

NOTES AND STUDIES

THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE OF THE SYRIAC ACTS OF JOHN.

The History of John the Son of Zebedee is the first of the Syriac pieces published by Wright in his *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*.¹ In his preface Dr Wright wrote: 'These Acts, which are obviously translated from the Greek, being of comparatively late date, and to all appearance destitute of any historical basis, are chiefly valuable from the linguistic point of view' (p. ix). This pronouncement, combined with the fact that the older MS states in the title that the work was translated from the Greek, seems to have warned off scholars from asking any further questions about the origin of the Acts. Considering the number and, in many cases, the peculiar character of the Gospel citations they contain, it is not a little strange that this should have been so; and in spite of the great authority of Dr Wright I am about to maintain that the piece was in reality composed in Syriac, and further, that the Gospel text used by the author was the Diatessaron.

I must begin by noticing the objection which is raised against this view by the title of the older MS (*A*). It runs: 'The history of John, the son of Zebedee, who lay upon the breast of our Lord Jesus at the supper, and said, "Lord, who betrayeth Thee?" This history was composed by Eusebius of Caesarea concerning St John, who found it in a Greek book, and it was translated into Syriac, when he had learned concerning his way of life and his birth and his dwelling in the city of Ephesus, after the ascension of our Lord into heaven.'²

In the other MS, *B*, the title has nothing about either Eusebius or a Greek original. It runs: 'The history of the holy and beloved Mār John the Evangelist, who spoke and taught and baptized, by the help of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, in the city of Ephesus.'

Now if we turn to the colophon we shall find reason to believe that the title of *B* is the more ancient. *A* reads: 'Here ends the doctrine of John, the son of Zebedee, who (leaned on the breast of our Lord at the supper, and) instructed and taught and baptized in the city of Ephesus.' *B* omits the bracketed words.

Thus in *B* the title is taken up quite naturally by the colophon;

¹ The text printed is that of a St Petersburg MS of the sixth cent. (*A*). Variants are given from a British Museum MS of the ninth cent. (*B*).

² Wright's rendering.

while the chief point of connexion between the title of *A* and the colophon lies in the words omitted by *B*.

If then there is any question of either of the MSS having preserved the original title of the piece the probabilities are on the side of *B* rather than of *A*.

In what follows I have to try and establish two points: (1) that the *Acts of John* is a Syriac composition, (2) that the author used the Diatessaron.

With regard to the latter it must be said at once that the existing text of the Gospel citations agrees for the most part with the Peshitta, especially in passages with a theological bearing. But there remain a considerable number of readings which could not have come from the use of the Peshitta, and several of these agree with known readings of the Old Syriac and the Diatessaron. We must be prepared, then, for a large amount of assimilation to the Vulgate text even in a MS of the sixth century. This process is several times betrayed by the variants of the later MS, *B* sometimes bringing expressions into line with later theological language, sometimes preserving a reading which implies the use of one of the older versions, i. e. either of syr. vt. or of the Diatessaron.

But it was not the character of the Gospel quotations that first led me to question Dr Wright's verdict that the Acts were translated from the Greek.¹ There are certain ideas, theological conceptions, and modes of expression, which are extremely characteristic of Syriac writers; and there are far too many of these crowded into the *Acts of John* to allow us to think of the work as a translation from Greek. In giving some examples of these Syriac characteristics I shall, with Professor Burkitt, count the *Acts of Judas Thomas* and also the Syriac *Acts of Philip*² as original Syriac documents. That the former work was composed in Syriac is now recognized, and I am personally convinced that the same must be said of the latter also.

Evidence of Syriac authorship.

1. On p. 4 (transl.) the demons are called 'the sons of the left hand', and on p. 11 the Apostle prays that the Lord would direct his path 'to the right hand'. The expressions 'sons of the right hand', 'sons of the left hand', or simply 'the right hand', 'the left hand', are found over and over again in Syriac writings to denote the good and the bad, without any attempt to explain the allusion to Mt. xxv 31 ff. A good example of the bald manner in which the allusion is sometimes made is to be found in St Ephraim's tract against Julian: 'For all of them were

¹ Of the supposed Greek original nothing is known.

² See *Evangelion Da-Mepharreshe* ii p. 106 note 3.

depending upon the head of the left hand (i. e. Julian); for while the right hand was in sorrow over sinners, the sons of the left hand were greatly rejoicing.' Again: 'All the apostates rejoiced in the Apostate, and the sons of the left hand in the head of the left hand.'¹ In *Acts of Philip* we read: 'Quit the destroying left hand, and the unconquered right hand shall receive you' (Wright p. 80). Aphraates (Wright p. 285) speaks of 'sons of the left hand, heirs of darkness'; again (p. 287), 'sons of the right hand, who travel by the strait and narrow way'.² This Syriac use of 'right' and 'left' may be paralleled by modern political use of the words—from the conservative point of view.

2. On pp. 7, 14, 26, and 33 it is said that at the incarnation the Word 'entered by the ear' of the Virgin. This is a favourite idea with Syriac writers. St Ephraim in his commentary on the Diatessaron (Moesinger p. 249) writes: 'Quia mors per aurem Evae intravit, per aurem Mariae vita intravit.' Isaac of Antioch (Bedjan i p. 715) makes it clear that this was the accepted notion among the Syrians, and bases upon it an argument for Christ's divinity: 'If He was not God, how did He enter by the ear?' Again (*ibid.* p. 716): 'By the ear Spirit entered, and from the womb flesh came forth.'³

3. The phrase 'put on a body', which occurs so frequently in Aphraates, *Acts of Thomas*, and other early Syriac writings (cf. *Acts of Thomas* p. 210; Aphr. pp. 144, 403, 414, 421, and 472; *Addai* pp. 9, 18), and is used almost invariably by St Ephraim to describe the incarnation, is found in our Acts on pp. 33 and 52. It fell into disrepute in later times, and so it is not surprising to find that in the later MS, *B*, other expressions have been substituted, viz. 'became flesh' on p. 33, and 'became man' on p. 52.

4. The expressions 'the sign' (*rûshmâ*, or *nîshâ*), 'the sign of baptism', 'the sign of life', and the like, to signify 'baptism', are so common in early Syriac writings as to be almost the rule. One or other of them occurs on pp. 25, 36, 48, 49 (*bis*) and 52. 'Baptism' simply occurs only three times, and in one of these cases it is the baptism of Christ that is meant; it is scarcely, if at all, to be found in the *Acts of Thomas*, but the use of *rûshmâ* as a synonym is frequent (cf. Wright, transl., pp. 166, 191, 256, 257, 259, 283).

5. The ritual of Baptism, described in detail on pp. 38-40, 42, and

¹ Overbeck *S. Ephr. aliorumque op. select.* pp. 4-5.

² For further examples see Lamy i 41 (Ephr.); Overbeck p. 3 l. 14, p. 8 l. 24 (Ephr.); p. 335 ll. 11-13 (Balai); *Carm. Nisib.* xxxvi 18 (*fin.*), and Ed. Rom. vi 103 A (Ephr.).

³ Other examples of this view may be seen in Lamy ii 515 (author?), ii 569 (author?), ii 801 (Ephr.), iii 979 and 981 (author?).

54-55, is practically identical with that which we find in the *Acts of Thomas* on pp. 166, 258, and 267-268, sharing with the latter a very remarkable feature as compared with Greek and Latin rites: there is no chrism after the immersion. First in each case comes a solemn unction, or signing (*rúshmá*), accompanied by the anointing of the whole body, and followed immediately by baptism in the threefold Name. Then comes the reception of Holy Communion, without any further anointing. Now this is in perfect agreement with what we find in St Ephraim's Hymns *On the Epiphany*.¹ These Hymns deal for the most part with Baptism; and here again the only anointing alluded to is that which comes before the immersion. Both the order of treatment and the language used make this quite clear. Hymn iii treats of the unction and Hymn iv of the laver. 'Christ', says St Ephraim, in the first verse of Hymn iii, 'and chrism are conjoined . . . the chrism anoints visibly, Christ signs secretly, the lambs newborn and spiritual, the flock of His twofold victory; for He engendered it of the chrism, He gave it birth of the water.' And further on he writes: 'When the leper of old was cleansed, the priest used to sign him with oil, and lead him to the waterspring. The type has passed and the truth is come; lo, with chrism have ye been signed, in baptism ye are perfected, in the flock ye are intermixed, from the Body ye are nourished.' In Hymn iv he passes on to the baptism: 'Descend, my signed brethren, put ye on our Lord.' The evidence from Aphraates points in the same direction: he puts the *rúshmá* before the water. Speaking of the celebration of Easter (p. 229), he says there must be fasting and prayer, and the chanting of psalms, 'and the giving of the sign (*rúshmá*), and baptism after its due observance' (ܡܪܝܢܐ). He, like St Ephraim, speaks of this pre-baptismal 'sign' in the most solemn manner. He speaks of 'the olive wherein is the sign of the Mystery of Life, whereby (men) are constituted Christians and priests and kings', and 'which makes light them that are dark' (p. 449). I repeat, I have been unable to discover any trace of a post-baptismal unction in Syriac writings of the fourth century.

Now in the Greek and Latin Churches the baptism seems always to have been followed by the chrism of confirmation, the variable element being the preliminary anointing.²

¹ Lamy i 5 ff. These Hymns may be read in Dr Gwynn's translation in *Post-Nicene Fathers* vol. xiii. Especially important for the study of the subject in hand are iii, iv, v, and vi.

² Mr Brightman, in *J. T. S.* i pp. 247 ff. The use of oil at Baptism, as described in the *Acts of Thomas*, met with the strongest disapproval of Turribius, a Spanish bishop contemporary with Leo the Great. He goes so far as to say that the *Acts of Thomas*, which he tells us was one of the apocryphal books in vogue amongst the Priscillianists, contained a command to baptize with oil instead of water (Mr C. H. Turner, in *J. T. S.* vii p. 604). Mr Turner observes on this: 'Of the

resounded over Jordan and pointed out our Lord Jesus with the finger (saying): This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him. Thou art here who wast at Jordan. Yea, I beseech Thee, Lord, manifest Thyself here before this assemblage who have believed in Thee with simplicity. And in that hour fire blazed forth over the oil, and the wings of angels were spread over the oil' (*B*, rightly, 'water').

Now Isho'dad, a ninth-century writer, professes to quote the text of the Diatessaron for an account of the appearance of a bright light and angels over Jordan at the time of Christ's baptism: 'And straightway, as the Diatessaron testifies, light shone forth (☞), and over Jordan was spread a veil of white clouds, and there appeared many hosts of spiritual beings who were praising God in the air.'¹ Jacob Barsalibi, a later writer, cites the Diatessaron for the same statement: 'A mighty light flashed upon Jordan, and the river was girded with white clouds, and there appeared many hosts that were uttering praise in the air.'²

St Ephraim (Hymn x *In Epiph.*) writes: 'When He was baptized light flashed from the water.'³ In Hymn xv he makes repeated allusion to a light, or fire, on Jordan at the Baptism, and to hosts of 'watchers', i. e. angels.

Now in our last passage from the *Acts of John* the Apostle prays in effect that God would manifest Himself as He did over Jordan; and straightway fire blazes forth over the oil, and angels appear over the water. An allusion to the incident cited by Isho'dad and Barsalibi from the Diatessaron can scarcely be doubted. Some copies of the Harmony may have read 'fire', *nūhrā*, for 'light', *nūhrā*. The finger of God pointing to our Lord is perhaps the ray of light flashed over Him.

2. On p. 34 (34) we have an account of the baptism of Christ, which begins thus: 'And He grew up as a man . . . And when thirty years were fulfilled (Lk. iii 23), He came to Jordan for baptism (cp. Mt. iii 13), and was baptized by John' (Mk. i 9). Compare with this Aphraates, p. 405: 'Jesus about thirty years old (Lk.) came to Jordan that He might be baptized'; also Ephraim's Commentary on the Diatessaron, p. 41: 'And Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age (Lk.) at the time when He came to be baptized of John' (Mt.). In the Gospel of St Luke (iii 23) the statement of our Lord's age comes after the baptism, and is made in connexion with the commencement of His teaching. It is evident from Aphraates and Ephraim that Lk. iii 23 was brought into connexion with Christ's coming to Jordan for baptism, as we find it in the *Acts of John*. We find this in the Arabic Harmony also, but there Mt. iii 13 precedes Lk. iii 23.

¹ Cf. Rendel Harris *Ephrem on the Gospel* p. 43.

² Burkitt *S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel* p. 68.

³ Lamy i 97. The incident is also alluded to in Ephraim's Commentary p. 43.

3. On p. 4 (4) we read: 'For He said to us, when He was going up into heaven from beside us, as He was blessing us (Lk. xxiv 51): Go forth, teach, and baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Mt. xxviii 19); every one that believes and is baptized liveth (Mk. xvi 16).'

The passage in the Arabic Diatessaron which deals with the ascension is thus composed: (Mt. xxviii 18^b, Jn. xx 21^b, Mk. xvi 15^b), Mt. xxviii 19^b-20, Mk. xvi 16 (-18, Lk. xxiv 49, Mk. xvi 19^a, Lk. xxiv 50), Lk. xxiv 51, Mk. xvi 19^c (Lk. xxiv 52-53). The bracketed passages do not concern us here. Thus we find in the *Acts of John* the command to baptize in Mt. xxviii 19 coupled with Mk. xvi 16 and connected with the ascension as in the Arabic copy. As in the latter, too, the Acts introduce a portion of the Lucan account of the ascension—the blessing of the disciples. In the Arabic this is followed by Mk. xvi 19^c. Now on p. 16 (16) of the Acts we read: 'And He ascended into Heaven, and sat at the right hand of His Father (cf. Mk. xvi 19^c) . . . And He said to us: Go forth, teach,' &c. (Mt. xxviii 19, Mk. xvi 16), as above.¹ We may conclude that Lk. xxiv 51 and Mk. xvi 19^c both came into the account of the ascension in the Gospel text used by the author. We may compare Aphraates (Wright p. 21): 'And when again our Lord gave the mystery of baptism (Mt. xxviii 19),² thus He said to them: He that believeth and is baptized shall live, and he that believeth not is judged' (Mk. xvi 16).

4. On p. 16 (16), in the course of a highly interesting harmonized account of the passion it is said that our Lord was given 'vinegar and gall' to drink on the cross. That 'vinegar and gall' was read in the Diatessaron is shewn by St Ephraim's Commentary (Moesinger p. 245): 'and they gave Him to drink vinegar and gall.'

5. On pp. 40 (40) and 47 (47) our author speaks of 'ravening wolves' (Mt. vii 15) as ܩܘܠܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܘܬܐ. But Pesh. and C represent 'ravening wolves' by ܩܘܠܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܘܬܐ; so *Acts of Thomas*.³ S is wanting.⁴ It is surely improbable that a Syriac writer, or even translator, who was accustomed to use only the Peshitta or the Old Syriac version, would have referred to the wolves in Mt. vii 15 as anything but ܩܘܠܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܘܬܐ.

¹ These words—'go forth', &c.—occur three times in all in *Acts of John*, viz. on pp. 4, 16, and 20.

² We know from the *Doctrine of Addai* (Phillips p. 20) that the command to baptize in the threefold Name stood in the Diatessaron.

³ A document in which the Old Syriac version was used; cf. Burkitt *Evangel. da-Meph.* ii pp. 101 ff.

⁴ I use C and S to denote respectively the Curetonian and Sinaitic MSS of Syr. Vt.

(3) In the harmonized passage on the passion, referred to above, we find, in addition to the reading 'vinegar and gall' already noticed, the following: 'And He cried out with His *mighty* voice (حده وحا) on the cross.' *S* reads, 'with a *mighty* voice' in Mt. xxvii 46 and Mk. xv 34, 37, but 'with a *loud* voice' (حفا وحا) in Mt. xxvii 50 and Lk. xxiii 46. *Pesh.* has 'with a *loud* voice' in all five places. *C* is wanting.

(4) The following readings, which occur in the second of the harmonized passages (pp. حح-حس) to which I have alluded, differ from *Pesh.* :—

(α) 'And the lame walked, and the blind were opened.'¹

The idiom 'to open the blind', which occurs also on p. ٤ of these Acts is found in *S* in Jn. ix 32 and x 21, and Ephraim (Lamy i 597) writes: 'He made clay of spittle, and opened the blind.' In both the passages in St John's Gospel *Pesh.* supplies 'the eyes of'.

(β) 'And the day inclined to dip' (وجع و ححعب).

The somewhat unusual word (in this sense) 'to dip' occurs in *C* in Lk. ix 12. *S* has there 'to set' (ححدد), and *Pesh.* 'to decline' (ححدل).

(γ) When Peter walks on the water it is said that he 'walked and *was coming* (*B, went*) to Him' (Mt. xiv 29).

S and *C* have 'and he came to Jesus'. *Pesh.* has 'that he might come to Jesus'.

(δ) 'And *our Lord Jesus came and* entered the ship' (Mt. xiv 32).

Pesh. reads: 'and when *they* went up into the ship the wind ceased.'

S: 'and when *they* went up into the boat the wind abated.'

C: 'and when *He* went up into the ship the wind ceased.'

Diat. Arab. (xix 9) implies a reading different from *Pesh.* and *S*, and approaching to that in *Acts of John*: 'and when *Jesus had come near, He* went up into the boat, Himself and Simon.' Cf. Ephraim's Commentary (Moes. p. 136): 'When *our Lord came and* went up into the ship with Simon, and the winds rested and ceased.'

(ε) 'Who then is this, that the winds and sea He commandeth and they obey Him?' (Lk. viii 25).²

¹ The healings referred to introduce an account of one of the miracles of feeding the multitudes; cf. Mt. xv 30 ff, which precedes the feeding of the *four* thousand. The number fed in our Acts is also *four* thousand, but nearly all the details belong to the account of the *five* thousand. The loaves are said to have been 'barley loaves', as in Jn.

² The writer has introduced this saying here, after the miracle of walking on the water, by a confusion. It is Luke's version of the saying which comes after the earlier miracle of stilling the storm. Ephraim's Commentary and the Arabic Harmony bear witness to the fact that both miracles were given by Tatian. The Arabic copy gives Luke's version of the saying after the earlier miracle; and there it is preceded by Mk. iv 39. Now in *Acts of John* the saying is immediately

S and *C*: 'Who then is this, that even the winds and the sea He commandeth and they obey Him?'

Pesh.: 'Who then is this, that even the winds he commandeth, *and the floods* and the sea, and they obey Him?'

Acts of John agrees with *S C* against Pesh. both in the order of words and in the omission of 'and the floods'.

(٤) 'And they brought to Him all those that were ill with divers (*B*, *stubborn*, ܫܘܒܪܝܢ) infirmities, and demoniacs and the paralysed and lunatics and the lame, and He healed them *all*' (Mt. iv 24).

There is a good deal of discrepancy between the texts of *S*, *C*, and Pesh. in this passage. Our Acts most resemble Pesh. in general character. But that the original text has been tampered with is proved by the peculiar reading 'stubborn', preserved by *B*, which is found here in both *S* and *C*, while Pesh. has 'divers' (ܡܨܬܠܦܐ). The Acts further agree with *S* and *C* in reading 'and He healed them *all*' (Pesh. omits 'all'), and with *C* in reading 'and they brought', while Pesh. has 'and they brought-near': the words are from different roots in Syriac.

(5) On pp. ٢٥-٢٦ (23-24) a youth who has been raised from the dead tells what he saw:—

'And I saw twelve men in one band, and in another *seventy-two* . . . And I drew near to the great troop of *seventy-two*.'

In Lk. x 1 'seventy-two' is read by *S*, *C*, *Acts of Thomas*, *Addai*, Ephraim's *Com. on the Diat. (bis)*, and *Doctrine of the Apostles*. Pesh. alone has 'seventy'.

(6) On p. ٤٦ (46) we read: 'And the multitudes were straightway crying out: We renounce Artemis . . . *And they were beating upon their faces and saying: Woe, what has happened to us?*'

Now in Lk. xxiii 48 *S* and *C* add, after the words 'beating their breasts' in the ordinary text, a cry of woe uttered by the multitudes, thus: 'and saying: Woe to us! What hath befallen us? Woe to us from our sins!' The Diatessaron, as attested by Ephraim (Moes. pp. 245-246), had the further addition, 'Lo! the judgements of the desolation of Jerusalem are come.'¹ That the passage in *Acts of John* starts from Lk. xxiii 48 can scarcely be doubted. The words 'they were beating upon their faces' are in the Syriac identical with those read in the Gospel by *S*, *C*, and Pesh., except that 'faces' is substituted for 'breasts', thus:

S, *C*, Pesh.: ܠܗܘܢ ܡܨܬܠܦܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ
Acts of John: ܠܗܘܢ ܡܨܬܠܦܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ

preceded by the words 'and there was a great quiet' (ܕܥܘܢܐ). This is the reading of Pesh. in Mk. iv 39. *S* and *C* are wanting there, but in Mt. viii 26 and Lk. viii 25 all authorities read 'calm' (ܡܨܬܠܦܐ).

¹ For other references see Burkitt *op. cit.* i 413.

