



CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA

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A BRIEF OUTLINE OF SYRIAC LITERATURE

ST. EPHREM ECUMENICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

BAKER HILL, KOTTAYAM - 686 001

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I. A BIRD'S EYE VIEW: THE MAIN PERIODS

Syriac began as the local Aramaic dialect of Edessa (Urhay, modern Urfa in SE Turkey), with its own script, first attested in inscriptions of the first century AD. It must have been adopted as the literary language of the Aramaic-speaking Christianity at an early date, and as a result of this its use spread rapidly along with the spread of Christianity in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and in the Persian Empire further east. Syriac is in fact one of the three Late Aramaic dialects which came to produce large surviving literatures, the other two being Jewish Aramaic and Mandaean; both in literary quality and in quantity Syriac easily surpasses these other two large Aramaic literatures.

Syriac literature covers from the second to the twentieth century AD. This long span of time can conveniently be broken up into six main periods:

- A. The earliest literature: 2nd- 3rd century AD.
- B. Aphrahat, Ephrem, and other fourth-century writings.
- C. Fifth to mid seventh century.
- D. Mid seventh to end of the thirteenth century.
- E. Fourteenth to nineteenth century.
- F. Twentieth century.

Of the six periods, B-D (4th-13th cent.) provide the most extensive and most important literature.

II. THE SECULAR AND ECCLESIASTICAL BACKGROUND.

(a) Periods A-C (2nd-7th cent.) belong to the time when Syriac writers were living either under the Roman Empire or under the Persian Empire (Parthians up to AD 226; Sasanians from 226 - 640). Syriac writers living under the Roman Empire (Christian from the fourth century onwards) mostly came from



what is now SE Turkey and Syria; those living under the Zoroastrian Persian Empire were from modern Iraq, Iran and the Gulf States, Under the early Sasanians there were intermittent persecutions of Christians, mostly at times of war with the Roman Empire; the most serious of these were under Shapur II in the mid 4th century. By the 6th century Christianity had become a recognized minority religion, and martyrs from that period onwards were almost all Zoroastrian converts to Christianity from noble families.

Periods A-B (2nd-4th cent.) belong to the time of the undivided Church. Arianism was a serious threat in Ephrem's day. As a result of the christological controversies of the 5th century Syriac - speaking Christianity was divided into three ecclesiastical bodies: (1) the Church of the East (almost entirely in the Persian Empire, with a Catholicos Patriarch at Seleucia-Ctesiphon), which followed the strict Antiochene or dyophysite (two-nature) Christology advocated by Theodore of Mopsuestia; (2) those who (along with the Greek and all the Western Churches) accepted the Christological formula of the Council of Chalcedon (451); these in the course of the 7th century emerged as two separate bodies, each under a different Patriarch of Antioch, namely the Melkites and the Maronites; and (3) the Syrian Orthodox, who (along with the Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox) rejected the Council of Chalcedon, and followed the Alexandrine or miaphysite (one-nature) Christology based on the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria. (The terms 'Nestorian' for the first group, and 'Monophysite' (or 'Jacobite') for the third group are seriously misleading, and should be avoided). It should be noted that the 'ecumenical' councils of this period were councils convened by the Roman emperor, and so applied only within the Roman Empire (though they might subsequently be received outside it, as happened with the Council of Nicaea (325) which was offi-

Besides Marcionism, Manichaeism, Buddhism & Jews.

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cially accepted by the Church in the Persian Empire at a synod in 410).

The most important centres for Syriac literature were (in the Roman Empire): Edessa (modern Urfa), Nisibis (until 363), Serugh, Amid (modern Diyarbekir), Mabbug; by the sixth century there were a large number of monasteries in (what is now) North Syria and SE Turkey. In the Persian Empire the main centres were: Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Nisibis (after 363; its School was especially influential in the 6th cent.) Arbela, Karka d-Beit Selokh (modern Kirkuk), Beth Lapt (also called Gundeshapur), Karka d-Ledan, Qatar. In the sixth and seventh centuries many monasteries were founded especially in the Nisibis area and in what is now North Iraq.

Three main formative influences can be identified in periods A-C (2nd-7th cent.): ancient Mesopotamian (which included literature in earlier Aramaic dialects), biblical and Jewish, and Greek. The first two of these influences are most obvious in periods A-B (2nd-4th cent.), while the third becomes more and more dominant as time goes on, reaching a peak in the 7th century. Syriac Christianity is at its most distinctive in the fourth-century writers, and it has its own individual ascetic and proto-monastic tradition, quite independent at this date from the forms of monasticism which were developing in Egypt at the same time. Subsequently, however, the Egyptian monastic tradition, owing to its great prestige, became dominant in the area of Syriac Christianity as well, and the earlier distinctive Syriac ascetic tradition became largely forgotten.

(b) Periods D-F (7th-20th cent.) belong to the time of Islamic domination in the Middle East.

Period D (7th-13th cent.) belongs to the time of the Omayyads (7th-8th century), 'Abbasids (750-c.1100), Seljuks (in Turkey, 11th/12th centuries) and Mongols (from 13th century).



Period E (14th-19th cent.) belongs to the time of (successively) Mongol, Mamluk (along with other local dynasties), and Ottoman rule in Western Asia, and opened with a time of great devastation and destruction through war and then the Black Death. Period F (20th cent.) belongs to the time of the break up of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the modern nation states in West Asia.

By the time of the Arab invasions the ecclesiastical boundaries between the different Christian communities had already become virtually fixed. The Syrian Orthodox and the Church of the East formed the largest of the Syriac Churches. From the 8th century onwards many writers of the Syriac Churches preferred to write in Arabic, rather than Syriac; thus there is very little Melkite and Maronite writing in Syriac after the 8th century, though Syriac remained the liturgical language in these Churches for much longer (in the Melkite Church Syriac was in a few localities used liturgically up to about the 17th century; in the Maronite Church it has continued to the present day, but in recent years is largely being replaced by Arabic). As a result of the widespread adoption of Arabic as a literary language especially in the Melkite and Maronite Churches, most Syriac literature in period D (7th-13th cent.), and all Syriac literature in periods E-F (14th-20th cent) has been produced by writers from the Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Churches (and, in the more recent centuries, their Eastern Rite Catholic counterparts).

Especially in the late eighth and the first half of the ninth century scholars from the various Syriac Churches played an important role in the transmission of Greek philosophy and sciences to the Arab world through their translations and commentaries; best known of these scholars is Hunayn ibn Ishaq, whose normal practice was to translate first from Greek into Syriac, and then from Syriac into Arabic; the reason for this