic culture, not with Judaism. Should we then posit Bardaisan, rather than Tatian, as the main spokesperson for Edessene Christianity around 200? Here, as in the case of Tatian, we should proceed with great caution. Later generations of Syriac Christians explicitly rejected Bardaisan's heritage, and Ephrem condemned and cursed him as one of the arch-heretics. His many works were not copied by later generations and entirely disappeared, with the exception of the fascinating *Book of the Laws of the Countries*,¹¹ which assesses the role of nature, fate, and human free will, and was written down by Bardaisan's disciple Philippus.

There are thus competing and seemingly conflicting images of early Syriac Christianity: the Jewish Peshitta translators, Tatian the encratite, and Bardaisan the court philosopher. One should add the Marcionites to this list. They certainly had a strong presence in Syria, and most of the other groups responded to them. These various strands originated perhaps independently of one another in different areas and at different times, before a more unified picture of Syriac Christianity emerged. Many of the obvious categories of the later period, such as orthodoxy versus heresy, centre versus periphery, and Judaism versus Christianity cannot be applied to the earlier period without resulting in historical distortions.¹² Moreover, such questions as to whether Christianity was brought to northern Mesopotamia from Greek-speaking Antioch or from Jewish Palestine, and to what extent Edessene Christianity retained its Aramaic or Semitic stamp rather than being absorbed by Graeco-Roman culture, cannot be given simple answers. We should also realize that most of the earliest texts have disappeared. The few texts that for specific reasons were incorporated

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into the later literary tradition were detached from their original context and given new layers of meaning. For example, such texts as the *Odes of Solomon* are very hard to imagine in their original context. Some scholars have emphasized the proximity of these hymns to Jewish thanksgiving hymns, such as those known from the Dead Sea Scrolls, and have considered the possibility of an early Palestinian and possibly Jewish-Christian origin. Others have explored the connections of the *Odes* with second- or third-century Edessene Christianity (Charlesworth 1998; Lattke 1999–2005, with further references).

18.3 Syriac Christianity at the Beginning of the Fourth Century: The Witness of Eusebius of Caesarea

It is only around 300 that Syriac Christianity fully emerges on the historical scene. From this time on, there is a historiography complete with events and names of places and persons that are part of the uninterrupted Christian history, which later generations of Syriac Christians recognized as their own. With most of northern Mesopotamia fully integrated within the Roman Empire, Syriac Christianity from this time on developed within the framework of expanding imperial Christianity, the foundations of which were laid by Constantine's conversion and the Council of Nicaea (325).

In the early fourth century, the West heard about Christianity in Mesopotamia through Eusebius of Caesarea, who included in his *Ecclesiastical History* the story of Edessa's conversion to Christianity in the days of King Abgar, a contemporary of Jesus (I, 13). The text of Abgar's letter to Jesus and of Jesus's reply was added as evidence, translated into Greek from the Syriac originals which, Eusebius asserts, were preserved in the archives of Edessa (Brock 1992). This legend must have been created around, or shortly before, 300 by one group of Edessene Christians wanting to boost their position, using the most powerful tools: Jesus's authorship of the letter, the mission of one of the seventy apostles, the prestige of the royal house (which most likely never was Christian), and the renown of the Aramaic language. The legend was expanded in the early fifth-century *Teaching of Addai* and became very popular throughout the Christian world (Griffith 2003). Its notable absence from some important Syriac sources, including Ephrem, may indicate that it was not universally endorsed or given credence by fourth-century Syriac Christians.

Eusebius certainly contributed to granting Syriac Christianity its rightful—albeit somewhat peripheral—place within Christianity as it developed in the Roman

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Empire. The position of Syriac Christian communities outside the Roman Empire, especially those living under the Sasanid Persians, Rome's eternal enemies, was more problematic. In northern Mesopotamia, the frontier between the Roman and Persian Empires became a real dividing line between the Christian and Zoroastrian worlds, cutting across the homelands of the Aramaic-speaking population. Syriac Christians were a minority in the Zoroastrian state. In times of peace, they enjoyed freedom and some sort of official protection. In times of war with the Roman neighbours, however, their position was vulnerable, and persecution occurred regularly (Rist 1996).

18.4 Aphrahat and Ephrem

Two of the most important Syriac authors, Aphrahat and Ephrem, lived in the

fourth century. Together they are the most eloquent and distinctive spokespersons of Syriac Christianity, on the two sides of the Roman-Persian frontier.¹³ Aphrahat's modest literary corpus consists of twenty-three *Demonstrations*, or treatises, written in epistolary form and dated to the years 337–45. Ephrem worked in Nisibis until 363, when, following Julian's death, the Romans surrendered the city to the Persians, and many Christians, Ephrem among them, moved westwards to Edessa. He lived the last 10 years of his life in that city, where he died in 373. Ephrem's *œuvre* is much more voluminous than that of Aphrahat and includes biblical commentaries, prose treatises, and above all poetical compositions. In spite of the geographical distance and the different political worlds in which they operated, Aphrahat and Ephrem had a great deal in common. Heirs to the Aramaic cultural heritage of Mesopotamia, they expressed themselves in a high form of literary Syriac, of which both were skilled masters. While the Old Testament occupies a prominent place in their thought (Van Rompay 1996: 619–28), their theological views and expressions show some marked differences. Ephrem wholeheartedly espoused Nicene Christianity, of which he became a staunch defender (Griffith 1986). Aphrahat, on the other hand, does not betray any knowledge of the Nicene Creed and exhibits a theology which in both its Trinitarian and its Christological concepts is unique.¹⁴

Ephrem fully believed in the Christian Empire under the protection of the God-appointed emperor Constantine and his successors (he saw Julian's short-lived reign in the 360s as a lamentable intermezzo). Aphrahat's position is much more complicated. Viewing contemporary history through the lens of Daniel's prophetic visions, he awaits the eschatological kingdom of Christ. The Roman Empire for him is the fourth kingdom, represented by the fourth beast, which is 'dreadful, mighty, and exceedingly strong' (Dan 7: 7; *Dem.* 5. 19).¹⁵ It will be killed at the inauguration

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of the eternal kingdom, and its body will perish, but until then it will last. The Persians, symbolized by the ram (Dan 8: 4–8), therefore, will not prevail against it. This interpretation does not imply Aphrahat's full sympathy with the Roman Christian Empire, but the Empire does have a clear place in his view of history, a place not challenged by Persian aggression.

While Ephrem often polemicizes against perceived enemies of Christianity, open polemic is much rarer in Aphrahat. Ephrem focuses his invective on the Marcionites, the followers of Bardaisan, and the Manichaeans. Each of these groups, which Ephrem sees as genealogically related, must have held their appeal for many Christians in northern Mesopotamia. Aphrahat, on the other hand, occasionally refers to Marcion and Mani, but never mentions Bardaisan. A further distinction is Ephrem's rebuttal of Arius and Arianism, which has no parallel in Aphrahat, who, as we have seen, had no part in the discussions surrounding Nicaea.

An area in which Aphrahat and Ephrem have similarities while also being clearly distinctive is their attitude towards Judaism. Both authors are familiar with Jewish traditions, Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, and Jewish hermeneutical principles. The ease and frequency with which they incorporate such interpretations and motifs in their work is very revealing, not only about their own intellectual background, but also about that of their audiences. While some of this shared heritage may have entered Syriac Christianity along with the Old Testament Peshitta, other elements seem to reflect later contacts, or even to respond to contemporary discussions.¹⁶ We must conclude, therefore, that in fourth-century central Mesopotamia, as well as in Nisibis and Edessa, there was still a shared discourse connecting Judaism and Syriac Christianity.

In spite of this obvious proximity (or, should one say, because of it?), there is also strong antagonism toward Judaism. Ephrem, following the rhetorical lead of the Hebrew Bible prophets, speaks extremely negatively not only about the Israel of the Old Testament, but also about contemporary Judaism. Aphrahat, while sharing several of the themes of Christian anti-Jewish literature of his day, is much more restrained in his critique, and tries to persuade his alleged Jewish interlocutor with arguments taken primarily from the Old Testament, searching for Old Testament precedents—not just types—for the main tenets of Christianity.

Much work has been done in the past decades both on the parallels that Aphrahat and Ephrem share with Jewish tradition and on their anti-Judaism.¹⁷ How exactly these two aspects should be brought together is not yet clear. To what extent does the anti-Jewish discourse reflect the historical realities in the Persian and the Roman Empires? Why is the anti-Jewish rhetoric of these two Syriac authors, who speak with voices so distinct from those of western Christianity, often so similar to the anti-Judaism of western church fathers?

The writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem, created in central Mesopotamia under Persian rule and in north Mesopotamia under Roman rule, display the essential

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unity of Syriac literary tradition in the fourth century. There is, however, very little evidence of direct links between the two literary corpora.¹⁸ It is only a hundred years after Ephrem's death that we know for sure that Aphrahat's work circulated in Edessa, Ephrem's second home town, when the scribe of what is now the first part of London, British Library, Add. MS 17, 182 (fos. 1–99) copied the first ten of the *Demonstrations*, in Edessa, in September 474 (Wright 1871: 403a–404a).

Aphrahat and Ephrem have received more attention from Syriac scholars than any other authors. In the past decades, many of their works, critically edited from manuscripts as early as the fifth and sixth centuries, have become available in modern translations. Both the literary qualities and the symbolic theology of their works have been explored.¹⁹ Although both authors are still seen as having been affected only a little by Greek philosophical and theological thinking, in an important recent publication (1999) Ute Possekkel has convincingly shown Ephrem's familiarity with the Greek philosophical concepts of his day.

18.5 The Beginnings of Syriac Ascetic Literature

Aphrahat and Ephrem, ascetics themselves, are important witnesses to the concepts and institutions of fourth-century Syriac asceticism. Particularly intriguing, and much studied, is the institution of the *bnay/bnāt qyāmā*, usually translated as 'sons/daughters of the covenant'.²⁰ Standing between the clergy and the lay people, these ascetics had a specific role within the community at large. Aphrahat's and Ephrem's works are aimed not at a separate body of ascetics, but at the broader Christian community. The idea of ascetic withdrawal from society seems first to appear in the Syrian area around the middle of the fourth century (Griffith 1994), and it is around 400 that we first hear about communities of ascetics deliberately conceived as distinct from lay society. The *Book of Steps (Liber graduum)* is a collection of thirty treatises addressed to a Christian community in which ordinary Christians (called 'the Upright') lived side by side with 'the Perfect'. The Perfect were enjoined to keep the 'major commandments' of radical asceticism, which included rejection of possessions, marriage, and manual labour, as well as total 'self-emptying' (cf. Phil 2: 7), while the 'minor commandments' were assigned to the Upright, who in addition were

expected to provide for the Perfect (Kitchen and Parmentier 2004). Geographically, the *Book of Steps* belongs to the Persian part of northern Mesopotamia, probably to the region known as Adiabene. The spiritual instructions that the *Book* imparts are put into the mouth of an

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anonymous visionary leader, whom the alleged editor of the work (who may or may not be the real author) introduces as 'one of the first teachers who wrote in Syriac' and as the peer of fathers like 'Gregory the Great (i.e. of Nazianzus), Basil the Great, and blessed Evagrius' (Syriac Editor's Preface). The radical asceticism of the Perfect seems to echo the rigorous practices advocated by Tatian and in the *Acts of Thomas*, while there are also intriguing parallels with the Greek homilies attributed to Macarius as well as with Manichaean asceticism (Caner 2002).

Perhaps a decade or two after the *Book of Steps*, a different voice of Syriac asceticism expressed itself in the works of John the Solitary (Lavenant 1984). He lived near Apamea, in Syria Secunda (an important centre of Middle Platonist and Neoplatonist philosophy), and was among the first Syriac authors working that far west of the Euphrates (Brock 1998b: 715). John's focus was not community life, but the individual ascetic's spiritual progress, which he analysed in philosophical and psychological terms. There is general agreement nowadays that John originally wrote in Syriac. His familiarity with Greek philosophy certainly did not place him outside the mainstream tradition of Syriac asceticism, which he marked profoundly with his imprint.

Prior to the popularity in Syriac of writings associated with Egyptian asceticism, such as the corpus attributed to Evagrius Ponticus (which became available in Syriac no later than c. 500), the *Book of Steps* and John the Solitary's *œuvre* indicate that the early fifth century was an important period in the formative process of Syriac Christianity. The significance of this period is marked in other ways as well.

18.6 The Early Fifth Century and the Increasing Hellenization of Syriac Christianity

An important manuscript was completed at Edessa in November 411. It survived and is actually the earliest dated Syriac manuscript: London, British Library, Add. Ms 12, 150 (Wright 1871: 631a–633b). It contains the following texts: (1) selections from the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*; (2) Titus of Bostra's work against the Manichaeans; (3) Eusebius of Caesarea's *Theophany*; (4) Eusebius's *On the Martyrs of Palestine*; (5) Eusebius's *Praise of the Martyrs*; (6) a martyrology, arranged according to the Syriac months, with the names of martyrs in Persia added at the end (unfortunately damaged and incomplete).

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Texts 1–5 are translations from Greek. Eusebius's earlier interest in things Edessene seems to be reciprocated here with a full Syriac translation of three of his works (one of them, the *Theophany*, is not otherwise preserved). The *Recognitions*, exhibiting traces of a more Jewish type of Christianity, probably originated in Greek in fourth-century Syria (Jones 1995, 2003), while Titus's

work, only partly preserved in Greek, was one of the most systematic refutations of Manichaeism—written around 370 by the bishop of Bostra in Arabia (Pedersen 2004). These major Greek works, products of the neighbouring provinces of Syria, Palaestina, and Arabia, must have been deliberately incorporated in the literary tradition of Edessene Christianity, which was in the process of redefining its place within imperial Christianity. At the same time, there was a sense of attachment to Syriac Christians in Persia, indicated by the inclusion of their martyrs in the manuscript. Contacts with Persian Christians became more frequent, as the local Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon of 410, held under the auspices of the Persian Emperor, declared Christianity in Persia in agreement with the church of the Roman Empire. Among the protagonists of the synod was Maruta, bishop of Mayperqat (Martyropolis), who travelled back and forth as an envoy between the two empires (Winkler 2003: 25–8, 55–8). The relief in the situation of the Christians of Persia, which was inaugurated by the 410 synod, was only temporary, for by the year 419 political tension with the Roman Empire increased, and persecution resumed (Van Rompay 1995; Rist 1996: 31–3).

18.7 The Fifth-Century Christological Discussions and their Aftermath

Developments in Edessa were marked decisively by the long tenure of the energetic Bishop Rabbula (411/12–435). Rules for monks, priests, and *bnay* and *bnāt qyāmā*, which he issued, show him as a committed organizer, keen to increase discipline and to regulate religious life. There is also evidence that he energetically set up programmes for the poor and the sick (Harvey 1994; Drijvers 1996),²¹ while his dealings with pagans, heretics, and Jews (many of whom he allegedly succeeded in converting) have been variously interpreted. He promoted the use of the four separate Gospels, over against the *Diatessaron* (Petersen 1994: 42–3), and it is generally agreed that he had some involvement in the standardization of the New Testament text, although his exact role in creating and introducing the New Testament Peshitta remains debated.

During Rabbula's tenure, theological conflict broke out between Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople, leading to the condemnation of Nestorius

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at the Council of Ephesus (431). Rabbula eventually became a staunch defender of Cyril's Christology. Whether he turned to it for political reasons, or whether this was his deepest conviction from the outset, will always remain a mystery.²² In the campaign that Rabbula subsequently launched against the opponents of Alexandrian Christology, it was not so much Nestorius who was the target, but Theodore of Mopsuestia, who had died in peace in 428 and was now branded as one of the initiators of Nestorius's two-nature Christology. Many of Theodore's Greek works at this point already existed in Syriac translations and enjoyed great popularity in the School of Edessa, an academic institution with connections to the ecclesiastical authorities. By linking Theodore's name to the struggle against Nestorianism and by condemning Theodore's works to be burnt in Edessa (432), Rabbula contributed to dividing Edessene and Syriac Christianity into two opposing camps, which would never again be reconciled. At the same time, Syriac Christianity was thrown into the midst of the Christological controversy that pervaded the imperial church for more than a century and led up to the ecumenical councils of Chalcedon (451) and Constantinople (553).

Many in Edessa remained faithful to Theodore's legacy, to his Christology and

biblical interpretation. While they continued studying his works and reinterpreting them in Syriac, they succeeded in creating a synthesis between the new Antiochene theology and the earlier Syriac tradition. One of the promoters of this process of adaptation and transformation of Theodore's works was Narsai, a gifted poet from Persian Mesopotamia. As a student at the School of Edessa and later, from the middle of the fifth century, as the school's director, he expressed the Antiochene views on Christ, human history, and salvation in metrical homilies, the language and style of which are often reminiscent of the earlier Syriac literary tradition. Just as in his exposition of the two-nature Christology Narsai emphasized Christ's full humanity (Frishman 1995–6), so too in his biblical interpretation he highlighted the human measure of God's dealings with man throughout history. The story of Paradise, for example, was seen not as the account of man's revolt and rejection that for ever changed human nature, but as the first step in the learning process through which God, according to his plan, led man to perfection (Frishman 1997; Becker 2006: 98–125).

This Antiochene, Theodorean line of thought met with increasing opposition in Edessa, so that, somewhere in the second half of the fifth century, Narsai, along with his followers and his books, left the city and established a new school in the city of Nisibis, which was within Persian territory. Narsai was the director of this new school until his death in 502/3. The School of Nisibis quickly became the intellectual centre of Persian Christianity, which adopted Theodore's two-nature Christology as its official doctrine at synods held in 484 and 486 (Winkler 2003: 66–9; Becker 2006). The East Syriac church, which is often infelicitously and incorrectly called 'Nestorian' (whereas its theology is in fact much closer to Theodore than to Nestorius), was henceforth seen as heretical by the imperial church.

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Those in Edessa and elsewhere in Syria, who did not identify with Antiochene theology and exegesis as interpreted by Theodore of Mopsuestia, instead embraced Cyril of Alexandria's concepts and thoughts. Rabbula himself was one of the first interpreters of Cyril in Syriac. A process parallel to what happened to Theodore took place with regard to Cyril and Alexandrian theology. One of its main representatives in the late fifth and early sixth century was Jacob of Serug, who, just like Narsai, though probably slightly later than him, had been a student at the School of Edessa. In contrast with Narsai, he belonged to those in the school who opposed Theodore's influence.²³

The demise of Antiochene theology within the Roman Empire and the exodus from Edessa to Nisibis did not imply that the Cyrillian opponents, who followed in the footsteps of Rabbula and Jacob of Serug, emerged as the winners. For 20 years after Ephesus, at the Council of Chalcedon (451), the imperial church endorsed a moderate form of the two-nature Christology. Intent on steering a middle course, the Council of Chalcedon condemned at the same time (what it saw as) extreme Dyophysitism, which was associated with the name of Nestorius, and Monophysitism, which was associated with the name of Eutyches. Chalcedon's sanctioning of the two-nature Christology, which became the doctrinal foundation for the whole of western Christianity, however, was unacceptable to many Christians, even those who were not willing to follow Eutyches (according to whom Christ's human nature was entirely absorbed within, and thus erased by, his divinity). Many Christians in Syria and Mesopotamia—as well as in Egypt, and later in Armenia and Ethiopia—thought that God-becoming-man could not exist in two natures, but had to be envisioned in one new nature of the God-man Christ. This was not, in their view, a particular expression of their type of eastern Christianity; rather, they were fully convinced that Miaphysitism, the one-nature doctrine,²⁴ was fully consonant with the

teaching of the earlier orthodox church fathers, including Athanasius of Alexandria, the Cappadocians, Cyril, and all those who were universally recognized as the pillars of (imperial) orthodoxy.

It is in this spirit that the main theologians of the Miaphysite tradition, Philoxenus of Mabbog in Syriac and Severus of Antioch in Greek, defended the orthodoxy of their views. In the late fifth and early sixth century, they had the emperors' ears and occasionally their support, especially between 512 and 518, when Severus occupied the patriarchate of Antioch. In those years, Miaphysitism held sway all over the eastern empire, in Antioch, Alexandria, and even in Constantinople, while with Rome a schism existed between 482 and 518. At the accession of Justin I, in 518, however, Chalcedonian orthodoxy was restored as the basis of the Empire's religious policy. Severus was deposed and fled to Egypt, while the Miaphysites became the target of the emperors' assiduous attempts to bring them back to normative Chalcedonianism, either by persuasion or by force (Van Rompay 2005).

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18.8 A Scattered Legacy and a Divided Tradition: The Sixth Century and Beyond

These attempts failed. Instead, anti-Chalcedonians within the Roman Empire gradually shaped their own identity and their own ecclesiastical structures. Towards the end of the sixth century, the resistance against the imperial Church—which the Miaphysites saw as heretical—expressed itself predominantly in Syriac (mirroring the role of Coptic in the same period in Egypt), and the foundations were laid for a self-conscious, anti-Chalcedonian, Syrian Orthodox community. The sixth century in many ways was a very creative period. Earlier works by Ephrem and others were copied, while new texts— theological, hagiographical, historical, and philosophical—were authored. Churches and monasteries were built or expanded (Van Rompay 2005: 256–7). In the same period, Dyophysite Christianity had its formative period in the Persian-Sasanid Empire (Reinink 1995). These two Syriac churches were further consolidated under Islamic rule, while Syriac Christians of Chalcedonian allegiance found their way either into the Maronite Church, with its original centre in the region of Apamea, or into the Melkite (i.e. Byzantine Orthodox) Church of the patriarchate of Antioch.

Each of these traditions in its own way continues to the present day the religious and cultural heritage of Syriac Christianity. The Greek interpretation of Christianity in the course of history may have left a strong imprint on Syriac Christianity, even transforming it in a number of ways. Yet the historian should not see these developments as a move away from the early indigenous roots of Syriac Christian culture. Each period should be studied in its own right, with its own historical and cultural complexities, as an authentic expression of Syriac Christianity.

Notes

¹ For surveys of Syriac scholarship, see Brock (1994); De Halleux (1996); Murray (2004: 1–38).

² With the exception of the surroundings of Jerusalem and some areas in Palestine, where there was a modest development of a different, West-Aramaic literary language, i.e. Christian Palestinian Aramaic.

³ Examples are the use of 'distancing' techniques when God is addressed or spoken about (in an attempt to emphasize God's transcendence); the introduction of prayer language where this is absent from the biblical text; the

use of the term 'Shekintâ', denoting the Divine Presence. See Brock (1995b, 1998a: 489–93).

⁴. This may refer to any place in Syria or Mesopotamia, see Millar (1993: 227); *contra* Hunt (2003: 181 n. 1).

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⁵. A critical survey of scholarship on the *Diatessaron* is available in Petersen (1994).

⁶. The term *enkrateia* is used here in its general sense, rather than as the specific designation of a sect, constructed by later heresiologists; see Hunt (2003: 145–50).

⁷. For a cautious and methodologically important study of some terms related to the incarnation, each having its own Jewish-Aramaic background, see Brock (1989); see also Brock (2001: 388 and 391–5).

⁸. Murray (2004) and Drijvers (1984) should be singled out among the scholars who have been most successful in depicting coherent pictures of pre-fourth-century Syriac Christianity.

⁹. For scholarship on the *Hymn of the Pearl*, see Poirier (1981) and Ferreira (2002).

¹⁰. For the state of the research, see Uro (2003: esp. 26–30 and 134–8). According to Uro, 'it has been almost universally acknowledged that [the *Gospel of*] *Thomas* should be seen as a product of east Syrian Christianity' (p. 137). He regards the period between c. 100 and 140 CE as 'the best conjecture' for the date. DeConick (2005) suggests a mid-first-century origin for the 'kernel' text in a Palestinian-Aramaic context, while the complete Gospel, to be dated no later than 120 CE, might reflect adaptation and modification in Syriac (esp. pp. 240–4). Quispel (2006), agreeing with DeConick, asserts that the *Gospel of Thomas* was written in Edessa before 140 CE.

¹¹. The most accessible English translation is Drijvers (1965). For a recent German translation, with some notes, see Krannich and Stein (2004). A recent analysis of Bardaisan's view on the resurrection can be found in Possekkel (2004).

¹². Another categorization which is not helpful in the study of early Syriac Christianity is that of Gnosticism. While some texts have been understood as Gnostic by ancient readers or by modern scholars, the distinction makes sense only from the perspective of a (later) non-Gnostic orthodox standard. Attempts to group together certain Gnostic texts of alleged Syrian origin have remained problematic. See King (2003: 162–5) and Uro (2003: 20–4).

¹³. Introductions to Ephrem's world and writings can be found in McVey (1989) and Brock (1990); for Aphrahat, see Baarda (1975: 1–10); Pierre (1988); Bruns (1990, 1991).

¹⁴. An excellent treatment of Aphrahat's Christology is Bruns (1990). On the possible connection between this Christology and Jewish Christianity, see the author's nuanced observations on pp. 214–16.

¹⁵. References are to Valavanolickal (2005).

¹⁶. For Ephrem, see Kronholm (1978); for Aphrahat, see Koltun-Fromm (1996).

¹⁷. For Ephrem, see Shepardson (2001) and Kuhlmann (2004); for Aphrahat, see Becker (2002, 2003).

¹⁸. Brock (1995a: 77) identified a passage in Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron* that mirrors, and may have been borrowed from, Aphrahat's *Demonstration 23*.

¹⁹. Murray (2004) focuses on Aphrahat and Ephrem while taking other early texts into consideration as well. On Ephrem, see also Bou Mansour (1988). For an exploration of Ephrem's poetic language and style within the broader Aramaic literary tradition, see Rodrigues Pereira (1997).

20. Griffith (1995: 229–34). For a possible connection between the *qyāmā* and the Jewish institution of the *ma^camad*, see Pierre (1988: 99 n. 84); de Halleux (1996: 161 with n. 78); Murray (2004: 14 n. 65). For further possible layers of meaning, see Murray (1999, 2004: 16–17). For a recent study on the *bnāt qyāmā*, see Harvey (2005).

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21. Doran (2006) conveniently brings together English translations of the most relevant Syriac texts, with introductions and notes.

22. For a recent discussion of some of the theological implications of Rabbula's position, see Doran (2006: 61–4), while the possible social dimension of the conflict in Edessa is indicated (pp. 115–19).

23. On Jacob's Christology, see Bou Mansour (2002). The parallelism between Jacob and Narsai may not be complete, as Jacob does not seem not to have followed Cyril as radically as Narsai followed Theodore. Both in his theology and in his biblical interpretation Jacob was closer to Ephrem than was Narsai. See Bou Mansour (2002: 497–9); Van Rompay (1996: 637–9).

24. There is a tendency in recent scholarship to use the term 'Miaphysite', which reflects Cyril of Alexandria's Christological terminology, and to avoid other terms that in the past were used to designate the anti-Chalcedonians, such as 'Monophysite' and 'Jacobite'. The latter names, coined by the anti-Chalcedonians' opponents, are seen by the present-day non-Chalcedonian communities as inadequate descriptions of their tradition. The term 'Monophysite' is associated with Eutyches, whose Christology is rejected by all later Miaphysite theologians.

Suggested Reading

Many of the works referred to in the Bibliography will serve as introductions to important themes and as stepping stones towards further explorations and research. The following titles are additional.

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