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Ephrem, Jacob of Edessa, and the Monk Severus

An Analysis of Ms. Vat. Syr. 103, ff. 1-72

Anyone who has ever checked references to Ephrem's work that appear in the literature preceding the modern editions, or tried to avail himself of an overview of the extant works and their transmission, will have been engaged to some extent in the study of Joseph Assemanus' *Bibliotheca Orientalis*,¹ Ephrem's *Opera Omnia* as edited by Peter Mubarak,² and the *Catalogus* of the Vatican Apostolic Library by Stephen and Joseph Assemanus.³ From the manuscripts described or edited in these works, one can proceed to modern studies and editions, and arrive at conclusions with regard to the genuineness and the nature of the writings attributed to Ephrem.

This route was taken, for example, by Jansma,⁴ who in doing so was able to demonstrate that certain questions pertaining to Ephremic tradition can be answered by taking into account the views of Peter Mubarak and the Assemanus brothers. In Jansma's case, a reconstruction of events showed that in the *Bibliotheca Orientalis* Ephrem's commentaries on Exodus as contained in the mss. Vat. Syr. 103 and 110 were as yet considered different works. However, Peter Mubarak, who may or may not have been aware of this fact, in any case supplied the missing portions of ms. Vat. Syr. 110 from ms. Vat. Syr. 103 for the *Opera Omnia*, making it clear that he regarded the two manuscripts as witnesses of the same work. Jansma was surprised, therefore, to note that in its description of Ephrem's commentary on Exodus as contained in Vat. Syr. 103, the *Catalogus* refers to Mubarak for its edition, and in doing so seems to subscribe to the view that the two manuscripts present the same work. In other words, the second commentary on Exodus attributed to Ephrem

¹ J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* I-III, 2, Rome 1719-1728.

² P. Benedictus and J. S. Assemanus in the latter's *Sancti Patris nostri Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, syriace et latine* I-III, Rome 1737-1743.

³ S. E. & J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae Codicum Manuscriptorum Catalogus* I,1-3, Rome 1756-1759.

⁴ T. Jansma, "The Provenance of the Last Sections in the Roman Edition of Ephraem's Commentary on Exodus," *LM* 85 (1972) 155-169.

disappeared as an independent work behind the 1737 edition by Mubarak, and it was not until 1972 that it was recovered by Jansma, who notes that it still must be considered an *ineditum*.⁵

Below, a number of initial results of the research carried out during the preparation of an edition of Jacob of Edessa's exegetical work are presented. One of its major sources, ms. Vat. Syr 103, ff. 1-72, is analyzed here in the light of Jansma's findings. In a concluding paragraph, the results are linked with what is known of Jacob's other exegetical works.

On the first leaf of the codex Vat. Syr. 103, the monk Severus introduces his work (which he completed AD 861), and at the same time gives an account of the procedure followed:

With the strength and trust of God we will begin to write (this) Commentary (*puššāqā*) on the Old Testament and the New (Testament) in short, (taken) from the teaching of the holy Mar Ephrem and (that) of Mar Jacob bishop of Edessa, (commentaries) that we will compose in (the form of) a Commentary on Difficult Words of the Old (Testament). Firstly, a commentary on Genesis, the first book of the Torah, of Mar Ephrem. Sometimes it (explains) according to the facts and sometimes according to the spirit.

In the colophon, 370 folios later, Severus states that he devoted ten years of his life to the compilation of "this profitable treasure," *sirtā hādē mawtrānitā*.⁶ Further study will be needed to determine exactly which portions of the material that appears between the opening words and the colophon constitute the original work of Severus. In addition to the elements discussed in this paper, there are other obvious interpolations and alterations. These are attributed to the scribe Šem'on of Ḥiṣn Maṣṣur by Baumstark, who in this is followed by Jansma. Neither scholar, however, provides any evidence for this attribution.⁷ In any case, a glance at the table of contents, extracted from the *Catalogus*,⁸ allows us to make some preliminary observations.

1. Ephrem on Genesis	fol. 1 ^v
2. Jacob of Edessa on Genesis	fol. 32 ^r
3. <i>idem</i> on Exodus	fol. 44 ^r
4. <i>idem</i> on Leviticus	fol. 52 ^r

⁵ Jansma, "The Provenance" (see note 4 above), 160.

⁶ Vat. Syr. 103:371^r; ed. & transl. Assemanus & Assemanus, *Catalogus* (see note 3 above) I,3, 25-26, and W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum I-III*, London 1870-1872, 912-913.

⁷ A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, Bonn 1922, 279; Jansma, "The Provenance" (see note 4 above), 163.

⁸ Assemanus & Assemanus, *Catalogus* (see note 3 above) I,3, 7-11.

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| 5. | <i>idem</i> on Numbers | fol. 57 ^r |
| 6. | <i>idem</i> on Deuteronomy | fol. 59 ^v |
| 7. | <i>idem</i> on Job | fol. 63 ^r |
| 8. | <i>idem</i> on Joshua | fol. 65 ^r |
| 9. | <i>idem</i> on Judges | fol. 66 ^r |
| 10. | Ephrem on Exodus | fol. 67 ^r |
| 11. | <i>idem</i> on Leviticus | fol. 72 ^v |
- et cetera*

At first glance, the designation of this manuscript as a *catena* is confusing, for the above table would suggest that Severus' compilation is an edition of two larger, independent works which have been combined, rather than a work which represents the views of a number of authorities organized around a single biblical verse or passage.⁹ For the time being, this leaves us with a *Catena Severi* which is perhaps not a *catena* proper, and may not be entirely the work of Severus. Secondly, the way Jacob of Edessa's Octateuch commentary (numbers 2-9) has been inserted between Ephrem's sections on Genesis and Exodus requires clarification, for which we shall turn now to Ephrem on Genesis.

The first part of the Vatican manuscript 103, comprising 31 folios, is a commentary on Genesis which as a whole is ascribed to Ephrem (see below) and which, moreover, mentions Ephrem's name on several occasions. As the Assemanus brothers regarded it as Ephrem's work basically — interpolated with that of Jacob of Edessa and others — they were interested in clearly distinguishing Ephremic from non-Ephremic sections. As a result, in the *Catalogus*, 20 passages are attributed to Ephrem, of which only 7 are designated as such in Vat. Syr. 103, and in addition can be verified by means of Vat. Syr. 110, the genuine Ephrem (edited by Tonneau).¹⁰ The remaining 13 instances are either ascribed to Ephrem by the Assemanus brothers themselves or are found only in later

⁹ Cf. F. Petit (ed.), *La Chaîne sur la Genèse*, 1 (Traditio Exegetica Graeca 1), Louvain 1991, xiii, n. 1, whose definition in addition requires the presence of the (full) biblical text: "C'est la présence du texte biblique qui distingue une chaîne d'une simple collection exégétique." See also R. Devreesse, art. "Chaînes exégétiques grecques," in *Dictionnaire de la Bible. Supplément* 1, Paris 1928, 1084-1233, here 1084, for the distinction between the genres of *catena* (chaîne) and anthology (florilège).

¹⁰ R. M. Tonneau (ed.), *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii*, CSCO 152 (1965); E. G. Mathews & J. P. Amar (transl.), *St. Ephrem the Syrian. Selected Prose Works* (The Fathers of the Church 91), Washington, D.C. 1994, 67-213.

copies, not known to them.¹¹ On the other hand, the *Catalogus* finds 35 quotations from Jacob of Edessa in the first part of Vat. Syr. 103. Of these, 10 attributions do not appear in the manuscript, and these are likewise made by the Assemanus brothers. In other words, whether the quotations in the first part of Vat. Syr. 103 are counted according to the manuscript or the *Catalogus*, those attributed to Jacob of Edessa are by far the more numerous, and can therefore be seen as constituent elements, rather than interpolations. This is reflected in the first lines of Vat. Syr. 103 quoted above:

Commentary on the Old Testament and the New (Testament) in short, (taken) from the teaching of the holy Mar Ephrem and (that) of Mar Jacob bishop of Edessa.

However, the last lines of the same introduction, which read

Firstly, a commentary on Genesis, the first book of the Torah, of Mar Ephrem. Sometimes it (explains) according to the facts and sometimes according to the spirit,

now become troublesome.

If we skip the parts attributed to Jacob (numbers 2-9 in the table of contents), we come to the commentary on Exodus which bears Ephrem's name. This text has been studied in some detail by Jansma who, as we have seen, concludes that it is certainly not identical to Ephrem's commentary in Vat. Syr. 110 (as edited by Tonneau), as the Assemanus brothers apparently believed.¹² Looking at the description of Ephrem on Exodus in the *Catalogus*, we see a picture not unlike that which is painted of the first part of our manuscript: a commentary attributed to Ephrem interspersed with scholia by Jacob of Edessa and others. Unlike the commentaries on Genesis and Exodus ascribed to Ephrem (numbers 1 and 10), the parts with Jacob's name on them (numbers 2-9) are of an entirely different nature. They are running commentaries, in which other authorities are rarely quoted.

It would appear that our question concerning the insertion of Jacob's commentary into that of Ephrem begs another. If the numbers 1 and 10 in the table of contents do not consist primarily of the work of Ephrem,

¹¹ See, for an inventory of the manuscripts, my "Reconstructing Jacob of Edessa's *Scholia*," in J. Frishman & L. Van Rompay (eds.), *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation. A Collection of Essays* (Traditio Exegetica Graeca 5), Louvain 1997, 187-196, here 188, n. 5.

¹² Jansma, "The Provenance" (see note 4 above), 160; Assemanus & Assemanus, *Catalogus* (see note 3 above), I,3, 11.

but rather are a text composed of work by him and others, why are they ascribed to Ephrem only? I would advance the following hypothesis. At some point Jacob's Octateuch commentary (which then must have been regarded as an entity) was inserted into Severus' work, after the latter's explanation of Genesis. Later on, the question must have arisen to whom the anonymous parts — which, in my opinion, consisted of Severus' original — should be attributed. As both Jacob and Ephrem are mentioned by Severus in the introduction to the entire work, and only Jacob appeared in the headings, the logical conclusion was to consider the remaining parts as belonging to Ephrem. We are assuming here that the Vatican manuscript is at least two stages removed from Severus' original work. In the first stage, Jacob's commentary was incorporated, and in the second, the headings were reedited. A continuation of this process of reediting can be seen in later copies, where we find even more attributions to Ephrem than in the Vatican manuscript.

The Old Testament part of the *Catena Severi* and the manuscripts with which it is identified are among the sources generally consulted in any search for Ephrem's works.¹³ At the outset in the 18th century, this approach led to a situation where the burden of proof lay with those who took the attributions to Ephrem as their point of departure. If not approached with caution, the description in the *Catalogus*, in particular, can block one's view of the textual history. It is mainly for this reason that the possibility was overlooked that the parts attributed to Jacob of Edessa constitute an independent work. The parts with Ephrem's name on them are witness of the original work of the monk Severus, who incorporated scholia by Jacob as well. In addition, these parts contain interpolations of later date, as observed already by Baumstark and Jansma (see note 7). The *ineditum* that was brought to light by Jansma is deserving of fresh attention, not so much so because of its supposed Ephremic nature — something never maintained by Jansma — but because it brings us one step closer to Severus' original composition.

As noted above, the present investigation was undertaken in preparation for a new edition of Jacob of Edessa's exegetical work. Ideally, these preliminaries would consist of a thorough study of the transmission of all the material contained in the Vatican manuscript. A reconstruction of Severus' sources and the way he handled them is necessary in order to

¹³ Other examples are C. Bravo, "Un Comentario de Jacobo de Edesa al Gen. 1, 1-7, atribuido a S. Efrén," *Biblica* 31 (1950) 390-401, and R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, Cambridge 1975, 32 and notes.

shed light on the history of Jacob's exegetical work. But this reconstruction is also important in its own right. The material must therefore not be examined solely in the light of questions pertaining to Jacob. For this reason, as well as practical considerations, my edition will comprise part 1 up to and including part 9 of the Vatican manuscript, thus making way for future critical study and, ultimately, an integral edition of the *Catena Severi* as well.

In conclusion, we can now consider to what degree we have progressed in reconstructing Jacob of Edessa's original exegetical works. In other words, which titles or designations can be listed with a fair amount of confidence? Two works are not typical examples of the genre. First, the corpus of Jacob's letters, which contains exegetical material, may be regarded as an original work and is, even apart from its contents, an important source of information on Jacob's style. The *Hexaemeron*, the authenticity of which is well established, is our second source, which in addition allows us to study the way sections borrowed from it are handled in the Vatican manuscript.¹⁴

Among the remaining works, there are two more candidates. Jacob's Octateuch commentary appears to be the only exegetical work that has come down to us in its entirety. I have not come across any reference to it in the modern scholarly literature, and its character has yet to be determined. The other work, however, has been known to the Western scholarly world by title since the publications of the Assemanus brothers: Jacob of Edessa's *Book of Scholia*. This work is presumably among the sources from which Severus culled the 2860 scholia he incorporated into his work.¹⁵ The fact that thus far three of them have been found in the scholia manuscripts preserved in the British Library¹⁶ is evidence that an independent collection existed to which both these scribes and Severus had access.¹⁷ For this reason — their independent transmission — as well as on literary grounds, I have argued elsewhere¹⁸ that these texts are original pieces which can tell us a great deal about Jacob of Edessa's

¹⁴ Some passages are identified in Bravo, "Un Comentario" (see note 13 above), 394-398.

¹⁵ Vat. Syr. 103:371f; ed. & transl. Assemanus & Assemanus, *Catalogus* (see note 3 above), I,3, 25-26, and Wright, *Catalogue* (see note 6 above), 912-913.

¹⁶ A selection taken from these manuscripts is edited and translated in G. Phillips, *Scholia on Passages of the Old Testament by Mār Jacob, Bishop of Edessa*, London 1864.

¹⁷ Kruisheer, "Reconstructing Jacob of Edessa's *Scholia*," 188-189.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190-192.

method and intentions. Even if it ultimately proves impossible to entirely reconstruct the original *Book of Scholia*, a comparison of its extant parts with Jacob of Edessa's Octateuch commentary will remain valid and profitable.

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