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Review of *Mor Gabriel aus Beth Qustan: Leben und  
Legende eines syrischen Abtbischofs aus dem 7.  
Jahrhundert* by Zeki Joseph

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Zeki Joseph, *Mor Gabriel aus Beth Qustan: Leben und Legende eines syrischen Abtbischofs aus dem 7. Jahrhundert*. Theologische Texte und Studien 15 (Hildesheim: George Olms Verlag, 2010). Pp. 148; €29.80

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*Mor Gabriel aus Beth Qustan: Leben und Legende eines syrischen Abtbischofs aus dem 7. Jahrhundert* by Zeki Joseph makes an important contribution to the study of Syriac hagiography and the cult of the saints in the Syriac-speaking milieu. This book presents a translation and commentary of the *Vita* of Mar Gabriel of Beth Qustan (b. 593), patron of Saint Gabriel's Monastery of Qartmin in Tur Abdin. Zeki Joseph himself is a native of Beth Qustan, and his intimate knowledge of the area enriches his discussion of the traditions connected to Mar Gabriel. His book's examination of the textual traditions and material culture connected to Mar Gabriel is a welcome addition for scholars and students interested in the religious landscape and indigenous saints of Tur Abdin.

The *Vita* of Mar Gabriel presents an idealized picture of the practices of the Syrian Orthodox monks of Qartmin in the seventh century, and it illustrates how the monks assisted the villagers who were living in proximity to them. Although the story is embroidered with hagiographic embellishments meant to elevate the monks and their patron saint, it is an important source for both the religious and social history of Tur Abdin. The anonymous hagiographer describes the devotions and liturgical practices of the community of Mar Gabriel (*Vita* 1, p. 27–29) and traces the construction of the church. The narrative discusses the persecution of the Non-Chalcedonians by the Chalcedonian Patriarch Ephrem of Antioch (*Vita* 4, p. 32–33) and mentions an incursion of the Persians that damaged the monastery (*Vita* 5, p. 33). The story underscores how the monks of Qartmin were oppressed for the sake of orthodoxy. The hagiography celebrates the founders and friends of the monastery while also marking out its rivals and adversaries.

The hagiographer highlights Mar Gabriel's kinship to the region, naming him a saint "from the region of Tur Abdin, from a village called Beth Qustan, which lies close to the city of Hah" (*Vita* 7, p. 34). He discusses Gabriel's training and discipline in the ascetic life, his arrival at Qartmin, "the Abbey of the House of Mor

Simeon” (*Vita* 9, p. 38), and his ordination to become the bishop of the Abbey (*Vita* 11, p. 42). The text shows how Gabriel performed miracles that encouraged Arabs to convert to Christianity. One hagiographic invention describes an imagined treaty between Gabriel and ‘Umar ibn-Khattab (d. 644), (*Vita* 12, p. 42–43). The narrative also shows how the monks ate, prayed, and regulated their day with a strict ascetic rule. This harshness contrasted with the compassion that the monks displayed to the poor in their midst.

The saint’s presence transformed the mundane times of daily life into moments for the miraculous. Gabriel raised the dead and performed wondrous deeds during communal meals (*Vita* 25, p. 44–46). He directed monastic building projects and gave orders to regulate communal life. The *Vita* thus shows us how monks of Tur Abdin projected onto Gabriel the qualities of an ideal abbot: a governor and miracle-worker, an ascetic and a friend of the poor.

The text depicts the death of the saint and his burial (*Vita* 22–23, p. 54–56). It links the protagonist to other heroes of the area as well, and it imagines a relationship between Gabriel and Simeon of the Olives, another wonderworker of Tur Abdin (*Vita* 25, p. 57). The narrative ends with a discussion of the exhuming of Gabriel’s corpse. His arm is severed from his body so that his relics could benefit his monastic family (*Vita* 27–28, p. 58–59).

This hagiography has stimulating material on the practices of the monks, and it shows how the Syrian Orthodox viewed their past and idealized their patron saint. Scholars of Syriac asceticism and historians interested in Christianity during the early decades of Islam will benefit from this text. It contains fascinating tidbits about the practices of the monks themselves within the walls of the monastery (*Vita* 13, p. 43). The story discusses the monks’ interaction with the poor in their midst (*Vita* 15, p. 44–45) and is particularly rich in its descriptions of the topography around the villages of Mar Gabriel.

In his introduction, Joseph discusses the manuscripts that he used to produce his translation of the *Vita* of Mar Gabriel. He is careful to distinguish “history” from “hagiography,” acknowledging that much of the story must be attributed to the imagination of the hagiographer. The book includes a thorough analysis of the manuscripts that contain the *Vita* of Mar Gabriel from Tur Abdin, Berlin, London, Paris, Birmingham, and Chicago. Joseph used

Br. Library Add. 17,265, a 13<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript, as the base text for his translation. He consulted other manuscripts for his translation, including ones from Paris (syr. 421, P. 36–60) and Istanbul (Meryem Ana 7, B. 99a–113 a). It is regrettable that this book does not have a critical edition of the Syriac text; a reader would need to find these manuscripts in order to read the Syriac. The reviewer did not have access to the Syriac text.

Joseph analyzes historical issues in the later chapters of this book and explains the transmission of the text and the development of written legends about the saint. In chapter four, the author presents an analysis of the Syriac sources that the hagiographer used to shape the narrative. The author outlines the text's relationship to the Syriac *Chronicle of 819*, the *Chronicle of 846*, the *Qartmin Trilogy*, and the Calendar of Tur Abdin. Joseph points out the hagiography's marked kinship to John of Ephesus' *Lives of the Eastern Saints*. Joseph should be commended for his thoroughness in elucidating how scholars of hagiography should consider multiple sources for understanding the interplay between material and literary evidence for the development of a saint's cult, such as historical chronicles, descriptions of liturgical practices, and hagiographic legends, both in their ancient form and modern retellings.

Joseph also connects *loci* mentioned in the hagiography with their possible counterparts in actual churches and monastic sites, and the text's photographic illustrations enrich this presentation. He offers an interpretative lens for understanding the miracles of the story, showing how the monks of Mar Gabriel composed these scenes to join their patron to other famous luminaries of the Syrian Orthodox ascetic tradition, like Simeon of the Olives (p. 100). The author cautions against reading this story as a purely historical source, yet his work shows how the text can be used to gain insights into the life of the late ancient Syrian monks: "Das *Leben des Gabriel* ist eine problematische Quelle, aber ein Teil davon könnte für das 7. Jahrhundert gültig sein, und alles, ausser dem, was Johannes von Ephesus entlehnt ist, wurde vor dem Hintergrund des klösterlichen Lebens in Tur Abdin verfasst" (p. 101).

The final chapter contains what is perhaps the most important original scholarly contribution of this book. Here he traces the expansion of the cult of Mar Gabriel in the villages around Tur Abdin. The author discusses the reverence shown to the relics of Gabriel's right arm and the fingers of the right hand: objects

viewed as sources of divine energy and power (p. 107). Joseph summarizes narratives on the relics of Mar Gabriel and illustrates the long history of devotion to the saint. He includes a commentary on festivals dedicated to Mar Gabriel and various depictions of the saint in art. Especially entertaining is the narrative that the hagiographer incorporates into the book on “Das Wunder der Geschlechtsumwandlung”(p. 109).

Joseph’s research builds upon Andrew Palmer’s scholarship on the history of Tur Abdin, and his book is a wonderful contribution to our understanding of the cult of the local saints of that area. This book’s study of Mar Gabriel’s *Vita* and cult balances historical commentary and literary analysis with attention to religious geography and the construction of space. His work provides an explanation for the popularity of Mar Gabriel in the Syrian Orthodox monastic tradition and has presented an explanation for the longevity of the saint’s cult into the present day.