

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE LEGACY OF THE ANCIENT SYRIAN CHURCH

by BRIAN E. COLLESS

MR. COLLESS, a graduate of Sydney, Melbourne and London Universities, is at present working for his doctorate in the Department of Semitic Studies of Melbourne University under the supervision of Professor John Bowman. His special field of study is Sufism and Syrian mysticism, to which the subject of the following paper provides part of the background.

I. THE SYRIAC WORLD AND THE SYRIAN CHURCH

IN the 11th century of our era a lengthy narrative poem circulated in France under the title *The Life of Saint Alexius*. The hero of this prototype *chanson de geste* was a certain "man of God" (*l'ome Deu*) who reputedly fled from the worldly life of Rome to become a beggar-saint in an Eastern land. As so often in this type of legend the nuptial night was chosen as the opportune time for flight. Proceeding first by ship to Laodicea he eventually settled in the Syrian Orient, in the city of Edessa:

Damz Alexis en Alsis la citet
sert son Seignour par bone volentet.¹

While it is possible that the French author has confused Edessa with Sis, the capital of the Armenian Empire in the 9th and 10th centuries (in which case *Al* would presumably be the Arabic definite article),² the Latin *Vorlage* definitely speaks of Edessa:

Abiit Edessam Syriae civitatem, ubi sine humano opere imago
Domini nostri Jesus Christi in sindone habebatur. Quo perveniens
. . . coepit sedere cum ceteris pauperibus ad atrium sanctae Dei
genetricis Mariae.³

The tale of Alexius passed, in fact, by way of its Greek and Latin versions, into all the literatures of Christian Europe: French, Provençal, Italian, Spanish, German, English, Old Norse and Russian. Thus in Konrad von Würzburg's rendering we encounter the same Edessene cathedral mentioned above in the Latin, which housed the famous image of Christ. Traditionally this had been sent by Jesus through his apostle Addai, the reputed missionary to Mesopotamia, and it was said to have spoken to the population on the subject of Alexius:

¹ Lines 158f. in the 1933 edition of Gaston Paris, *La Vie de Saint Alexis. Poème du XI^e siècle*. For an up-to-date edition see G. Rohlfs, *Sankt Alexius* (Tübingen, 1963).

² See the "Nachtrag" of Rohlfs, p. 62.

³ The Latin text is given in Rohlfs' Introduction.

ouch stuont ein münster wohl geslaht
gezierte dâ vil sêre.
In sant Marien êre
gewihet ez vil schône was.⁴

The whole story stems from a Syriac original⁵ and the important point is that here we have at least one indication that the medieval Western world knew of the existence of a centre of Christianity in the lands of the Tigris and the Euphrates, the Syriac-speaking world.

Syriac is a Semitic language belonging to the Aramaic group of dialects and therefore closely related to "the language that Jesus spoke".⁶ Syriac flourished as a literary medium from the 3rd century to the 14th, and was almost exclusively used to produce a Christian literature. As a vernacular tongue, however, it was gradually rendered obsolete from the 7th century onwards when the Muslim conquerors introduced Arabic, another Semitic language.

The origins of Christianity in this region are shrouded in obscurity, but the native tradition relegates the cradle of Mesopotamian Christianity to Edessa (Syriac *Urhai*, modern Urfa), the capital city of the kingdom called Osrhoëne by the Greeks and Romans. This view has been supported by many modern scholars who point to the middle of the 2nd century as the date of arrival. On the other hand there is the suggestion that the Christian mission began among the Jews of Adiabene, a kingdom lying east of the Tigris, rather than among the pagan population in Edessa, which is situated east of the Euphrates.⁷ In any case Edessa was undoubtedly the first really great centre of the Syriac-speaking Church.

⁴ Konrad's *Alexios*, line 270-273, in P. Gereke, *Konrad von Würzburg, Die Legenden*, 2, *Altdeutsche Textbibliothek*, No. 20, 1926. On the image cf. n. 26 below.

⁵ For the Syriac version see A. Amiaud, *La Légende Syriaque de saint Alexis, l'homme de Dieu* (Paris, 1889).

⁶ Actually the question of Jesus' mother tongue is hotly disputed, since scholars variously champion Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek. Inscriptions from 1st century Palestine are equally divided between the three, so that Jesus may have had cause to use each of them in various situations in polyglot Palestine.

⁷ For recent discussions of the question see A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden, 1962), pp. 30-33; P. Kahle, *The Cairo Genizah*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1959), pp. 270-283; and A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* (Louvain, 1958), Vol. I, pp. 1-10. It should be noted, however, that the Syriac document that goes under the name of the *Teaching of Addai* states that when the missionary Addai came to Edessa he first contacted the Jewish community there, in true apostolic style.

The scholars of modern Europe have been enabled to tap the rich resources stored in the Syriac manuscripts chiefly through the labours of the Assemani family in the 18th century. Of Maronite faith, and therefore in communion with Rome, the Assemanis originated from Hasrun, a village near the Cedars of Lebanon. These enthusiastic searchers settled in Rome and began to devote themselves to the task of bringing Syriac and Arabic manuscripts from the Syrian Orient to Rome. In 1707 Elias Assemani went to Egypt to collect documents at Der es-Suriani, ("Monastery of the Syrians"), an ancient Syrian outpost. After nearly perishing in the Nile Assemani and the mere 34 manuscripts he had managed to acquire were hauled out and set on their way back to the Vatican. His cousin Joseph-Simon Assemani made a similar journey in 1715 with better success. Returning in 1717 "laden with the spoils of the East" he began the work of cataloguing the treasures of the various monasteries, eventually publishing his researches in his mammoth *Bibliotheca Orientalis*.⁸ The selfsame quest continues into our own day, for Syriac literature, though admitted to be mediocre on the whole, has much of interest not only for Orientalists but also for classical scholars, theologians, and historians. The debt owed by the West to Syrian monks and scholars for their role in preserving and transmitting the lore of the Ancients is too easily overlooked. Therefore we shall here remind ourselves of the significant place Syrian culture holds in the history of ideas. After an outline of the history of the Syrian Church we shall turn to a brief consideration of Syrian education and intellectual culture, concluding with a statement of its legacy to both Europe and Asia.

II. HISTORY OF THE SYRIAN CHURCH

(1) *Period of Unity*

In this early epoch we find various shades of orthodoxy uneasily coexisting, as in the rest of Christendom.

The earliest bright light was Bar Daisan of Edessa (Bardesanes, "The last of the Gnostics", 154-222) who lived at court and wrote treatises and hymns. In the 4th century he was posthumously rebuked by Aphrem (Ephraem Syrus, c. 306-373) who produced *inter plurima alia* counterhomilies to correct Bar Daisan's erroneous theology. Aphrem's unswerving Catholic orthodoxy is now attested by the fact that in 1920 Pope Benedict XV proclaimed

⁸ G. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, I-III (1719-1728). For details of all authors mentioned below see I. Ortiz de Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca* (Rome, 2nd ed., 1965).

him a doctor of the Church. At the same time his contemporary Afrahat ("The Persian Sage") showed independence in his theology though orthodox to all intents and purposes.

Early in the 5th century we meet Rabbula, the distinguished bishop of Edessa (d. 435), energetically opposing the theology of Nestorius and his followers. It was during Rabbula's episcopacy that St. Alexius was supposed to have died, though the European version has him joyfully enduring further privations back in Rome before his death.

Meanwhile the most superhuman ascetic feats were being performed by Simeon the Stylite (c. 389-c. 459), who stood continuously perched on a 60 foot pillar dispensing justice, reconciling disputants, and urging the cause of orthodoxy. This pillar asceticism attracted many adherents and was all very well in the Middle East. In the European climate, however, a 6th century would-be-stylite in the Ardennes was ordered down by his bishops. The freezing wind caused his toe-nails to fall out and icicles to hang from his beard, according to Gregory of Tours in his *Historia Francorum*.⁹

(2) *Period of Schism*

The 5th century saw a religious cleavage in the Syrian Church. Theological turmoil spread through the churches of Mesopotamia and Persia, as elsewhere throughout Christendom. The nature of Christ's humanity and divinity was the matter in dispute and Nestorius the bishop of Constantinople stood at the centre of the storm.

Bishop Rabbula of Edessa showed himself a fierce opponent of Nestorianism, as we mentioned before, but his successor Hiber (Ibas), as head of the great "Persian School" of Edessa, followed the Nestorian party line and taught the doctrine and Scriptural interpretations of Theodore of Mopsuestia. By 489 the "Persian School" was closed and its personnel expelled from Edessa. The college was transferred to Persia itself, to the city of Nisibis, and a new school instituted under the directorship of the great teacher and ascetic Narsai.¹⁰

Henceforth the whole Church of Persia became adherents of the Nestorian creed, now to be known as the Eastern Syrian Church or the Nestorian Church of Persia.

In the Western Syrian Church the doctrine of monophysitism, the belief in the fusion of Christ's divine and human elements,

⁹ See Th. Nöldeke, *Sketches from Eastern History* (1892), pp. 210-225, and *Hist. Franc.* VIII, 15.

¹⁰ For the chronology of this period see A. Vööbus, "Un vestige d'une lettre de Narsai et son importance historique. (Date de la fuite de Narsai à Nisibe)", *L'Orient syrien*, 9, 1964, pp. 515-523.

was adopted, so that officially it thereafter went by the name of the Syrian Monophysite Church. Unofficially it was dubbed the Jacobite Church after Jacob Burde'ana (Baradaeus) its great 6th century organizer and sometime bishop of Edessa.

The two sectors of the Church became politically and culturally isolated to such an extent that each developed its own style of writing (Jacobite and Nestorian scripts) and speech. An ideological dispute continued between Edessa and Nisibis no less bitter and abstruse than that between Moscow and Peking in our own days.

(3) *Period of Synthesis.*

Around the 11th century Syriac literature entered its silver age. As stated earlier, Arabic had increasingly stifled the native language. Nevertheless the scholars of the two Churches held on to the study of the mother tongue and also entered into irenic dialogue. The greatest exponent of this Syriac learning and liberality of spirit was the Monophysite bishop Abu'l-Faraj, better known by his nickname Bar Hebraeus, "Son of a Hebrew" (1226-1286). Though well versed in the dogmatic controversies he sought to minimize their dividing effect. Echoing the cry of the Apostle Paul, "Who is Paul? and who is Apollos?" (1 Corinthians 3: 5), he declared that the one thing necessary was not love for Nestorius or Jacob but devotion to Christ. In the course of his mystic treatise entitled *The Book of the Dove* Bar Hebraeus sketches his life's searching and thereby gives us a broad outline of Syrian education:¹

From my first youth burning with love for teachings I was taught the Holy Scriptures with the necessary explanation, and from an exquisite teacher I heard the mysteries contained in the writings of the holy doctors. When I had reached the age of twenty the then living patriarch compelled me to receive the dignity of a bishop. Then it was unavoidable for me to engage in disquisitions and disputations with the heads of other confessions. . . . I became convinced that these quarrels of Christians among themselves are not a matter of fact but of words and denominations. . . .

I zealously turned to attain the power of Greek wisdom, namely logic, physics and metaphysics, algebra and geometry, science of the spheres and the stars. . . .

And because in all teachings, interior and exterior, I found not what I sought I almost fell into complete destruction.¹¹

In the end it was his seven year study of the Mystics, especially Evagrius Ponticus, that led Bar Hebraeus to his release in the beatific vision, whereby he reproduced the experience of Islam's Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), and anticipated that of Catholicism's

¹¹ A. J. Wensinck, *Bar Hebraeus's Book of the Dove* (Leiden, 1919), pp. 60f.

Thomas Aquinas.

Bar Hebraeus's polymathy in the fields of medicine, astronomy, grammar, mathematics, history, philosophy, and theology conveniently displays the range of studies available in the Syrian Christian academies. We are also indebted to him for a detailed description of the curriculum taught in his own Jacobite schools, and also an account of the content of Nestorian education.¹² Briefly we may say that in this course of instruction, whether imparted in (a) the great "universities" of Edessa, Nisibis, and Seleucia-Ctesiphon, or (b) in the monastery schools such as that of Qennesrin, or (c) in the private cell groups of anchorites, the emphasis was monastic and theological.

It should be further noted that these Syrian colleges maintained (a) an ardent concern for evangelization and missionary endeavour at home and abroad, alongside (b) a vital interest in Greek science and philosophy. These two educational motives were to have far-reaching results in both Asia and Europe.

III. THE LEGACY TO ASIA

Towards the end of his life Bar Hebraeus enjoyed cordial relations with the Patriarch of the Nestorian Church, Yavallaha III, whom he mentions in his *Ecclesiastical Chronicle* (ii. 452). He notes, however, that Yavallaha was not fully cognizant of the ideological minutiae of the Syrian churches because of his Far Eastern background.

Now although Yavallaha was somewhat deficient in the knowledge of the doctrines and writings of the Syrians, he was a man of good disposition, and the fear of God was found in him; and he showed great love towards us and to the children of our people (the Jacobites).¹³

Although Bar Hebraeus died only a few years after Yavallaha's election to the Patriarchate he nevertheless has much to tell us of his affable rival's origins. This information is admirably supplemented by a detailed chronicle in Syriac (Br. Mus. Ms. Or. No. 3636). This account of the peregrinations of two "Monks of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China" reads like *The Travels of Marco Polo* in reverse. As a matter of interest it may be noted that Marco Polo made many references to Nestorian Christians in Cathay under the Mongol Il-Khans. The two Christian monks in question, Sauma and Markos, set out from Peking in their homeland China

¹² The relevant passages are found in Assemani's *Bi. Or.*, III, 2, pp. 937ff. together with other material on the subject.

¹³ Cited by E. A. W. Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan* (London, 1928), pp. 58-60.

to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, though Bar Hebraeus states that they were sent "at the command of the Great Mongol king Kublai Khan and ordered to go and worship in Jerusalem". As Providence would have it their mission was not fully accomplished, for the elder monk Sauma (d. 1294) found himself appointed Visitor-General of the Nestorian Church, an office which eventually led him to such places as Byzantium, Rome, and Paris. His companion Markos (1245-1317), who came from Kaushang in Khorasan, was to become Metropolitan Bishop of China. Thereafter, protesting all the while his ignorance of the Syriac language and literature, he was ushered into the patriarchal seat, on account of his acquaintance with the culture of the Mongols. He was given the throne name of Yavallaha ("God has given").

From his seat in Seleucia-Ctesiphon "the Patriarch of the East" wielded spiritual sway at least equal to that of the Pope in Rome, with whom he actually corresponded, according to the evidence of a letter of Yavallaha to Benedict XI, which seeks union with the Roman Church.¹⁴

Thus it may be seen that the missionary zeal fostered in the Syrian schools had borne abundant fruit, for as the writer of the preface to the Yavallaha history tells us:

The Indians (Henduwayē) and the Chinese (Sināyē) and other Oriental nations from various countries became restrained and submitted to the bridle of the fear of God, and their emotions and understandings were anointed by the Spirit.¹⁵

In fact, as a result of these missionary endeavours the Gospel was carried from its Eastern base in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia to Armenia, Central Asia, Tibet, India, China, and even made contact with the Indonesian Archipelago.¹⁶ In the wake of Syrian missionaries and traders churches flourished from perhaps the 6th century or earlier till the 14th, when Asian Christianity went into a sharp decline, mainly owing to a resurgence of Islam and a corresponding increase in the persecution of Eastern

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-100.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁶ K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (1938), Vol. II, pp. 263-285. Cf. the maps and chart in P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo, 1951), pp. 348-342. Colonies of Christians in Asia, emanating from the Syrian Orient, were made up of traders, missionaries, and refugees from persecution. Thus the Greek historian Cosmas Indicopleustes, writing at the beginning of the 6th century, makes it clear that there was a large group of Persians settled in Ceylon and carrying on trade with merchants from the remotest countries. Since persecutions of Christians in Mesopotamia and Persia were of frequent occurrence, such settlements along the Asian trade routes could date from the early Christian centuries.

Christians. There are still various survivals of Syrian Christianity, many of them now in communion with Rome, in their homelands in the Middle East,¹⁷ and in India.¹⁸

As regards China, the "Nestorian Stone" of Hsian-fu (A.D. 781), the manuscripts of the Tun Hwang Caves, and many other relics still bear monumental testimony to the results of the evangelistic journey undertaken in 635 by the Persian bishop Alopen across the steppes of Central Asia to the Court of China. The upshot was the planting of "the luminous religion" on Chinese soil and the founding of the Church of the T'ang Dynasty.¹⁹ Prior to the 19th century the Nestorian stele was branded, by such people as Voltaire, as a Jesuit forgery, but its now authenticated Chinese and Syriac inscription, with its chronicling and its listing of seventy missionaries, shows the considerable influence the Nestorians had on the civilization of China until they were swallowed up, along with the Franciscans, in the collapse of the Mongol Empire in the 14th century. Not least of the gifts brought to the Khans was the Syriac alphabet, which was used for the Mongolian language.²⁰

IV. THE LEGACY TO EUROPE

Western Christendom had come into contact with the various Eastern Churches through the Crusades.²¹ Furthermore there was ecclesiastical dialogue between the Vatican and Eastern Patriarchates, and political intrigue among the potentates of the Occident and the Orient. An illustrative case is that of our other monk of Kublai Khan, namely Rabban Sauma.

A native of Peking and of Christian parentage, Sauma brought great grief to his parents by refusing, in the style of Alexius, to enter wedlock with the girl to whom they had betrothed him. Again in typically Alexian fashion he distributed his possessions as alms and eventually found his way to the Syrian Orient. There he became Visitor-General of the Nestorian Churches in the East, and in 1285 was sent by Arghon, the Mongol king, as ambassador to the Pope and to the kings of Byzantium, France, and England. The

¹⁷ See the various writings of W. A. Wigram on the 'Assyrian' Church, and B. Spuler, *Die Morgenländischen Kirchen* (Leiden, 1964).

¹⁸ See E. Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India*, London, 1957 (A History of the Syro-Malabar Church).

¹⁹ See Saeki, *op. cit.* On p. 15 he points out that the immigration of Nestorian families into Chinese territory took place as early as 578, well before the arrival of the official mission in 635.

²⁰ Cf. the portrait of Chingiz Khan (d. 1227) surrounded by inscriptions in Chinese and Mongolian (in Budge, *op. cit.*, facing p. 97). The Cyrillic alphabet is now used.

²¹ See the article of E. Barker, "The Crusades", in *The Legacy of Islam*, ed. T. Arnold and A. Guillaume (Oxford, 1931), pp. 40-77.

letters he carried on this mission sought the formation of an alliance to capture Jerusalem from the Muslims.²² The Patriarch Yavallaha also took the opportunity to send letters and gifts to the Pope. The full details of Sauma's itinerary cannot be recounted here,²³ but there are some points of religious interest which may be noted.

When Sauma arrived in Rome the Pope, Honorius IV (1285-7), had just died and the Cardinals were engaged in the prolonged election of the new Pope, Nicholas IV (1288-92), so Sauma and his companions went to visit the kings for whom he had dispatches. In each city Sauma asked to see the holy places and their sacred relics. In Paris, for example, the Crown of Thorns was exhibited in its gilded chamber in the Sainte Chapelle. Sauma was told by the king, Philippe IV le Bel, that the sacred object had been brought by the French from Constantinople.²⁴ The Crown of Thorns was one of the relics seen in Byzantium by the French historian Robert de Clari during the Fourth Crusade (1201-4), as was also the Holy Shroud:

There was also another minster, which was called My Lady Saint Mary of Blachernae, where the shroud was in which Our Lord was wrapped. Every Friday this was raised upright (*se drechoit tous drois*), so that the form of Our Lord could be clearly seen; yet no one knows, neither Greek nor Frank, what became of that shroud (*sydoines*) when the city was taken.²⁵

Presumably this relic was in France at the time of Sauma's visit, but it was not brought out into the open until 1353 by the de Charny family.

At any rate, in Rome Sauma was shown a relic of a similar nature, namely "the strip of fine linen on which Our Lord impressed His image and sent to King Abgar of Urhaj (i.e. Edessa)".²⁶

²² There were four such missions to the Pope between 1285 and 1291, but, though all parties were in agreement, no joint attack was ever made. 1291 was not only the year of Arghon's death but also that of the fall of Acre on the Syrian coast, the last stronghold of Latin Christianity on the mainland of Asia.

²⁴ The Crown of Thorns was presented in 1239 to St. Louis the King as a gift from Baldwin II, Latin Emperor of Constantinople. It is now preserved in Notre Dame de Paris.

²⁵ For the full text see the edition of Philippe Lauer, *Classiques Français du Moyen Age*, No. 40 (Paris, 1924), p. 90, Ch. XCII.

²⁶ Budge, p. 178. For the various traditions concerning this image, variously conceived as a painting or a cloth similar to the towel of Veronica, and the vicissitudes that led it from Edessa to Byzantium and ultimately to Italy, see L.-J. Tixeront, *Les origines de l'église d'Edesse et la légende d'Abgar* (Paris, 1888), pp. 52-62. Robert de Clari includes a cloth of this nature in his descriptive list of relics he saw in Constantinople.

That there was some sort of image of Christ kept in the Church of Edessa in earlier centuries was known in European traditions, as we stated at the outset of this study. Thus the image of Jesus reputedly sent to Edessa with the legendary apostle Addai is referred to in the Alexius story (ll. 86-90):

Puis s'en alat en Alsis la citez
 por une imagene dont il odit parler
 qued angele firent par comandement Deu
 el nom la virgene qui portat salvetet,
 Sainte Marie, qui portat Damnedeu.

King Abgar was also supposed to have received a unique epistle from Jesus along with a blessing for his city Edessa to the effect that "the enemy shall nevermore prevail against it". This idea of the immunity of Edessa was frequently taken up by Syriac writers, as for example in the interesting chronicle of Joshua the Stylite,²⁷ where the city is miraculously preserved from destruction. In this matter of divine protection there were two parallel traditions, in which either the Image or the Letter acted as a talisman.

This notion and the Letter itself were even known in Europe at an early date, in Pope Hadrian's first letter to Charlemagne (787), for example, and in various redactions of the legend in the Germanic languages.²⁸

Thus in England the story of Abgar is told in an Anglo-Saxon poem of 204 lines, which constitutes a recounting of Book I, Chapter 13, of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*.²⁹ Further, in an ancient service book from Saxon times preserved in the British Museum, the Abgar Letter follows the Pater Noster and the Apostles' Creed, with an appended description of its virtues as a charm that will ensure the safety of any one who carries it with him in his walk: "Si quis hanc epistolam secum habuerit, securus ambulet [ambulabit?] in pace". Writing of the devotion to the Letter in 18th century England, Jeremiah Jones stated:

The common people in England have had it in their houses in many places in a frame with a picture before it; and they generally, with much honesty and devotion, regard it as the word of God and the genuine epistle of Christ.³⁰

Of course all these items of information are somewhat incidental

²⁷ W. Wright, ed., *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite* (Cambridge, 1882), V, LX, LXI. For the other writers, Syrian, Greek, Arab, and Latin, who knew the Abgar legend consult Tixeront, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-29.

²⁸ Tixeront pp. 27-29.

²⁹ G. Stephens, *Abgarus Legenden paa Old-Engelsk*, with English translation (Copenhagen, 1853).

³⁰ Tixeront, pp. 48-52, and W. Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents . . . of Christianity in Edessa* (London, 1864), pp. 154f.

to our main theme, but they serve to demonstrate that Europe was not unmindful of the existence of Syrian Christianity in the lands of the so-called Infidels.

What then can we say of a literary and scientific legacy? This is not the place to reiterate all the evidence and arguments for the influence of the literature of the Middle East on that of Europe during the medieval period,³¹ but certain points stand out in the landscape as viewed by the present writer. Thus the well-known *chante-fable* of 13th century France, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, bears marks of Spanish-Arabic provenance in several details of its setting and in the Arabic name of its hero (*al-Qasim*).³² While it is certainly not our intention to argue that the Syrian Church had anything to do with the origin or transmission of this tale, as compared with the *Vie de Saint Alexis*,³³ yet there remains a general principle: it was the Syrian *literati* who initially translated works from foreign languages into Syriac and Arabic, and the nascent Islamic civilization was happy to avail itself of these services.

Take for example the collection of animal fables of Sanskrit origin known as *Kalila and Dimna*, which came by way of Old Persian into Syriac and then Arabic. From here it found its way into the Malay region on the one hand, and into Europe on the other in Spanish and Latin dress, ultimately becoming one of the sources of La Fontaine.³⁴

Further, the Monophysite Syrian scholar who translated *Kalila and Dimna* into Syriac, Būd by name, was also the reputed trans-

³¹ Refer to *The Legacy of Islam*, pp. 180-209.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 193 and the edition of Mario Roques, *Cl. Fr. de M.A.*, No. 41, pp. III-XXXVIII.

³³ The ascetic atmosphere of the Alexius poem is typical of Syriac literature, but the secular spirit breathed by the Aucassin song-tale (especially the Paradise parody in which the hero expresses his preference for Hell, where all the fine knights go along with "les beles dames cortoises que eles ont deus amis ou trois avoc leur barons", as contrasted with Heaven where all the religious and beggarly folk are) would be more at home in the mouth of the Arab troubadour (*farrāb*). The present writer has a special affection for both these works, since they were his prescribed texts in 4th year French at Sydney University under Professor I. Henning.

³⁴ H. A. R. Gibb, in *The Legacy of Islam*, p. 196, and C. Hooykaas, *Over Maleise Literatuur* (Leiden, 1947), Ch. 15, entitled "Pantja-Tantra, de overal verspreide Fabelverzameling", pp. 136-144. The tale of Barlaam and Josaphat is a Christianized version of the life of Buddha (which *inter alia* included the long lost Apology of Aristides) but in this case no Syriac version is extant. This ascetic tale was in great vogue in medieval Europe. See J. Sonet, *Le Roman de Barlaam et Josaphat* (Louvain, 1949), Vol. I, pp. 5-68.

lator of Book I of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.³⁵ This points our way to the greatest merit of the Syrian schoolmen, as we may justly call them, namely their vital concern for the study and transmission of the writings of the Greeks. It needs to be said at the outset, however, that although Homer's epics were known in Syriac translation³⁶ the Syrians had little taste for secular literature. The poets and playwrights were completely neglected in favour of the philosophers and scientists. Nevertheless it was the research and translation activity of the Syrian schools of Edessa, Nisibis, Qennesrin, and Jundaysabur that laid the foundations for the development of Islamic philosophy at the school of Baghdad. When Caliph al-Ma'mun founded this *Bayt al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom) in 832 the Syrian scholars were given royal patronage in the task of rendering from Greek into Arabic, mostly by way of intermediate Syriac versions, works of a medical, astronomical, physical, mathematical, and philosophical nature.³⁷

When this learning had been assimilated into Islamic culture it found its way round to Muslim Spain. The Arabic writings were pressed by Jewish scholars into a Hebrew mould, from which they passed into Latin, in which form they were eagerly taken up by the scholastics of Europe.³⁸ Thus the *literati* of the Syrian Church had fixed the first spoke into a wheel that was to transport the science of the Greeks from Athens and Alexandria to Baghdad, and eventually to Cordova, Salerno, and Montpellier.

One other debt owed by Islam to Syrian Christianity may have also had echoes in Europe, namely the influence of Syrian asceticism and mysticism on the development of the Muslim movement known as Sufism.³⁹ When we recall the Arabic philosophic ideas and the erotic imagery of the Sufis reflected in the works of Dante, and the beatific vision shared by Al-Ghazali, Bar Hebraeus, and Thomas Aquinas, it is difficult to maintain that there was no mutual influence. Furthermore when one considers the Syrian devotion to the Cross and the Passion, and the Sufic devotion to the crucified martyr Hallaj, executed in 922 by the religious

³⁵ Khalil Georr, *Les Catégories d'Aristote dans leurs versions syro-arabes* (Beyrouth, 1948), p. 23. On the whole subject of Syrian translation activity see pp. 1-32.

³⁶ A Syriac rendering was made by Theophilus of Edessa, who also translated Greek philosophical works, in the 8th century. See Georr, pp. 30f.

³⁷ *Legacy of Islam*, pp. 315-322.

³⁸ A. Guillaume, *ibid.*, pp. 239-282; C. and D. Singer, "The Jewish Factor in Medieval Thought" in *The Legacy of Israel*.

³⁹ R. A. Nicholson, *Legacy of Islam*, "Mysticism", pp. 210-240.

legalists of Islam,⁴⁰ a partial explanation seems to emerge for the upsurge in European Christian spirituality in the late Middle Ages,⁴¹ when a lay movement devoted to the Passion of Christ sprang up and took hold of the art of the medieval world⁴² and led to the enormous popularity of the "Mystères de la Passion" on the late medieval stage.⁴³ At the very least we may say that the mystic ways followed by the Syrians and the Sufis ran parallel to the path of "the devotion of the Passion" pursued by Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Bonaventura, and the Franciscan Poets; but the ideas and features of Syrian, Muslim, and Catholic mysticism touch one another so closely that it is difficult to deny any interaction among them.

Time and again we have found the Syrian Church acting as the vehicle for the passing on of ideas to other cultures⁴⁴ and to round off the picture we shall cite three examples of very early Syrian influence, or mediation, experienced by the Western Church. J. Leipoldt has outlined three areas of influence.⁴⁵

(1) *Religious symbolism*: here it is suggested the symbol of Christ as the Fish, so prevalent in early Christianity, goes back to Syrian pagan models.

(2) *Religious art*: of Syrian provenance is the custom of having all the figures in a picture facing the viewer, whether this stance is compatible with their depicted action or not.

(3) *Religious music*: the musical style known as Gregorian Chant has its roots in the Syrian Orient. In this respect Augustine gives us an illuminating aside in his *Confessions* (IX, 7, 15) to the effect that in Milan shortly before his baptism in 387 "the singing of hymns and psalms after the manner of the Eastern Churches was introduced . . . and imitated by many, yea by almost all Thy congregations throughout the rest of the world".

V. THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SYRIAN CHRISTIANITY

The achievements of the Syrian Church in the transmission of

⁴⁰ L. Massignon, *La Passion d'al-Hallaj* (Paris, 1922); A. Schimmel, "The Martyr-Mystic Hallaj in Sindhi Folk-Poetry", *Numen*, IX, 1962, pp. 161-200.

⁴¹ P. Pourrat, *La spiritualité chrétienne*, II, Le Moyen Age, Paris, 1951.

⁴² E. Mâle, *L'art religieux de la fin du M.A.*, ch. I-III.

⁴³ G. Cohen, *Le théâtre en France au M.A.*, I, Le théâtre religieux (Paris, 1928), pp. 40ff.

⁴⁴ Cf. John Bowman, "The Debt of Islam to Monophysite Syrian Christianity", *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 19, 1965, pp. 177-201; "The Influence of Iran upon Christianity", *Milla wa-Milla*, 5, 1965, pp. 32-40.

⁴⁵ *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, I, 8, 2, "Religionsgeschichte des Orients" (Leiden, 1961), pp. 12-17.

the ancient cultural heritage were colossal and out of all proportion to the physical size of this body. But how are we to assess the value of their missionary endeavours or to account for the eclipse of their work?

Rev. Dr. John Stewart, who chronicled *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise* in a book bearing this title,⁴⁶ described it in his subtitle as "The Story of a Church on Fire". Stewart's list of causes contributing to the decadence of this missionary activity contains the following items: (1) *Persecution*, (2) *Deception*, as when Indian Christians were led to identify Krishna with Christ, (3) *Compromise*, e.g. with Manichaeism, Monophysitism, Buddhism, (4) *Extermination*, by the Mongols and especially Tamerlane, the violently anti-Christian Muslim ruler, (5) *Absorption*, by Roman Catholicism.

L. E. Browne, however, is more searching and probes deeper into the internal causes and weaknesses, finding evidence of (1) reliance on the secular arm in seeking large numbers of converts, (2) mass baptism of converts without due preparation or teaching and without ensuring the spiritual reality of Christianity in their lives, and (3) the proclamation of what might be called "the yoke of the Gospel", reminiscent of the burden of the Mosaic Law, rather than "the glorious liberty of the children of God".⁴⁷ Syrian Christianity could not divorce its message from its asceticism, as an apt quotation from the 9th century monastic writer Thomas of Marga (cited by Stewart, p. 83) eloquently testifies, for missionary work is said to result in submission to "the yoke of fasting and prayer, vigil by nights, and abstinence from every kind of food on the stated fasts and holy festivals". It is this ascetic outlook, apart from any question of the heretical nature of their theology, which accounts for both the energetic zeal of the Syrian missionaries and the serious shortcomings of their message.

Nevertheless they have won for themselves an enduring place in the annals of Christian missionary endeavour. The pity is that we are too prone to pass over the pages in which are recorded the accomplishments of this small pocket of Christianity which exerted in its heyday an influence of worldwide extent.

University of Melbourne.

⁴⁶ Edinburgh, 1928. (Reviewed in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, 1929).

⁴⁷ L. E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia from the Time of Muhammed till the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1933), esp. pp. 107f.: ". . . with the information available we can only suppose that the failure of Christianity in Central and Eastern Asia was due to the missionary methods employed, and that those methods were the natural outcome of the life and thought of the Church".