

## Isaac of Antioch's Homily against the Jews

by

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(continuation)\*

This sermon seems to reflect a situation in which the Jews were proselytising among the members of the Syrian Church in Nisibis. Their success apparently posed a serious threat to the Church. Christians were being convinced by the Jewish arguments on circumcision and were practising it. Ephraem spoke out with great animosity and bitterness against the Jews who were encouraging Christians to follow this practice.<sup>13</sup>

One may adduce further evidence of Christian observance of Jewish religious practice from Ephraem's "Hymns on Unleavened Bread." Ephraem argues that the unleavened bread of Egypt has been replaced by the body of Jesus in the bread of the Church. In giving his life, Jesus brought life to the Christians, whereas the unleavened bread of Egypt brought death to those who ate of it. The unleavened bread was but the "mystery of the son" which has seen its fulfilment in the body of Jesus. It is, therefore, no longer necessary today.

The Church has given us the bread of life  
Instead of the bread which Egypt gave.

(Lamy I, 593:7/8)

Praise the son who gave his body  
In place of that unleavened bread which He gave to the nation.

(Lamy I, 619:18/9)

Therefore, Christians may partake of the bread of the Church only, and not of the unleavened bread of the Jews which was kneaded by hands that killed the son.

My brothers, do not take that unleavened bread  
From the nation that polluted its hands with blood.

(Lamy I, 625:17/8)

... the unleavened bread is unclean  
Which was kneaded by hands which killed the son.

(Lamy I, 625:23/4)

But apparently, Christians did eat the unleavened bread of the Jews, much to the consternation of Ephraem who cries out:

Whoever takes the oblation, takes the elixir of life,  
And whoever eats with the nation, takes the elixir of death.

(Lamy I, 627:7/8)

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\* Cf. OrChr 45 (1961) 30–53, 46 (1962) 87–98.

<sup>13</sup> Beck, op. cit. 73, and especially pp. 118–20, suggests the same conclusion.



Ephraem concludes these hymns by urging his co-religionists to flee and become distant from the source of defilement, the Jews.

Flee and become distant from him who shakes himself<sup>14</sup>.

Why should a sprinkling of blood stain you?

(Lamy I, 627:16/7)

The situation reflected in Ephraem's "Hymns on Unleavened Bread" seems to be one in which Christians were celebrating the Jewish Passover by eating unleavened bread. Whether this was due to Jewish proselytising efforts is not clear from the hymns themselves. But the passion with which Ephraem utters his words, and the anger with which he paints a portrait of the Jew who has killed the son, strongly suggests that this may have been the case.<sup>15</sup>

The extent of the Jewish threat to the Church of Ephraem is discernible in his prose refutations as well. These refutations are generally directed against Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan, with the main attack centered about Mani. Manichaeism was "perhaps the most formidable rival the Church has encountered in the whole course of her history,"<sup>16</sup> and Ephraem's anxiety and concern are certainly understandable. The concluding paragraph of these refutations is all the more revealing for this study.

And just as he who worships idols does not worship wood or stone but the demon, so he who prays with the Manichaean prays with Satan. And he who prays with the Marcionite (?) prays with Legion. And he who (prays) with the follower of Bardaisan (?) (prays) with Beelzebub. And he who (prays) with the Jew (prays) with Barrabas, the robber.<sup>17</sup>

Not a word is mentioned about the Jews throughout these entire refutations, yet Ephraem concludes his discourse with an attack upon the Jews as well. The company in which he places the Jews seems to indicate that Judaism, too, posed a threat to the Syrian Church. The specific context suggests that Christians prayed with Jews, much to the dismay of Ephraem.

If we, then, summarize the evidence of the third of the "Sermons on Faith," the "Hymns on Unleavened Bread," and the prose refutations, we may say that Christianity in Nisibis was being threatened by Jewish proselytism. Christians were practising circumcision, were eating unleavened bread on the Jewish Passover, and were praying with Jews. In an attempt to eliminate those practices, Ephraem raised his voice in bitterness and

<sup>14</sup> Lamy reads *mtnpn* "ecce egreditur". Professor F. Rosenthal, who was kind enough to check the manuscript during his visit to London, informs me that the British Museum add. 14,627 clearly reads *mtnpš*.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Beck, *op. cit.* 120, n. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Mitchell, *op. cit.*, last page of the preface without the source. Harnack, *op. cit.* 147, n. 4, comments, "Manichaeism showed a decidedly anti-Christian and anti-Catholic front from the very first." For an informative chapter on Manichaeism, see A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les sassanides* (Copenhagen 1936) 174–200, and especially pp. 186/7, for a brief discussion of the influence of Christian ideas upon Mani's thinking. Cf. H. Puech, *Le manichéisme* = Bibliothèque de diffusion 56 (Paris 1949) 61–92, on the doctrines of Manichaeism.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, *op. cit.* 184:47–185:13. The question marks are Mitchell's. They indicate uncertain readings in the Syriac text.



hatred against the Jews. Duval<sup>18</sup> is right in calling Ephraem "un polémiste ardent" who labored "à enraciner la foi sans se préoccuper de rendre justice à ses adversaires," and S. Krauss<sup>19</sup> also makes a valid observation in saying that "Ephraem distances all his ecclesiastical predecessors in his hatred of the Jews."

### Christians and Jews in Nisibis

Although we have only legendary sources on the origin of Christianity in Nisibis, it seems probable that it was introduced at the end of the third century through the efforts of missionaries from Edessa. The tradition preserved in the *Acta Maris* relates that Mari turned to Nisibis after the death of Addai, and that he overthrew the idols and built many churches and monasteries there.<sup>20</sup> Although the great school of learning in Nisibis<sup>21</sup> was not founded until 489, Christian schools existed there long before that date. Shortly after Jacob of Nisibis had returned from the Council of Nicaea, he organized a school in Nisibis under the direction of Ephraem Syrus<sup>22</sup> which soon eclipsed the school of Edessa in importance. Ephraem was forced to leave Nisibis not too long after Julian had been defeated by Sapur II in 363. He migrated to Beth-Garbaya, then to Amid, and he finally settled in Edessa where he organized the "Persian School."<sup>23</sup> This newly established academy was actually a transplantation of the school of Nisibis on the soil of Edessa.<sup>24</sup>

At the time of the destruction of the second temple, Nehardea and Nisibis were the two largest centers of Jewish population in Mesopotamia.<sup>25</sup> Funds collected for temple tribute were gathered in these two places from which they were conveyed to Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> For a special favor granted King Artaban, the Parthian, the city of Nisibis was added to the dominion of King Izates of Adiabens<sup>27</sup> who, together with his mother, Queen Helena, had embraced Judaism before the middle of the first century.<sup>28</sup> The royal

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit. 330.

<sup>19</sup> *Church Fathers* = Jewish Encyclopaedia IV, 80/1.

<sup>20</sup> Labourt, op. cit. 12.

<sup>21</sup> See J. B. Chabot, *L'École de Nisibe, son histoire, ses statuts* = *Journal Asiatique* IX.8 (1896) 43-93, and G. F. Moore, *The Theological School at Nisibis* = *Studies in the History of Religions* presented to C. H. Toy (New York 1912) 255-67.

<sup>22</sup> Hayes, op. cit. 124 mentions this on the authority of Barḥaḏbšabbā.

<sup>23</sup> E. Honigmann, *Orfa* = *Encyclopaedia of Islam* III, 995. On the school of Edessa, see Hayes, *ibid.*, *passim*, and especially pp. 124/5; 144ff.

<sup>24</sup> Hayes, *ibid.* 124.

<sup>25</sup> H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart* (Leipzig 1888) III.1 p. 144, and E. Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, transl. John Macpherson (New York 1891) 224.

<sup>26</sup> Schürer, *ibid.* 290.

<sup>27</sup> R. Gottheil, *Adiabene* = *Jewish Encyclopaedia* I, 191.

<sup>28</sup> See H. Graetz, *Zeit der Anwesenheit der adiabenenischen Königin in Jerusalem und der Apostel Paulus* = *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 26 (1877) 241-55, and especially pp. 250 and 255, for the dates of Helena's visit to Jerusalem and the approximate date of the conversion of the Kingdom of Adiabene to Judaism.



houses of Adiabene and of Edessa were connected through marriage, Abgar VII being the son of Izates.<sup>29</sup> An inscription discovered in the tomb of Queen Helena near Jerusalem led Duval<sup>30</sup> to the conclusion "that the language spoken in Edessa was familiar to the Adiabeneans," but it is doubtful whether this inscription is actually written in Syriac as Duval suggested.<sup>31</sup>

Nisibis was also an important center of Jewish learning. According to the Talmud,<sup>32</sup> R. Judah ben Bathyra migrated to Nisibis during the first century where he established an academy of learning.<sup>33</sup> This academy was still flourishing in the third century when R. Simlai (219–279)<sup>34</sup> lectured there. It is most probable that the academy was still in existence in the first half of the fourth century when Ephraem Syrus lived in Nisibis.

Nisibis was an important Christian and Jewish center during the time of Ephraem Syrus. While there is no direct evidence to indicate that the Jews proselytised among the Christians, the historical situation makes this a possibility, and the bitterness and vindictiveness with which Ephraem wrote of the Jews, makes this a strong probability. I cannot agree with S. Krauss<sup>35</sup> that Ephraem's writings against the Jews are motivated by theological prejudice alone. Whether Ephraem personally came into contact with Jews, or as Krauss maintains, did not, I do not know, but the point, in itself, is irrelevant. Jacob of Sarug<sup>36</sup> certainly was not in personal contact with the Hımyarite Christians and their Jewish persecutors. Nevertheless, his letter of consolation is concerned with a concrete historical situation. The question is whether Christians and Jews came into contact with one another at Nisibis in the fourth century. The strong likelihood is that they did.

<sup>29</sup> R. Duval, *Histoire politique, religieuse et littéraire d'Édesse jusqu'à la première croisade* = *Journal Asiatique* VIII.18 (1891), 113 and 206.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 114.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. F. Rosenthal, *Die aramaistische Forschung* (Leiden 1939) 196, and A. Maricq, *Les plus anciennes inscriptions syriaques* = *Syria* 34 (1957) 303.

<sup>32</sup> *Sanhedrin* 32b. For other rabbinic references to Nisibis, see A. Berliner, *Beiträge zur Geographie und Ethnographie Babylonien im Talmud und Midrasch* (Berlin 1882/3) 53/4, and J. Hamburger, *Real-Encyclopaedie für Bibel und Talmud* (Strelitz 1884) I, 134–44. On the connection between the Jewish academy in Nisibis and the royal house of Adiabene, see Segal, *op. cit.* 123 and 130.

<sup>33</sup> Berliner, *ibid.* 51. H. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Philadelphia 1945) 114, lists him among the younger group of the second generation of Tannaim (90–130). Also J. Heilprin, *Sēper sēder had-dōrōt* (Jerusalem 1956) II, 359, A. Hyman, *Sēper tōlōdōt tannā'im w-'amorā'im* (London 1910) II, 555/7. On the existence of a second Judah ben Bathyra, a contemporary of R. Aqiba (ca. 135), and possibly even a third, see S. Krauss, *Bathyra* = *Jewish Encyclopaedia* II, 598.

<sup>34</sup> He is listed among the second generation of Palestinian Amoraim by Strack, *ibid.* 123. Cf. Heilprin, *ibid.* 359, and Hyman, *ibid.* III, 1150/2. For Talmudic references, see 'Aboda Zara 36a, and cf. Jerusalem Talmud 'Aboda Zara, Chap. II, 41d.

<sup>35</sup> *The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers* = *Jewish Quarterly Review* 6 (1894) 89.

<sup>36</sup> *Infra.*



## Chapter III

## Isaac of Antioch

In a letter<sup>1</sup> to John the Stylite, Jacob of Edessa repeats a tradition which knows of three Isaacs, Isaac of Amid, Isaac of Antioch and Isaac of Edessa. Following the precedent established by Assemani,<sup>2</sup> it has become customary to refer to Isaac of Amid, the Isaac with whom we are concerned, as Isaac of Antioch. He was a disciple of Zenobius who was, in turn, a direct disciple of Ephraem Syrus.<sup>3</sup> According to Ps. Zacharius of Mytilene in Lesbos,<sup>4</sup> Isaac of Antioch visited Rome in 404, the year of the jubilee games. The date of his death is unknown, although it must have been after 459, since, according to Gennadius,<sup>5</sup> the earthquake at Antioch in that year was the subject of one of his poems. His works have been published by G. Bickell<sup>6</sup> in two volumes, and by P. Bedjan.<sup>7</sup> "De Magis"<sup>8</sup> and "De Fine,"<sup>9</sup> erroneously attributed by Lamy to Ephraem Syrus,<sup>10</sup> also come from the pen of Isaac of Antioch. C. Moss<sup>10</sup> has published "Isaac of Antioch, Homily on the Royal City."

## The Jews in the Writings of Isaac of Antioch

In "Homily Two against the Jews," Isaac of Antioch speaks out against the Jewish law. When the Jew argues that if the law is unnecessary then why was it ordained, Isaac answers that the law was given to prevent Israel's flight from the Lord.

And I answered and said to him  
Against the perversity of his saying:  
"That it should be a fetter for your servitude,  
(Similar to) that which you served in Egypt."

.....  
Then I clarified my words and said to him:  
"I am not the cause of your rebuke."

<sup>1</sup> British Museum add. 12,172, fol. 123. Published by P. Martin, *Grammatica, chrestomathia et glossarium linguae Syriacae* (Paris 1874) 69, Lamy, op. cit. IV, 362/3, and Bedjan, *Homiliae S. Isaaci Syri Antiocheni*, IV-V.

<sup>2</sup> *Bibliotheca Orientalis* I, 207, where he is also called Isaac the Great.

<sup>3</sup> Assemani, loc. cit., Baumstark, op. cit. 63, and Bedjan, op. cit. III.

<sup>4</sup> Baumstark, loc. cit., n. 4, and Bedjan, loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Baumstark, loc. cit., Bedjan, loc. cit., Baumstark, loc. cit., n. 8, following Gennadius, sets the date of his death before 461.

<sup>6</sup> *S. Isaaci Antiocheni doctoris Syrorum, opera omnia* (Gießen 1873/7).

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. II, 393-426. This work is ascribed to Isaac by F. C. Burkitt, *S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospels* = Texts and Studies, Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature, vol. VII, no. 2, Cambridge 1901), 80/4, S. Krauss, *Antioche* = Revue des études juives 45 (1902) 44, M. Simon, *Polémique anti-juive de S. Jean Chrysostome et le mouvement judaïsant d'Antioche* = Annuaire de l'institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales et slaves 4 (1936) 407.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. III, 132-86. Cf. Burkitt, loc. cit.

<sup>10</sup> *Zeitschrift für Semitistik* 7 (1929) 295-306; 8 (1930) 61-72.



Is it not after you turned astray  
 From the Lord after the calf,  
 (That) there came down for you from Mount Sinai  
 A chain for your bonds,  
 A heavy yoke which was cast  
 As if upon your rebellious neck.  
 And a bond and a shackle it was to you,  
 That you would not leave your Lord.

(OrChr. 45 [1961] 35)

But the burden of Isaac's homily is directed more specifically against the practise of circumcision rather than the law in general.

Circumcision, you fool, was (but) a seal.  
 It protected the treasury of your father.  
 Now that (its) riches have come forth,  
 Of what use is the seal to you?  
 Abraham was stamped like a vessel,  
 Because of the treasure that was in him.  
 And the seal continued in your generations,  
 Because the treasure was in you until now.  
 But you, O Jews,  
 Have been sent from his treasury.  
 And when the riches within them went forth,  
 Because of which they were sealed,  
 They remained open in a ruined state and were made  
 A latrine like you are.

(loc. cit. 43f.)

O nation, you were the guardians  
 Of the riches which were preserved for the nations.  
 You want to continue circumcising; you will not give peace.  
 Would that each of you would cut all the way.

(loc. cit. 46)

That strength has gone forth from you,  
 O nation, and your might has left you.  
 And behold you are rolling on the ground  
 With your ancient circumcision.

(loc. cit. 47)

Isaac speaks with great anger and animosity in language and tone strongly reminiscent of the polemic of Ephraem Syrus.<sup>11</sup> Both writers, it may be suggested, are motivated by the same circumstance, Jewish proselytising. The Jewish effort apparently met with success, and Isaac found it necessary to somehow combat and counteract this tendency towards Christian observance of Jewish ritual practice. This polemic against the Jews was his answer.

Not only did Christians practice circumcision, they also celebrated Jewish holidays and festivals. This is especially evident in "De Magis."

Whoever eats with the magicians,  
 Does not eat the body of our lord.  
 And whoever drinks with the charmers,  
 Does not drink the blood of the Messiah.  
 These three, bloated with blood, will be (assigned) to the fire.

<sup>11</sup> Supra, pp. OrChr 46 (1962) 96/8; 47 (1963) 89f.



And whoever mingles with them,  
Will inherit Gehenna with them,  
The Jews and the magicians  
Together with Satan, their leader.

(Lamy II, 399:17-23)

The phrase "to eat with the Jews" occurs once more in "De Magis,"<sup>12</sup> and twice in "De Fine."<sup>13</sup> Nowhere is the nature of this offense clearly explained. However, the first passage in "De Fine" offers a possible explanation of this malpractice.

I considered again what is the judgement  
Of him who eats the sacrifice of a pagan?  
And into which accusation does he enter,  
Who eats with the Jews?

(Lamy III, 137:2/4)

Apparently, "to eat with the Jews" means to participate in some Jewish religious observance, just as to eat "the sacrifice of a pagan" seems to imply participation in a pagan cult. Burkitt<sup>14</sup> has suggested that all these references to "eating with the Jews" allude to Christian participation in the Jewish festivals and holidays.

In Isaac's eyes, perhaps the greatest danger facing the Church was the trust which the masses placed in the efficacy of amulets and charms obtained from charmers and magicians. To Isaac, these amulets were symbolic representation of Satan himself. However, many Christians saw nothing inconsistent in going to church one day and to the house of the magician on the next day.

Today they come for baptism,  
And they clothe themselves in the holy spirit.  
And on the morrow they go to the magical ablutions,  
And they undress and are naked.

.....

The masses come to the Church,  
And they are led by Satan.  
And he is (proudly) carried upon their necks  
Like a royal necklace.

This one (wears him) upon his neck.  
And an innocent child

Comes wearing the names of demons.

(Lamy II, 395:11/3; 15-20)

Not only are the masses guilty of this practice, the members of the clergy also engage in this activity, and actively encourage their flock to go to magicians and diviners.

The gates of the Church are open,  
And no one comes to pray.  
For the shepherds with (their) flock  
Run to the gate of the magicians.

<sup>12</sup> Lamy II, 411:25f.); cf. *infra*, p. 96f.

<sup>13</sup> Lamy III, 137:4; 165:1-2. Cf. *infra*.

<sup>14</sup> *S. Ephraim's Prose Quotations* 81f.



The first of the priests of the Church  
Send them to the magicians.

(Lamy II, 397:12/6)

Isaac of Antioch asks with bitterness:

And if the priests have abandoned his way,<sup>15</sup>  
Who will proceed uprightly?

(Lamy II, 402:5/6)

Who are these charmers, diviners, and magicians of whom Isaac speaks? Examination of the text of "De Magis" reveals that some of them, at least, are Jews.<sup>16</sup> The charms which Isaac points to are Jewish amulets, and the magicians he refers to by name may be identified with those mentioned in Jewish tradition.

Whoever hangs the note  
Of profane spirits around his neck,  
Stands there wearing  
That which will be his accusation.  
Whoever takes the ablution in the springs  
And fountains after being baptized,  
We place him among the pagans,  
And he is no different from the Jews.  
Whoever with the blood of his body  
Writes a yōd<sup>17</sup> and marks it in a book,  
Stands with Jannes and Mambres<sup>18</sup>  
Magicians of renown.  
Whoever eats and drinks  
And mingles with the Jews,  
Enters thither into the accusation  
That he is the comrade of the crucifier.

(Lamy II, 411:18-27)

In his "Carmen Invectivum et Adhortatorium,"<sup>19</sup> Isaac inveighs against the practice of circumcision, the Sabbath, and the wearing of amulets obtained from Jewish magicians.<sup>20</sup> The amulets he mentions are the

<sup>15</sup> The way of Jesus.

<sup>16</sup> On the powers of magic attributed to the Jews in antiquity, cf. Juster, op. cit. II, 209/10, and M. Simon, *Verus Israel: Étude sur les relations entre chrétiens et juifs dans l'empire romain* (135-425) = Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, vol. 166 (Paris 1948) 394-431; in the middle ages, cf. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York 1939); and in the Muslim World even today in such places as Yemen, cf. S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs* (New York 1955) 190f.

<sup>17</sup> This probably means that whoever writes even a yōd, the smallest letter of the alphabet, is guilty of an evil practice. It may also be a reference to the first letter of the Tetragrammaton.

<sup>18</sup> Two Egyptian magicians mentioned in the rabbinic tradition concerning Moses. See K. Kohler, *Jannes and Jambres* = Jewish Encyclopaedia VII, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Bickell, op. cit. II, 162-203.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 186-98.



Jewish mezuzah and phylacteries. Isaac insists that these two objects were ordained to remind Israel of the divine commandments; they are completely devoid of magical power.

The blind nation of the Hebrews  
Was commanded by God  
To tie a sign upon its hand,  
And to make a mark between its eyes.  
Israel, then, went astray,  
And was gathered in from its straying.  
And the exhortations were appropriate  
To bring it into conformity with the law.  
Even upon the door post and upon the gate  
It was commanded to make a remembrance  
Of the divine commandments  
Which it received from Mount Sinai.

(Bickell II, 190:608-19)

Isaac's writings strongly suggest that Jews were successfully proselytising among the members of the Syriac-speaking Church. Christians were practicing circumcision, were celebrating Jewish festivals and holidays, and were frequenting the house of the Jewish magician for amulets they believed to possess magical powers.

(to be continued)