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1. Syrian Orthodox Church.

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THE IDENTITY FORMATION
OF SYRIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS
AS REFLECTED IN TWO EXEGETICAL COLLECTIONS:
FIRST SOUNDINGS

BY

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Among the Christians who did not accept the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (451), the group now known as West Syrians (or Syrian Orthodox) was probably least likely to form a national or ethnic community. Yet a group emerged with its own distinctive literature and art, its own network and historical consciousness. In an intricate process of adoption and rejection, the Syrian Orthodox selected elements from the cultures to which they were heirs and from those with which they came into contact, thus defining a position of their own. In this paper I shall discuss the first results of my inquiry into the question of how biblical interpretation contributed to the formation of a specifically Syrian Orthodox identity. My main examples are the so-called *London Collection* (possibly compiled in the second quarter of the seventh century) and the *Collection of Simeon* (end of the ninth century; better known as *Catena Severi*). These works are in fact anthologies and summaries of earlier exegetical literature. They seem to have been designed to collect everything that was known, sometimes even assuming an encyclopaedic nature. We will see how they built an authoritative interpretative tradition that helped to give answers to questions posed by the political and religious circumstances of the period. In the process of sifting, selecting, and summarizing, choices were made and new elements were added that were to determine the Syrian Orthodox use of the Bible until today.

Exegesis and Identity

First, we should deal with the question of whether exegetical material is at all useful to map the reactions of the Syrian Orthodox to the changing cir-

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cumstances. With Martin Accad, who recently published an important article on the influence of the Islamic context on later Syriac exegesis, we should admit that direct engagement with the new environment belongs to the genre of polemics and apologetics rather than to exegesis¹. 'Exegesis, and not least Syriac exegesis,' he says, 'owes to its nature to remain faithful to its text and traditions, and not to be dictated in its purpose by its changing environment'. On the other hand, he describes how exegesis cannot escape the influence of its day, and that it can even be considered a task of the exegete to try to be relevant and address the issues of the day. I would add that biblical interpretation plays a major role in shaping, legitimizing, and conveying any orthodoxy, and that this seems to have been particularly true in the case of the West Syrians. A large part of the literary output of the Syrian Orthodox and some of the main genres of their literature were concerned with exegesis.

Syriac exegetical works used the authority of the Bible to discuss the creation of the world, its early history, and the future; to give moral guidance; and to inform the reader about physics, astronomy, and other sciences. Some works dealing with the Creation were in fact up-to-date encyclopaedias of contemporary scientific knowledge. Thus biblical interpretation served as a vehicle for a complete world-view. This world-view had its background in the different traditions that contributed to Syrian culture, but also had a clear touch of its own, which defined the position of the Syrian Orthodox vis-à-vis the surrounding world. Biblical interpretation forms the key to the authoritative biblical myths, histories, and commandments: it selects what is important for the community under the circumstances of the moment, and it redefines and resignifies their content to serve its changing moral, theological, and political needs. Biblical interpretation is the key to the origin myth, early history, ethics, and world-view of the community.

It is often stated that Syriac exegesis, and especially later Syriac exegesis, is not creative or original. It is true that earlier material plays a very important role, in all West and East Syriac exegesis. But wherever these sources are known and still available to us, they enable us to look into the mind of the compiler. It is the subtle strategy of adoption and rejection of earlier material that needs to be described. In not a few cases, the comparison with earlier material tells us more of what was considered important at a certain moment than a so-called original work might do.

1) Martin ACCAD, «Did the Later Syriac Fathers Take into Consideration their Islamic Context when Reinterpreting the New Testament?», in *Parole de l'Orient* 23 (1998), pp. 13-32.

Syrian Orthodox Biblical Interpretation

In order to position the works under discussion, it is necessary to take a quick look at the history of Syrian Orthodox biblical interpretation. The School of Edessa, where the great Syriac exegete Ephrem worked after 363 and which played a pivotal role in the development of the early Syrian exegetical tradition, became divided in the fifth century over the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia. This Greek Antiochene theologian and exegete was one of the main sources of inspiration for the Dyophysites. His works were studied and translated in the School, and his hermeneutic principles and terminology were taken over, together with his view on history as a manifestation of God's pedagogic treatment of humankind.

The adoption of Theodore's exegesis and anthropology also met with resistance, however. The early Miaphysite exegete and poet Jacob of Serug, for example, felt more at home with Ephrem's views and those of moderate Alexandrian exegetes. Yet Jacob of Serug and his opponents still had much in common. First of all, they shared a common Edessan tradition. In addition, it seems that the Miaphysite opposition to Theodore did not necessarily lead to the acceptance of the radical allegorizing trend of some of the Alexandrians, who were ready to abandon the plain sense of the Scriptures altogether. The Miaphysites sought to achieve a balance between the Antiochene 'historical' approach and spiritual exegesis. At the end of the sixth century, we find that the West Syrians had a complex literary culture, which combined Greek, Hebrew, and indigenous components. They stood in interrelationship with surrounding cultures, but expressed their own interests with the help of all traditions available to them². It is in this vein that we should also see the very influential work of Jacob of Edessa in the following century, when the advent of Islam relieved the Syrian Orthodox of the pressures of the Chalcedonians³.

It was during the first three centuries of Islamic rule that the Syrian Orthodox started editing their anthologies and summaries of earlier exegetical

2) Lucas VAN ROMPAY, «The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation», in M. SÆBØ (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation 1. From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300) 1. Antiquity* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1996), pp. 612-41, especially 637-41.

3) Lucas VAN ROMPAY, «Past and Present Perceptions of Syriac Literary Tradition», *Hugoye* [<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/>] 3.1 (2000), §§ 11-23; R.B. Ter Haar ROMENY and K.D. JENNER (eds.), *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day* (MPIL 14; E.J. Brill, Leiden, forthcoming).

literature. It was a period of reinventing tradition: the split between the Miaphysites, Chalcedonians and Diophysites had become definitive, and the political landscape had changed because of the victories of the Arab armies over the Byzantines. The collections I will be discussing come from this period. The *London Collection* unites the opinions of various, mainly Greek, exegetes. The *Collection of Simeon* combines the early Syriac interpretation from before the split with the explanations of Jacob of Edessa, a limited number of Greek exegetes and other, possibly new material.

From the period of Simeon, one could also mention the work of Moses bar Kepa, which likewise builds on predecessors. The tenth and eleventh centuries, however, showed little activity in the field of exegesis. It was not until the period of the Syriac Renaissance, the twelfth and thirteenth century, that Dionysius bar Salibi and Barhebraeus compiled new exegetical collections. These works lean on the eighth- and ninth-century collections, but do show evidence of further ‘cultivation’ and ‘pruning’ of the tradition. A notable feature, for instance, is Barhebraeus’ openness towards the East Syrian tradition. Since the thirteenth century, hardly any new material has been added to the exegetical tradition. Some of the existing collections have assumed canonical status themselves, and are fostered and studied to the present day⁴.

Description of the Two Collections

The *London Collection* survives in a single manuscript, British Library Add. 12168, of the eighth or ninth century⁵, but there are indications that it was composed somewhat earlier, possibly in the second quarter of the seventh century⁶. This work has not been reproduced in our own days. It should also be termed a *collection* rather than a *catena*. It consists of extracts from various, mostly Greek authors in Syriac translation, forming a commentary on most of the Old and New Testament. The choice of authors quoted gives a good impression of the profile of this work. For the Pentateuch we find the names of Cyril of Alexandria, Severus of Antioch, Gregory of

4) Lucas VAN ROMPAY, «Development of Biblical Interpretation in the Syrian Churches of the Middle Ages», in M. SÆBØ (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation* 1. *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)* 2. *The Middle Ages* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2000), pp. 559-77, especially 573-77.

5) William WRIGHT, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since 1838* 2 (Trustees of the British Museum, London, 1871), pp. 904-908; Van Rompay, «Development of Biblical Interpretation», p. 564.

6) See below, under «References to Contemporary Events».

Nazianzus, and Ephrem; for the Prophets, Athanasius, Cyril, Severus, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and Ephrem. In other words: some of the more moderate Alexandrians, the moderate Antiochene Chrysostom, the Miaphysite leader Severus, the Cappadocians, and finally Ephrem as the only Syrian authority. In addition, the *London Collection* has several appendices dealing with moral and other questions.

The *Collection of Simeon* is commonly known as the *Catena Severi*, the *catena* of the monk Severus, who lived in the Monastery of St. Barbara near Edessa in the middle of the ninth century. This composition was edited in part in a very unsatisfactory way in the eighteenth century⁷, and continues to be used and copied today. It has been called a *catena* in the past, as it contains exegetical fragments by different authors. Nowadays a *catena* is defined more strictly as a collection centred on a full biblical text, in which comments culled from different authors are quoted under their own name in the margin or between the scriptural verses⁸. Our text is not a *catena* in this sense. It is a collection of different materials which do not all go back to the monk Severus either. The actual work of the monk Severus consisted, as he himself says in a colophon, of a commentary on difficult words of the Old Testament, mainly based on Ephrem and Jacob of Edessa, and a commentary on the New Testament, mainly based on John Chrysostom. It was completed in the year 1172 of the Greeks, that is, AD 861.

The main text contains a number of long insertions. The first is the complete *Commentary on the Octateuch* of Jacob of Edessa⁹. In addition, there are some marginal comments, often with a clear attribution to a specific author and a particular work. The person who added these is, according to his own testimony, the monk Simeon of Hisn Mansur, who worked in the Monastery of the Seven Martyrs near the town of Perrhe. For this reason, we have designated the text the *Collection of Simeon*, which thus consists of what we should term the *Commentary of the Monk Severus*, several longer insertions, and the shorter marginal comments.

7) P. BENEDICTUS (ed. & transl.), *Sancti Patris nostri Ephraem Syri Opera omnia quae exstant* 1-2 (Pontifical Press of the Vatican, Rome, 1737-40).

8) Françoise PETIT, «La chaîne grecque sur la Genèse, miroir de l'exégèse ancienne», in G. SCHÖLLGEN and C. SCHOLTEN (eds.), *Stimuli: Exegese und ihre Hermeneutik in Antike und Christentum: Festschrift für Ernst Dassmann* (Jahrbücher für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband 23; Aschendorff, Münster, 1996), pp. 243-253.

9) Dirk KRUISHEER, «Ephrem, Jacob of Edessa, and the Monk Severus: An Analysis of Ms. Vat. Syr. 103, ff. 1-72», in René LAVENANT (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum VII* (OCA 256; Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome, 1998), pp. 599-605.

I have been able to establish a stemma of the available manuscripts. It appears that the manuscript Vatican Syriac 103, written by Simeon himself at the end of the ninth century or perhaps the beginning of the tenth¹⁰, is the archetype of the known tradition. The other four manuscripts (British Library Add. 12144, dated 1081, Mingana Syr. 147, written in 1899, Harvard Syriac 116, of the same year, and Harvard Syriac 123, of 1903) all go back, directly or indirectly, to this codex¹¹.

References to Contemporary Events

The first group of examples that can help us answer our main question – how did these collections contribute to the formation of a communal identity? – is that of explicit references to contemporary events and situations. It should be conceded right at the start that this group is not very large. The view held by Antiochene and East Syrian exegetes that the Old Testament usually does not refer to things beyond the horizon of the Old Testament itself would seem to have influenced these authors, too, though an important exception is made for references to Christ, which are recognized especially in passages of a prophetic nature. There are more exceptions, however. Thus in its explanation of the Blessings of the Patriarch Jacob (Gen 49), Jacob of Edessa's *Commentary on the Octateuch* explains with, among others, Cyril of Alexandria, that Asher means 'rich one'. He adds, however, that the nourishment that Asher is to provide to the princes according to the biblical text, refers not only to nourishment of angels, as Cyril said, but also to that of 'earthly princes, that is, the believing kings and the orthodox bishops' (Vat. Ms. fol. 43b). Apparently he distinguishes between two groups of bishops: those who followed the Miaphysite teaching and those who did not.

In the Blessing of Dan (Gen 49:16-18) Jacob of Edessa seems to follow Cyril without additions: Dan judging his people refers to the apostles, who will judge Israel. Here it is Severus or Simeon who gives a long and interesting addition (Vat. Ms. fol. 30b–31b). First, in a comparison of the blessings of Jacob and Moses, he had repeated Ephrem's point of view, that the phrase

10) Cf. S.E. and J.S. ASSEMANI, *Bibliothecae apostolicae Vaticanae codicum manuscriptorum catalogus* 1.3 (Paris, 1926 = Rome, 1759), pp. 7-28, with an important correction in T. JANSMA, «The Provenance of the Last Sections in the Roman Edition of Ephraem's Commentary on Exodus», *Mus* 85 (1972), pp. 155-67, especially 160.

11) Bas Ter Haar ROMENY and Dirk KRUISHEER, «The Tradition of the So-Called Catena Severi, Formerly Attributed to Ephrem the Syrian», to be submitted to *Le Muséon*.

'Dan shall judge his people' referred to Samson, who was indeed a Danite¹². But further on he adds a scholion entitled 'On the prophecy of Jacob about the Antichrist, who was begotten from Dan his son'. Here he explains the Peshitta reading 'Dan shall be a snake on the road and a viper on the paths, who bites the horse in its heel and throws the rider on his back.' Referring to a commentary by Hippolytus of Rome on the Revelation to John¹³, he says that the animal mentioned in Rev 17 and this horse with its rider refer to the Empire 'of those who are called Latins': 'The snake bites this empire, that is, the horse, while leading it astray and casting it into the pit of destruction'. A few lines further on he also clearly indicates that the Roman Empire is being led astray: 'This is the back as it can be understood: the end of the realm of the kingdom of the Romans, which is carried away by the corruption of the stings of the snake, this enemy of the human race.' Interestingly, he combines this explanation with one that can indeed be found in the Greek fragments of Hippolytus: the idea that the snake is the Devil¹⁴. But this snake does not simply come forth from Dan, as in Hippolytus. In the version of our commentary, only the mother of the Antichrist is a Danite; his father is a Roman.

12) R.M. TONNEAU (ed.), *Sancti Ephraem Syri In Genesim et in Exodum commentarii* (CSCO 152 / Syr. 71; Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, Louvain, 1955), p. 115.

13) This fragment is adopted among Arabic fragments from a commentary on the Apocalypse by Hans Achelis (ed.), *Hippolytus: Werke 1.2 Kleinere exegetische und homiletische Schriften* (J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, GCS, Leipzig, 1897), pp. 236-37. Pierre Nautin, however, suggested that this fragment is an echo of Hippolytus' *De Christo et Antichristo* 50 (ed. Achelis, *Hippolytus* 1.2, p. 34, ll. 5-7); *Le dossier d'Hippolyte et de Meliton dans les florilèges dogmatiques et chez les historiens modernes* (Patristica 1; Cerf, Paris, 1953), p. 144; cf. Marcel RICHARD, «Les difficultés d'une édition des œuvres de S. Hippolyte», in idem, *Opera minora* I (Brepols, Turnhout; University Press, Leuven, 1976), no. 11, p. 68. It appears that at least one other fragment of this work was also handed down in Syriac as belonging to a commentary on the Apocalypse; see Sebastian P. BROCK, «Some New Syriac Texts Attributed to Hippolytus», *Mus* 94 (1981), pp. 177-200, especially 179-80. A fuller version of *De Christo et Antichristo* 50 is quoted in Dionysius bar Salibi's *Commentary on the Apocalypse*: I. SEDLACEK (ed.), *Dionysius bar Salibi: In Apocalypsim, Actus et Epistulas catholicas* (CSCO 53 / Syr. 18; Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1909), p. 23; cf. Pierre PRIGENT, «Hippolyte, commentateur de l'Apocalypse», in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 28 (1972), pp. 391-412, especially 395. Hippolytus' identification between the Latins and the beast of Rev 17 is based on the numerical value of the Greek word λατῆνος, which is 666; cf. Irenaeus' *Adversus haereses* 5.30.3, ed. Rousseau, Doutreleau, Mercier (SC 153), pp. 380-81.

14) Fragments XXXIV-XXXVI on pp. 64-65 in Achelis, *Hippolytus* 1.2; now available in a new edition by Françoise PETIT: *La chaîne sur la Genèse: Édition intégrale 4. Chapitres 29 à 50* (TEG 4; Peeters, Leuven, 1996), fragments 2200, 2201, and 2205. Note that Hippolytus here equates the rider with Christ; it would seem that the link between the beast of Rev 17 and the horse of Gen 49 goes back to our compiler rather than to Hippolytus, as Nautin already observed (see the preceding footnote).

Whether the author has fully considered the consequences of the combination of these identifications, remains unclear. It is obvious, however, that he is very negative about the Roman Empire: it is being led astray, it is even itself at the root of all evil, and it will be cast on its back, that is, it will come to its end. This attitude fits a situation in which the Roman Empire was seen as the representative of non-orthodox teachings and one in which there was considerable apocalyptic interest. The last two decades of the seventh century or the first years of the eighth century formed such a period: they witnessed enormous social and political changes; there was a severe plague, there was famine, and there was the burden of new taxations, not to mention the second civil war between the Umayyads and Ibn al-Zubayr.

The fact that the Arabs are not mentioned by name does not mean that the scholion dates from before Islamic rule; in fact, it could be an argument to assign an even later date to this scholion. Just like Simeon's collection, *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* has the traditional Syriac identification of the four beasts of Daniel 7 with the empires of the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, and Greeks. This shows that this scheme, with the Graeco-Roman Empire at the end of days, could still be used in apocalyptic speculations at the beginning of the nineties of the seventh century: it was not necessary to define the Muslim Empire as the last kingdom; the Arabs could be seen merely as an instrument or an extra complicating factor during the Apocalypse. It is true that a slightly later Miaphysite text, the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, defines the Muslim Empire as the fourth¹⁵. In its anti-Judaism and its anti-Chalcedonian attitude, however, Simeon's collection can be compared with the latter text. Should we therefore not think of a more stable situation in the eighth or ninth century, a period without the intense apocalyptic hope of the end of the seventh? A period in which open criticism of the Arabs was perhaps difficult, but in which the boundaries between Jews and Christians and between Miaphysites and Chalcedonians could again be emphasized?

Whenever we should date this particular scholion, it is clear that for our

15) On this text and its historic background, see Han J.W. DRIVERS, «Christians, Jews and Muslims in Northern Mesopotamia in Early Islamic Times: The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles and Related Texts», in Pierre CANIVET and Jean-Paul REY-COQUAIS, *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam: VI^e-VIII^e siècles. Actes du colloque international, Lyon, Maison de l'Orient Méditerranéen, Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe 11-15 septembre 1990* (Publications de l'Institut Français de Damas 137; Institut français de Damas, Damascus, 1992), 67-74, reprinted in his *History and Religion in Late Antique Syria* (Variorum, Aldershot, 1994), chapter XIX.

compiler at the end of the ninth century, the picture of the Roman Empire being led astray was still relevant. In an East Syrian context, or even a later West Syrian context, one would not expect so much attention to the wickedness of Rome. Therefore it does not come as a surprise that the East Syrian commentary of Išo'dad (c.850)¹⁶ and Barhebraeus¹⁷ just have a simple reference to the Antichrist here, without mentioning the Romans or to any other explanation of the horse and its rider¹⁸.

A different reference to contemporary events is probably found in a very short excursus in the *London Collection* right after a section quoting the text of Nehemiah according to the Syro-Hexapla (the Syriac translation produced in 615-617 by Paul of Tella on the basis of the Hexaplaric Septuagint). It reads as follows:

That prayers also help in tumultuous wars, Moses shows who overcame Amalek, and Joshua the son of Nun (who overcame) the thirty kings who fought him, and Samuel and David who slew the Philistines, and Hezekiah (who slew) the forces of the Assyrians. And Asa overcame through prayer the thousand thousands of Zerah the Indian who went to battle against him. (London Ms. fol. 159a.)

It is tempting to suppose that this remark was written by somebody who himself experienced the tumultuous circumstances of a war. Unfortunately, it is unclear which war. In the seventh century alone, one could think of the campaigns of Chosroes II, the reconquests of Heraclius, the Arab campaigns in which the whole Middle East was brought under Islamic rule, or the civil wars at the time of the Umayyads. Even though the Miaphysites may have assessed the Persian and Arab campaigns positively later on, it is clear that they too suffered in the upheaval. Another excursus, which follows this one, may be taken to suggest that the author wrote before the death of Yazdagird III, the last of the Sasanid rulers, in 651¹⁹. An earlier digression, discussing, among other things, why God permits holy men to be tried, and that to flee

16) J.M. VOSTÉ and C. VAN DEN EYNDE (eds.), *Commentaire d'Išo'dad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament 1. Genèse* (CSCO 126 / Syr. 67; Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbeck, Leuven, 1950), p. 217.

17) Martin SPRENGLING and William Creighton GRAHAM (ed. & trans.), *Barhebraeus' Scholia on the Old Testament 1. Genesis-II Samuel* (The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 13; University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1931), pp. 96-97.

18) Whether this is really significant depends on the question whether they knew of the full explanation found in Simeon's collection. Their reference to the Antichrist could be taken as an indication that they did, but it is hard to prove this (only in the case of Barhebraeus could further research bring out that he used the *Collection of Simeon* in this form).

19) WRIGHT, *Catalogue 2*, pp. 905-906.

from persecutors does not deserve of blame (London Ms. fol. 35a-36a), would suggest that the author lived through the persecutions under the Chalcedonians: these are not just memories of a difficult past, but attempts to put heart into those who experienced these hard times themselves.

Answers to Important Questions

The exegetical collections discuss many issues that are in our opinion perhaps only loosely connected to the biblical text, but that the authors must have considered important. Together these discussions, sometimes presented in the form of answers to questions, form the building blocks of a Christian, or more specifically, a Syrian Orthodox world-view. The collections deliver all the material necessary for one's position. This was done in various ways. Thus the *Commentary on the Hexaemeron* of Moses bar Kepa (d. 903) presents a long list containing a diversity of issues, partly in the form of questions and answers. To mention just a few of these: he explains the Trinity, the fact that the world was not created out of the mingling of five or two beings, the question of what is prophecy, various aspects of the four elements, the different animals, the size of the earth, and verse by verse, the creation narrative itself²⁰. Simeon's collection lacks the formal structure of Moses work, but deals with many of the same issues while going through the creation narrative. A number of long quotations from Jacob of Edessa's *Commentary on the Hexaemeron* add depth to the discussion of the philosophy and theology of the work of Creation and the world that is its result.

Further on in the book of Genesis we find the lists of descendants of Adam in Gen. 5 and Noah in Gen. 10 and 11, which formed the basis of virtually all pre-modern ideas on the relations between peoples. These chapters attracted the attention of Syriac exegetes from the start. Already in Ephrem we find, for example, an identification of the cities where Nimrod was king (Gen 10:10-12) as Edessa, Nisibis, Ctesiphon, Adiabene, Hatra and Resh'aina: important cities for Syrian Christianity²¹. The identifications of the cities themselves are also known from other sources, that is, from the Targumim, but it is conspicuous that Ephrem takes over exactly these identifications, and that he had a positive view on Nimrod, the legendary king of

20) See the full table of contents in Lorenz Schlimme (trans.), *Der Hexaemeronkommentar des Moses bar Kepha 1* (Göttinger Orientforschungen 1.14; Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1977), pp. 63-90.

21) TONNEAU (ed.), *Sancti Ephraem In Genesim et in Exodum*, p. 65.

this area²². Jacob of Edessa does not mention Nimrod, but he does explain how the world was divided over Sem, Ham, and Japhet (London Ms. fol. 36a). In Simeon's collection we find all this material in an expanded version. The space allotted to this material could indicate a growing interest in how the peoples of the world related to each other, especially those in the Middle East. Still, this collection does not venture into very clear identifications of the Syrians of his day with, for example, Asshur or Aram – unless we should explain as such the fact that it allots Lebanon, the anti-Lebanon, Phoenicia, and the whole area to the west of the Euphrates to Aram (London Ms. fol. 17b). On the one hand, the collection can be considered conservative – especially if we take into account that we see a certain pride in being a Syrian coming up in the seventh century, among others in Severus of Nisibis, who reacted against the cultural chauvinism of the Greek-speaking world and identified the Syrians with the Babylonians²³. On the other hand, Simeon's collection did not hesitate to give its readers all the material from which they could draw their own conclusions, and was much more helpful in this respect than earlier works.

The first folios of the *London Collection* are lost, so it is hard to say how this author dealt with the Creation and the lists of Gen 5, 10 and 11. On the basis of the end of Genesis, we could surmise that he used Cyril of Alexandria's *Glaphyra* as a framework, adding fragments from other authors. Elsewhere, however, as we have seen, he adds treatises on various issues. Some of these were also discussed by Moses: on the versions of the Bible and on the question of which books are to be reckoned as canonical. Thus the reader was also informed on the different versions of the Bible used by Jews and by other Christians – a matter which became highly important in the debate with Islam²⁴. The *London Collection* quotes the biblical text in

22) For views on Nimrod in rabbinic and early Christian literature, see Pieter W. VAN DER HORST, «Nimrod after the Bible», in idem, *Essays on the Jewish World of Early Christianity* (Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus 14; Universitätsverlag, Freiburg; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1990), pp. 220-232, especially 225-26.

23) Cf. Sebastian P. Brock, «From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning», in N. Garsoïan et al. (eds.), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period (Dumbarton Oaks symposium, 1980)* (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC, 1982), pp. 17-34, reprinted as Chapter V of his *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Variorum Reprints, London, 1984); especially 23-24.

24) Cf. Bas ter Haar ROMENY, «Biblical Studies in the Church of the East: The Case of Catholicos Timothy I», in: E.J. YARNOLD and M.F. WILES (eds.), *Studia Patristica 34. Papers Presented to the Thirteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1999* (Peeters, Leuven, 2001), pp. 503-10.

a number of instances from the Syro-Hexapla; at other places it gives a direct translation from the Greek biblical text of the commentaries quoted; and in yet other instances it quotes the Peshitta, the ancient Syriac version translated directly from the Hebrew. In this way, it does take its own stance in the contemporary debate on the right version of the biblical text, a stance which differs from that of the later *Commentary* of the monk Severus, who mainly quoted the Peshitta.

Some insight into the London compiler's ideas on the right version of the biblical text can be gained from the treatise on this subject. It consists of two parts. The first part is written in the kind of Syriac which can only be understood after a retroversion to Greek, which does of course place our work firmly in the seventh century²⁵. It mentions the various Greek versions and the use of critical marks by Origen, and explains that the first translators, the seventy-two wise men who came from the city of Tiberias, were working under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the later translations, made by only one person, were less reliable. I have not been able to trace the Greek text that must have been the *Vorlage* for this passage. The second part deals with the same issues, and is taken from Epiphanius' treatise *On Weights and Measures*, as indicated by our compiler. It is not as literal, and it is independent from the full version edited by James Elmer Dean²⁶.

If one compares the exposition on the versions given by Moses bar Ke-pa around 900, the use of Epiphanius and the interest in the various Greek versions are clear points of agreement. The two authors must have shared the feeling that a commentary that quotes more than one version needs to give some information on the different versions. The striking difference between the two is the fact that Moses bar Ke-pa also explains about versions in Syriac, in a passage added to the material he took from Epiphanius. In the *London Collection*, we do find information on the Syro-Hexapla elsewhere in the commentary, as I said, but not on the Peshitta. The fact that the London compiler seems to completely ignore this version is probably a good indication of his ideas on this version. Yet the Peshitta is not completely absent in

25) Cf. Sebastian P. BROCK, «Towards a History of Syriac Translation Technique», in René LAVENANT (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum 1980* (OCA 221, Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome, 1983), 1-14, reprinted in his *Studies in Syriac Christianity* (Variorum, Aldershot, 1992), chapter X.

26) James Elmer DEAN (ed.), *Epiphanius' Treatise On Weights and Measures: The Syriac Version* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 11; University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1935).

the collection; in fact, it can even be argued that our compiler wanted to create a kind of Greek companion to the Peshitta, as we will see below.

The Structure of the Collections: Building Different Traditions?

The last point mentioned, the London compiler's attitude towards the Peshitta, brings us to the structure of the two collections. In my opinion, the difference in structure indicates that the two compilers had different ideas on the tradition they wanted to lay down and pass on to the next generation²⁷.

It seems that, at least from Exodus onwards, the London compiler decided not to follow a single commentary, but to take extracts from the Syro-Hexapla, while adding comments from various sources, sometimes with an attribution, at other times without. Wherever the compiler takes over the scriptural reading from the commentary he wants to quote, the form of the biblical text quoted could help us to reveal the origin of the interpretation. It is significant, in this respect, that the Peshitta is found only in one or two instances. This is paralleled by the fact that nearly all exegetes quoted by name wrote in Greek. As we have noticed above, Ephrem is the only Syriac exegete mentioned. At the same time, however, the compiler does take into account that his readers were familiar with the Peshitta. So he puts the book of Job immediately after the Pentateuch, as is quite common in Syriac tradition, in contrast to the order of the Milan Syro-Hexapla. On the other hand, he places Chronicles and 1 and 2 Esdras right after Kings. Together with the fact that he presents these books in the form of well-chosen extracts from the Syro-Hexapla, without commentary, this may point to the fact there were hardly any copies of these texts around. The Leiden edition is based on only four or five copies from the period up to 1200. In more instances the Leiden edition is based on a small number of witnesses, but this situation here is rather extreme. The position of these books in the Syriac canon was not very stable or ancient, and our compiler may have wanted to simply point to the existence of these books. The absence of a commentary on these books may of course also be explained from the fact that in terms of Greek commentaries on Chronicles, he would not have had much choice. But still, he could have decided just to leave out these books.

27) This aspect is also the subject of my paper «Greek or Syriac? Chapters in the Establishment of a Syrian Orthodox Exegetical Tradition», in F. YOUNG et al. (eds.), *Studia Patristica. Papers Presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2003*.

The impression is that the *London Collection* would have liked to do without the Peshitta, but could not completely ignore the fact that most of his readers were familiar with this version. There are more indications for this. Thus in his comment on the material that was to be used for building an altar according to Exod. 20:24, he explains how one can understand that the Syro-Hexapla's word 'mud' is in fact the same as 'earth' – the word known to the readers as the rendering of the Peshitta (London Ms. fol. 11a). With regard to the exegetical material itself, the compiler also tries to make the Greek material that he wants to offer to his readers acceptable to them. In this respect we should note not only the obvious fact that he offers all material in translation, or his token references to Ephrem, the greatest of Syriac exegetes from before the split. More important is perhaps the fact that he has used abbreviated versions of the existing full translations, those of Athanasius, Cyril, and Gregory of Nyssa, among others²⁸. Especially in the case of Cyril, this was a very smart move. Cyril needed a lot of words to convey his basic message that the Old Testament is all about Christ, and our compiler or, more probably, someone just before him with the same ideas, understood that if Cyril was to be handed down and read in Syriac, he had to be rendered in a more compact way. We see a parallel movement among East Syrians. The interpreter *par excellence* for them was of course Theodore of Mop-suestia. Considering his status, it may seem amazing that only a few fragments of the original fifth-century translations came down to us. However, it is well known that Theodore's prose was too difficult for most readers. Theodore was handed down, but in reworked and, often, shorter versions.

I would suggest, then, that the London compiler is offering West Syrian readers, familiar with the Peshitta, a digest of Greek material in a form that is meant to replace earlier Syriac material. He tries to make this new tradition acceptable through its form and through a limited number of links to the earlier tradition. The choice of authors and the predilection for the Greek biblical text bring to mind the position of the later Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523). In earlier works, such as his *Memre* against Habbib, quotations of Ephrem were still of central importance. In the theological treatise to the monks of Senun, however, it seems that Philoxenus mentions the great exe-

28) The shorter version of Athanasius' *Expositiones in Psalmos* has been edited from BL Add. 12168 by Robert W. Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca* 4 (CSCO 386-87/Syr. 167-68; Leuven, 1977), together with a fragmentary version of the longer text. Cyril is quoted for Genesis, among other books. For Gregory of Nyssa, see C. Van den Eynde, *La version syriaque du commentaire de Grégoire de Nysse sur le cantique des cantiques: ses origines, ses témoins, son influence* (BMus 10; Leuven, 1939), pp. 46-49.

gete only because it was impossible to do without him. The vast majority of quotations come from the Greek authors that were also important to the London compiler. As the treatise to the monks of Senun was written at the end of Philoxenus' life, it is possible that the new Greek perception of tradition was developed during his lifetime, and possibly even under his influence²⁹.

The Old Testament part of the *Collection of Simeon* or, more precisely, the *Commentary of Severus*, makes an impression completely different from the *London Collection*: the biblical text quoted is that of the Peshitta, the main authorities said to have been excerpted are the Syrians Ephrem and Jacob of Edessa. The quotations from the Greek Bible are few and they are clearly marked as readings from the *Yawnaya*; the number of explicit references to Greek exegetes, most of which were added by Simeon rather than Severus, is likewise low. All in all, the work seems to be the opposite of the *London Collection*: this is the best of Syriac exegesis on the authentic Syriac Bible, with only passing references to Greek sources. The fact that the New Testament part is said to be based on John Chrysostom shows that there is no full opposition between Greek and Syriac; the reason for this may well be that there was no traditional Syriac alternative, as Ephrem had written a commentary on the Diatessaron rather than on the four Gospels. Still, one cannot deny that there is a shift from a preference for all things Greek to an interest in what seemed to be authentic Syriac material. This fits very well, I would argue, in the atmosphere among the Syrian Orthodox in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Paradoxically, at the beginning of the seventh century the acceptance of Greek learning among the Syrians was at its height, whereas there was considerable discontent with the Byzantine Empire, especially for its religious politics³⁰. If we look at the attitude of some Syrian monks at the end of the century, who quarrelled with Jacob of Edessa because they thought his teaching was too much concerned with Greek writings³¹, it seems that the popularity of Greek learning among the West Syrians had also reached its ebb. Language was seen more and more as a boundary marker: gradually

29) See VAN ROMPAY, «Past and Present Perceptions», § 10 with n. 5, as well as his «Mallpânâ dilan Suryâyâ. Ephrem in the Works of Philoxenus of Mabbog: Respect and Distance», forthcoming in *Hugoye* [<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/>].

30) BROCK, «From Antagonism to Assimilation», pp. 17-25.

31) See W. WRIGHT, *A Short History of Syriac Literature* (Adam and Charles Black, London, 1894), p. 143, and J.M. FIEY, «Jacques, dit "l'Interprète", évêque d'Édesse», *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques* 26 (Letouzey et Ané, Paris, 1997), pp. 663-64.

Syriac became the language of the Miaphysites, and Greek that of the proponents of Chalcedon³². With Lucas Van Rompay, we could say that in this period, the balance between the Greek and the Syriac stream in the tradition was redressed³³. It was out of sheer necessity that Jacob of Edessa, with his great knowledge and love of Greek, became instrumental in this process. I would argue that his own revision of the biblical text was a clear attempt to save as much of the Greek Bible as possible. This mix of the Peshitta with readings based on a Greek manuscript was meant to sound more familiar to Syriac ears than the Syro-Hexapla, whereas it did give some of the main Greek readings³⁴. It is true that Jacob did not succeed in making his revision accepted; a new Bible was just a step to far. However, the Greek interpretations which he adopted in his commentaries together with material from the tradition of the School of Edessa did become the core of what came to be seen as the Syrian Orthodox tradition.

As Jacob of Edessa and his followers adopted many interpretations of Greek origin in their commentaries, we could say that these were 'Syriacized' in three stages. After the full translations of such authors as Athanasius, Cyril, and Gregory of Nyssa, the abbreviated versions which we find in the *London Collection* were produced. Finally, later Syriac authors wrote their own commentaries on the basis of either the shorter or the full version, adopting interpretations without indicating the source. The *Commentary of Severus* also represents the last of the stages just mentioned. Just as Jacob of Edessa was thoroughly influenced by Greek authors such as Cyril, the monk Severus, who followed in Jacob's footsteps, also added interpretations that cannot be traced back to Ephrem or other Syriac authors; in many cases these must have come from Greek sources. Thus we see the paradox that his anti-Greek attitude goes together with a full appropriation of the contribution of Greek authors to the Syrian Orthodox tradition. The boundary between 'Greek' and 'Syriac' is clearly one that is invented.

32) Cf. Sebastian P. BROCK, «Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria», in Alan K. BOWMAN and Greg WOOLF (eds.), *Literacy and Power in The Ancient World* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), 149-160, reprinted in his *From Ephrem to Romanos: Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999), chapter I; especially pp. 157-159.

33) VAN ROMPAY, «Past and Present Perceptions», § 22.

34) On this issue, see R.B. ter Haar ROMENY, «Jacob of Edessa on Genesis: His Quotations of the Peshitta and his Revision of the Text», in ROMENY and JENNER (eds.), *Jacob of Edessa*.

The Tasks Ahead

In order to obtain a fuller picture of the contribution of the two collections, and exegesis in general, to the formation of a West Syrian identity, the following tasks have to be carried out. First, the methods of the two compilers must be mapped further, along with their use of earlier Syriac and Greek sources. On the basis of the authentic commentaries of Ephrem, available for Genesis and part of Exodus, as well as those of Jacob of Edessa, the handling of the sources in Severus' *Commentary*, the main constituent of the *Collection of Simeon*, has to be determined. The *London Collection* will be collated with the authors named in the texts, and with the other Greek and Syriac material available. The results will be compared with the contemporary work of Moses bar Kepa (also West Syrian). Second, in order to find out which elements make the works stand out as Syrian Orthodox, and to investigate the specific choices that determine certain explanations, contemporary East Syrian commentaries, such as that of Isho'dad of Merv, will be adduced in order to provide the necessary contrast. The choice of certain biblical texts and combinations of verses, and the way these texts have been used, is one of the areas that can be expected to yield important results in this respect. Third, a study of the use made of the two collections and their sources by Dionysius bar Salibi and Barhebraeus is necessary to highlight the concerns of the next stage of selecting and summarizing.

The basis of this study, which forms part of the Leiden NWO project 'The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians', will be formed by an edition and annotated translation of at least those parts of the two collections that discuss the Pentateuch and Isaiah. The *London Collection* is being edited from the only existing manuscript. For the edition of the *Collection of Simeon* I am using the archetype of the known tradition, Vat. Syr. 103; wherever this manuscript has become illegible, I consult the later copies (Benedictus' edition is incomplete – Isaiah 43-65 is missing, for example – and has been reworked by the editor).

Conclusions

The West Syrian exegetical collections discussed here may seem much more conservative and irenic than the polemic and apologetic works written by the same group of Syrians. We do find references to contemporary events, but these are often vague or concealed. Severus' *Commentary* tells us that there are believing kings and orthodox bishops, and thus we get to know that there were also kings who did not believe and bishops who were not orthodox. In the same work we also learn about the corruption of the Roman Empire. The compiler of the *London Collection* wrote down some remarks referring to war and persecution. But the compiler-exegetes must have thought that a commentary on the Old Testament was not the place for detailed refutations of the Christology of Chalcedon, or explanations on the new Arab rulers and their religion.

Still, the exegetical collections of the Syrian Orthodox did contribute to their sense of belonging together. The stress was not so much on the boundaries of Syrian Orthodox beliefs and views as on their content. They offered the building blocks of a Syrian Orthodox world-view. They explained the right views on the physics and metaphysics of creation, they sketched the relation between the peoples on the earth and the position of the Syrians, dealt with problems such as the origin of evil and what is to be expected at the end of times, and made explicit the ethical code and doctrines of the community. Important is the fact that biblical interpretation connected these elements of a world-view to the authoritative text of Scripture. The resulting narrative of what a Syrian Orthodox Christian should think and believe, helped to strengthen the existing community. In an implicit way, however, the choice of content also set the boundaries between the Syrian Orthodox and the others. These boundaries become clear if we study the use of sources in these collections, as well as the differences between them and their East Syrian and Chalcedonian counterparts.

Finally, when we call these works traditional, we should realize ourselves that they were in fact still inventing the tradition. The comparison between the two Syrian Orthodox collections shows that the period of the seventh to the ninth century was a critical one in this process. The way this tradition was perceived at the beginning of the period was not the same as at the end: we move from a conception of tradition which almost exclusively credited Greek sources to one that seems to have preferred Syrians, as if one was no longer aware of the contributions of Greek authors which had been

fully appropriated. And that the tradition remained open for further refinement appears from the collections of Dionysius bar Salibi and Barhebraeus, which show us the differentiations of later centuries.

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