

**Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī's Works in the Mingana  
Collection of Syriac and Arabic Manuscripts, with  
special emphasis on his Polemical Treatise  
'Against the Muslims'\***

[Obras de Dionisio Bar Ṣalībī en la Colección Mingana de  
manuscritos siríacos y árabes, con especial énfasis en su tratado  
polémico 'Contra los musulmanes']

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**Resumen:** The purpose of this paper is to present a comprehensive survey of these seminal writings which have survived in the Mingana Collection of Syriac Manuscripts, arranged according to the subject matter, together with a brief analysis of their contents as well as a consideration of their value. Special emphasis will be laid on Bar Ṣalībī's *Polemical Treatises*, and in particular his *Treatise Against the Muslims*.

**Abstract:** El propósito de este artículo es presentar un estudio global de estos escritos fundamentales que se han conservado en la Colección Mingana de manuscritos siríacos, dispuestos de acuerdo con la materia del tema, junto con un breve análisis de sus contenidos, además de una consideración sobre el valor de éstos. Hemos dedicado un especial énfasis a los *Tratados polémicos* de Bar Ṣalībī, en particular en su *Tratado contra los musulmanes*.

**Palabras clave:** Bar Ṣalībī. Colección Mingana. Manuscritos. Tratados polémicos.

**Key words:** Bar Ṣalībī. Mingana Collection. Manuscripts. Polemical Treatises.



The rich collection of the Mingana Syriac and Arabic Manuscripts, preserved in the University of Birmingham Library<sup>1</sup>, contains numerous valuable, and in some cases unique, works by Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī, Metropolitan of Amid (d. 1171 AD) in a variety of fields: Homilies, liturgical works, canon law, commentaries on classical and patristic texts, polemical treatises, theological works and biblical commentaries. Many of these works have not been edited, on the whole remaining un-translated as an entirety, and have been so rarely the subject of extended analysis by scholars in general and historians in particular.

The purpose of this paper is to present a comprehensive survey of these seminal writings which have survived in the Mingana Collection of Syriac Manuscripts, arranged according to the subject matter, together with a brief analysis of their contents as well as a consideration of their value. Special emphasis will be laid on Bar Ṣalībī's *Polemical Treatises*, and in particular his *Treatise Against the Muslims*, which is fresh source for assessing the relationships between Christians and Muslims of the Levant in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The importance of inter-faith dialogue in the contemporary world is undisputed and cannot possibly be overstressed. Nor is it doubted that sound research in, and investigation of, surviving documents from the past, such as those of our author, can dispel misconceptions and stereotypes which have too often contributed to distrust and conflict between the adherents of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Christians, Jews and Muslims have lived together for centuries, sometimes in concord, at other times in conflict. One of the most tense periods for these communities was in the twelfth century, precisely the period of literary activity of our author and

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<sup>1</sup> A. MINGANA, *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts. Vol. I: Syriac and Garshuni Manuscripts*, Cambridge, 1933. For the life, career and works of Alphonse Mingana, see Samir Khalil SAMIR, *Alphonse Mingana 1878-1937 and his Contribution to early Christian-Muslim Studies*, Selly Oak Colleges, 1990.

following the impact of the Crusades which upset the delicate balance of communities in the Middle East. To date, we only possess a partial knowledge of how adherents of these three global faiths in this medieval period encountered and perceived each other. Similarly, we have little understanding of what actually happened between these groups and particularly the manner of arguments that were employed by either side in their altercations and accusations against one another. This is largely because most of the relevant documents have remained inaccessible and on the whole remaining unedited and not translated.<sup>2</sup>

### The Author of the Works

Bar Ṣalībī was one of the most varied, productive and prolific authors of Syriac literature who played a major role in the final stage of flourishing of the Syriac theological tradition (the Syrian renaissance of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries). He was a distinguished hierarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church who earned the now familiar epithet “the eloquent doctor” and was hailed as the “star of his generation” by Michael the Syrian.

A rehtor, polemist, deacon, bishop and metropolitan, Bar Ṣalībī was born in Melitene (west of the Euphrates) at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. His baptismal name was Jacob (James), but he is known as Dionysius, the name he assumed when he was elevated to the episcopacy of Mar'ash (Germanicia) in 1154. It was during that year that Mar'ash was attacked by Armenians and Bar Ṣalībī was carried off as a prisoner of war but he escaped on foot to the Monastery of Kalasyur.<sup>3</sup> He was appointed

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rifaat EBIED, “Prejudice and polarization towards Christians, Jews and Muslims: ‘The Polemical Treatises’ of Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī” in *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Martin TAMCKE, Beirut, 2007, pp. 171f; R. EBIED, “The Syriac Polemical Treatises of Dionysius Bar Salibi, Metropolitan of Amid (D. 1171 AD)”, *Parole de l’Orient* 31 (2006), p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> This event is recorded by Bar Hebraeus in his *Chronography*. Cf. Stephen Desmond RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi’s Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82*, «Cahiers de la Revue Biblique» 57 (Paris, 2004), p. 5.

metropolitan of Amida in 1167, and remained there until his death on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1171.

### The Works

Bar Ṣalībī's works have been considered a very valuable witness to the lost works of earlier authors.<sup>4</sup> They abound with allusions to, and citations from, such sources, some of which are no longer extant. Hence part of the value of his writings is that they distill the Syriac intellectual tradition of the first millennium.<sup>5</sup> To this end, J. Rendel Harris describes these works as "a magazine of early traditions".<sup>6</sup>

Works of Bar Ṣalībī have survived, either completely or partially, in the Mingana Collection in at least 30 (thirty) Syriac and Karshuni manuscripts. These are: Mingana Syriac MSS 4, 54, 71, 89 105, 137, 152, 155, 181, 183, 215, 225, 231, 234, 295, 317, 331, 332, 342, 343, 345, 347, 369, 386, 424, 460, 480, 513, 525, 549. In a number of cases multiple works and/or copies of writings of Bar Ṣalībī have survived in these manuscripts, and to the above list should be added a number of manuscripts which only contain quotations from our author on a variety of subjects.

Works of Bar Ṣalībī which survived in the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts can be divided into seven categories. These are: polemical treatises; biblical commentaries; homilies and liturgical writings; canon law; commentaries on classical and patristic texts; theological works; miscellaneous writings. There follows a brief survey and analysis of these works focusing on his polemical works in general and *Treatise Against the Muslims* in particular.

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<sup>4</sup> S. D. RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82*, p. xvii

<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. EBIED, "The Syriac Polemical Treatises of Dionysius Bar Salibi, Metropolitan of Amid (D. 1171 AD)", *Parole de l'Orient* 31 (2006), p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> *The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv* 5, p. xxxi (quoted by S. D. RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82*, p. xvii).

## I. Polemical Treatises

Bar Ṣalībī wrote seven polemical treatises which offer rare and illuminating insight into Christian-Jewish-Muslim relations, not from the perspective of Western Crusaders, but from 'within', from the frequently neglected viewpoint of the Oriental Orthodox tradition. In particular, his treatise *Against the Muslims*, written at a particularly turbulent time of heightened tensions, is fresh source for assessing the relations between Christians and Muslims of the Levant in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It was a period of intense religious animosity throughout the Middle East. A hundred years after the arrival of the first wave of crusaders was sufficient time to allow attitudes and perceptions to be formulated and become entrenched. The value of this treatise for understanding polemic between Christians and Muslims is no more urgent in today's vexed international arena.<sup>7</sup> Manuscripts containing copies of **six** of these polemical treatises have survived in the Mingana Collection. These are:

(a) *Treatise Against the Muslims (Muhammadans)*

Three versions, one of which is incomplete, of this Treatise have survived in the Mingana Collection. These are: Mingana MS 89, fols. 39a-84b [ܐܘܬܘܪܐ ܕܢܘܨܝܘܨܐ ܕܡܘܚܡܘܕܐܢܐ]; MS 215, fols. 59a-101b ... ܐܘܬܘܪܐ ܕܢܘܨܝܘܨܐ ܕܡܘܚܡܘܕܐܢܐ (ܐܘܬܘܪܐ ܕܢܘܨܝܘܨܐ ܕܡܘܚܡܘܕܐܢܐ ܕܡܘܚܡܘܕܐܢܐ); MS 424, fols. 97a-100 ܐܘܬܘܪܐ ܕܢܘܨܝܘܨܐ ܕܡܘܚܡܘܕܐܢܐ (ܐܘܬܘܪܐ ܕܢܘܨܝܘܨܐ ܕܡܘܚܡܘܕܐܢܐ ܕܡܘܚܡܘܕܐܢܐ).

The treatise comprises three discourses (*memrē*) divided into 30 chapters. Bar Ṣalībī divides his text into two synoptic columns, quoting the Qur'ān in Syriac translation in one column and commenting in the other. Only chapters XXV-XXX which contain the quotations from the Qur'ān (the third *memrā*) were reproduced and translated by A. Mingana based on one

<sup>7</sup> R. EBIED, "Prejudice and polarization towards Christians, Jews and Muslims", in *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*, p. 176f.

manuscript.<sup>8</sup> The treatise was also the subject of study by Sidney Griffith<sup>9</sup> who notes that the work is “unique among the works of Christian writing in Syriac”<sup>10</sup> He also remarks that it is “unique not only among Syriac dispute texts, but among Christian works on Islam in general from the medieval period”<sup>11</sup>. More recently it was edited by Joseph P. Amar.<sup>12</sup> As Mingana pointed out,<sup>13</sup> Bar Ṣalībī’s aims in citing the Qur’ānic quotations in Syriac are threefold. These can be summarized as follows:

1. To confirm a given Christian doctrine by listing all the Qur’ānic verses dealing with Jesus, Mary, the disciples and the Holy Spirit;
2. To draw attention to certain apparent contradictions of the Qur’ān where he includes all the passages in which he puts side by side the apparently contradictory statements made by the Prophet Muhammad;
3. To present to his readers the story of some Biblical incidents as narrated in it. Under this item are included all the passages dealing with the Patriarchs Abraham, Noah, etc. whose story is often narrated in a different way from that given in the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testaments.

Confirmation of Mingana’s hypothesis and claim regarding the source of these Qur’ānic quotations in Syriac, containing “variant readings at odds

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<sup>8</sup> MS Mingana Syr. 89; see A. MINGANA, “An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Kur’an Exhibiting new Verses and Variants”, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9 (1925), pp. 188-235.

<sup>9</sup> Sidney GRIFFITH, “Dionysius bar Salibi on the Muslims”, in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, «Orientalia Christiana Analecta» 229 (Rome, 1987), pp. 353-365.

<sup>10</sup> S. GRIFFITH, “Dionysius bar Salibi on the Muslims”, in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, p. 361.

<sup>11</sup> S. GRIFFITH, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam*, «Moran Etho» 7 (Kerala: St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1995), pp.23-24.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph P. Amar, *Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī: A Response to the Arabs*, «CSCO» 614, 615, *Scriptores Syri* 238 (Text), 239 (Translation) (Louvain, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> A. MINGANA, “An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Kur’an”, pp. 188f; cf. R. EBIED, “Prejudice and polarization towards Christians, Jews and Muslims”, in *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*, p. 178.









commentary on the Old and New Testaments preserved in Syriac. Part of the value of his commentary is the recovery of earlier sources. Moreover, he is credited with an innovation in the layout of his commentary since there are no exact precedents for his methodology in former Christian or Jewish biblical commentaries. In his commentaries on the Old Testament books, he divides his work into two separate commentaries, factual (or literal) and spiritual and he presents them in synoptic columns in a mirror arrangement.<sup>22</sup> Copies of commentaries by Bar Ṣalībī on the Old and New Testament are extant in the following Mingana manuscripts:

(a) The Old Testament commentaries:

- A commentary on all the books of the Old Testament is extant in Mingana MS 152, fols. 1-292b (dated A.D. 1891) ( ... )  
 ...  
 ...

(b) The New Testament commentaries:

- Mingana MS 343 (fols. 1-93a) ( ... )  
 ...  
 ... ( ... ) contains a commentary on the whole of the New Testament, with the exception of the Gospels.
- Mingana MS 54 (fols. 1-343b) comprises a commentary on the four Gospels ( ... )

<sup>22</sup> See Rifaat EBIED, s.v. 'Dionysius Bar Salibi' in *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (forthcoming), to be published by Walter de Gruyter. For a comprehensive survey of published commentaries of Bar Ṣalībī on books of the Old and New Testaments, see S. D. RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82*, pp. 14-22.



### III. Homilies and Liturgical Writings

Bar Ṣalībī made many seminal contributions to the study and revision of the Syrian Orthodox Liturgy. He is credited with writing treatises and commentaries on the Eucharist, the Holy Chrism (*Myron*), Baptism, the Holy Cross, etc. He is also credited with authoring several Anaphoras and explanations of the West Syrian Liturgy. The following works, in both Syriac and Karshuni, are extant in the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts:

- Mingana MS 183, fols. 50a-53b: The Anaphora of Bar Ṣalībī;
- Mingana MS 231, fols. 2b-8a: Another copy of The Anaphora of Bar Ṣalībī (ܐܢܦܘܪܐ ܕܒܪ ܫܠܝܒܝܐ);
- Mingana MS 137, fols. 1-67: The explanation (*Tafsīr*) of the Syrian Orthodox Liturgy (ܐܦܫܪܐ ܕܠܝܬܘܪܓܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ) (ܐܦܫܪܐ ܕܠܝܬܘܪܓܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ). The work is divided into nineteen *Babs*, the last of which is incomplete at the end;
- Mingana MS 225, fols. 12a-59a (ܐܦܫܪܐ ܕܠܝܬܘܪܓܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ) (ܐܦܫܪܐ ܕܠܝܬܘܪܓܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ): Another copy of the explanation (*Tafsīr*) of the Syrian Orthodox Liturgy. On fol. 58b a sentence occurs in the text from which we infer that Bar Ṣalībī wrote the work at the request of Ignatius (1140-1184), Bishop of Jerusalem, who had requested it in order to be better equipped to defend Syrian Christianity in disputations with Western crusaders<sup>23</sup>;
- Mingana MS 317, fols. 1b-103b (ܐܦܫܪܐ ܕܠܝܬܘܪܓܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ) (ܐܦܫܪܐ ܕܠܝܬܘܪܓܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܝܐ): Another copy of The explanation (*Tafsīr*) of the Syrian Orthodox Liturgy;

<sup>23</sup> See S. D. RYAN, *Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual Commentary on Psalms 73-82*, p. 9 [quoting Peter KAWERAU, *Die jakobitische Kirche im Zeitalter der syrischen Renaissance, Idee und Wirklichkeit* (Berlin, 1960), p. 83].

- Mingana MS 386, fols. 1-117b ( ... )  
 (A further copy of The explanation (*Tafsīr*)  
 of the Syrian Orthodox Liturgy;
- Mingana MS 225, fols. 98a-100b: A commentary on the Holy Chrism  
 ( ... );
- Mingana MS 342, fols. 34a-42a: The explanation of the Sacrament of  
 the Holy Chrism ( ... );
- Mingana MS 215, fols. 1-56a: A collection of Treatises on the  
 resurrection ( ... ); on faith and the Holy Cross ( ... )  
 ( ... ); on the Holy Chrism ( ... )  
 ( ... ); and on  
 Eucharist ( ... ).

### III. Canon Law

Bar Ṣalībī assembled and systematized collections of laws relating to specific topics, e.g. penitential canons on the obligations of bishops and priests, on penitence absolution, on the sins of the laity, etc. Works in this category have survived, in both Syriac and Arabic, in the following manuscripts in the Mingana Collection:

- Mingana MS 155, fols. 54b-64a: The ecclesiastical Canons of Bar Ṣalībī  
 ( ... )
- Mingana MS 234, fols. 1b-6b ( ... )  
 ( ... )  
 ( ... )





collecting and finally cataloguing these seminal manuscripts, some of which contain unique copies of the works of Bar Şalībī.

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