

## Isaac of Antioch's Homily against the Jews

by

Stanley Kazan

(continuation)\*

Christians and Jews at Antioch  
in the Late Fourth and Early Fifth Centuries

The very same situation is reflected in the "Eight Discourses against the Jews,"<sup>21</sup> delivered by John Chrysostom at Antioch in 386.

"Many," he says in the first discourse, "of those enrolled in our ranks and professing to share our beliefs betake themselves to the Synagogue; some, no doubt, merely to look at the festivals, but others actually feast with the Jews and join in their fasts. This evil custom I intend now to banish from the Church (PG 48,844)." "I fear," he says again, "lest some out of ignorance partake of their transgression (ibid. 849)."

S. Chrysostom goes on to attack the custom of wearing charms and amulets...

These amulets seem to have been much used by the Antiocheans and S. Chrysostom had gone as far as to say that the man who fell a victim to disease through refusing to carry such things about him ought to be counted as a Christian martyr.<sup>22</sup>

Some interesting literary points of similarity between Isaac of Antioch and scholars of the Jewish tradition are provided by a number of passages in Isaac which closely resemble passages found in rabbinic literature.

The negative golden rule receives the following formulation in Isaac:<sup>23</sup>

bṗāsīqātā ilepnāh  
daydā lam da'layk sanyā

lagmīrūtā dnāmōsā  
lḥabrāk laḡmār lā ṭe'beḏ

In brief we have learned  
The teaching of the law.  
What is hateful to you,  
Do not do unto your neighbor at all.

In 'Ābōt drabbī Nātān,<sup>24</sup> the negative golden rule is cited in the name of Rabbi Aqiba, mā d'att sānē lḡarmāk lḥabrāk lā ṭa'abīd. In B. Shabbath 31a, this same rule is attributed to Hillel.

Pirqē 'ābōt<sup>25</sup> 5:26 reads: "Ben He He says: 'According to the pain-staking, the reward'," (lṗum ṣa'arā 'agrā). In 'Ābōt drabbī Nātān,<sup>26</sup> the

\* Cf. OrChr 45 (1961) 30-53, 46 (1962) 87-98, 47 (1963) 89-97.

<sup>21</sup> PG 48, 844-942, quoted from Burkitt, op. cit. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Burkitt, ibid. 82.

<sup>23</sup> Bickell, op. cit. II, 194: 688-91.

<sup>24</sup> Ed. S. Schechter (New York 1945), vers. B, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> Text, J. H. Hertz, *Daily Prayer Book* (New York 1948) 702; translation, J. Goldin, *The Living Talmud* = Mentor Religious Classic (New York 1957) 224.

<sup>26</sup> Vers. A, p. 55.



statement appears in the name of Hillel. S. Lieberman<sup>27</sup> points out that this statement is found word for word in Samaritan sources. He concludes that "the saying attributed to the mysterious ben He—He was a popular adage current in Palestine, and various sages were credited with it." Apparently, this popular saying was known in Christian circles at Antioch in the fifth century, since it is found in Isaac,<sup>28</sup> *dkulnāš ak 'amleh aḡreh*.

A third parallel is worth mentioning. *Pirqē 'ābōt* 1:13 reads:

nḡaḏ šmā 'aḡaḏ šmā  
wḏilā mōsipī yāsep  
wḏilā yālep qṭālā ḡayyāb  
wḏi-ištammasḡ bṭāḡā ḡaḡaḡ

"A name made great is a name destroyed; he that does not increase shall cease; he that does not learn deserves to die; and he that puts the crown to his own use shall perish."<sup>29</sup>

The passage in *Pirqē 'ābōt* is mentioned in the name of Hillel. It is usually interpreted as referring to the study of torah. However, a political interpretation is suggested by the comment in *'Ābōt drabbī Nātān*,<sup>30</sup> "A name made great is a name destroyed: This teaches that one's name should not come to the attention of the Ruling Power. For once a man's name comes to the attention of the Ruling Power, the end is that it casts its eye upon him, slays him, and confiscates his wealth."

In Isaac of Antioch<sup>31</sup> we find a passage very similar to the one found in rabbinic literature. However, the interpretation of this passage is not clear from the context.

kul aynā ḡrāḡem tāḡā  
wkul aynā ḡḡa'ē klilā

hūyū m'ir taktūšā  
hūyū mqayyem aḡōnā

He who loves the crown,  
Stirs up controversy.  
And he who desires the diadem,  
Raises strife.

It is not suggested that these three literary parallels between Isaac and the rabbinic tradition necessarily indicate interdependence. However, the fact that the three aforementioned rabbinic passages for which we find parallel passages in Isaac are somehow connected with the name of Hillel, may be more than mere coincidence. Certainly, the impression is strengthened that these sayings attributed to various Jewish scholars in the

<sup>27</sup> *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York 1942) 160 n. 113.

<sup>28</sup> Lamy II, 426:2.

<sup>29</sup> Goldin, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> Vers. A, p. 56; translation Goldin, loc. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Bedjan, *Homiliae S. Isaaci*..., 303:6/7.



Mishnah and Talmud were popular sayings known to Christians and Jews alike.

The fourth century witnessed the triumph of Christianity through the conversion of Constantine. Pagans *en masse* turned to Christianity, the newly established religion of the Roman Empire. The faith of these "half-Christians"<sup>32</sup> waned in times such as those provided by the brief, though significant, reign of Julian the Apostate,<sup>33</sup> and they became a source from which the Jews actively sought proselytes. The partiality which Julian had shown the Jews, as opposed to his open hostility towards Christianity, made Judaism appear particularly attractive to the "half-Christians" especially in an age of religious syncretism such as the fourth century produced. This strong syncretistic movement found its most unique expression in Christianity in the veneration of the seven Maccabean brothers and their mother.<sup>34</sup> These martyrs, not to be confused with the heroes of the war of liberation in the second pre-Christian century, had long been venerated by the Jews at the site of a synagogue in Antioch. This synagogue was taken over and converted into a Christian shrine, and, henceforth, these same Maccabean brothers and mother were venerated by Christians as part of the Christian cult. The necessity to adopt this cult and to practice it at precisely the same place where Jews had previously practiced it, indicates the strength of the Jewish proselytising movement. M. Simon<sup>35</sup> suggests that when Chrysostom, in his eighth discourse against the Jews, says, "When God tests you through illness, do not go to the house of His enemies, the Jews, but rather to the house of the martyrs, his friends. . .," he means do not go to the synagogue, but rather to the shrine of the Maccabean martyrs who can cure you. It is against this historical background that we must understand the discourses of Chrysostom and the writings of Isaac of Antioch against the Jews.

<sup>32</sup> For more about these "half-Christians", see Ch. Guignebert, *Les demi-chrétiens et leur place dans l'église antique* = *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 88 (1923) 65-102.

<sup>33</sup> On Julian's attempts to turn the Christians towards paganism, see A. Pignaniol, *L'empire chrétien* (325-395) (Paris 1947) 130/1; 137/8. On Julian and the Jews, see *OrChr* 46 (1962) 96 n. 10.

<sup>34</sup> On this cult, see Cardinal Rampolla, *Martyre et sépulture des Machabées* = *Revue de l'art chrétien*, V. 10 (1899) 290-305; 377-92; 457-65. M. Maas, *Die Maccabäer als christliche Heilige* = *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 44 (1900) 145-56. J. Obermann, *The Sepulchre of the Maccabean Martyrs* = *Journal of Biblical Literature* 50 (1931) 250-65. J. Gutman, *The Mother and her Seven Sons in the Agadah and in the Books of Maccabees II and IV* (Hebrew) = *Sēpēr Yōhānān Lēwī* (Commentationes Judaico-Hellenisticae in memoriam Johannis Lewy) (Jerusalem 1949) 25-37.

<sup>35</sup> *Annuaire* . . . 418/9. For a more detailed analysis of this "Judaizing" movement which I have summarized briefly, see Simon, *ibid.* 403-21, and Baron, *op. cit.*, II, 401, n. 22. On "Judaizing" in the Church in general, see Simon, *Verus Israel* . . . 356-93.



L. Lucas<sup>36</sup> believes that the synagogue served as the center from which the Jews, who traced their settlement back to the time of Seleucus I Nicator,<sup>37</sup> proselytised for converts among the Christian population. The drama of the synagogue service when the Jews turned in prayer towards Jerusalem,<sup>38</sup> and the fascination of the Jewish law<sup>39</sup> captured the imagination of the Christian masses. But perhaps the single most significant factor in drawing the Christians to the synagogue was the reputation which the rabbis enjoyed as diviners and healers.<sup>40</sup>

In short, the writings of Isaac of Antioch against the Jews argue for the existence of a strong Jewish proselytising movement. The discourses of John Chrysostom suggest the same conclusion. And, an examination of the historical situation strengthens the assumption that Jews were proselytising among Christians at Antioch in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

## Chapter IV

### Jacob of Sarug

Jacob of Sarug (d. 521), "the flute of the holy spirit and the harp of the believing Church"<sup>1</sup>, was one of the most illustrious and learned writers of the Syriac-speaking Church. His works have been published in five volumes by P. Bedjan<sup>2</sup>. He wrote seven homilies against the Jews in about the year 500<sup>3</sup> which are preserved in a Vatican Syriac manuscript<sup>4</sup>. However, the seventh homily is incomplete. A manuscript which contains the first five homilies is found in the British Museum manuscript collection<sup>5</sup>. However, homily two is incomplete containing only the beginning and the very end, while homily five is missing more than two columns at the end. Homily one is also preserved in another British Museum manuscript<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> *Zur Geschichte der Juden im 4. Jh.* = Beiträge zur Geschichte der Juden 1 (Berlin 1910) 68.

<sup>37</sup> On the Jewish community of Antioch, see Krauss, *Antioche* = Revue des études juives 45 (1902) 27-49, C. Kraeling, *The Jewish Community at Antioch* = Journal of Biblical Literature 51 (1932) 130-60, G. Haddad, *Aspects of Social Life in Antioch* (Chicago 1949) 59-67.

<sup>38</sup> Lucas, loc. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. OrChr 47 (1963) 96 n. 16.

<sup>1</sup> From an anonymous biography published by Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* I, 286.

<sup>2</sup> *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris 1905-10).

<sup>3</sup> Fol. 347b col. B, lines 8-9, cf. *infra*, summary of Homily IV.

<sup>4</sup> Vatican Syriac manuscript 117, fols. 339b-350b, Assemani, *op. cit.*, no. 127, pp. 321/2.

<sup>5</sup> British Museum add. 17, 161, fols. 31b-43b, Wright, *A Catalogue* ..., II, no. 637, p. 506.

<sup>6</sup> British Museum add. 14,608, fols. 98a-107b, Wright, *ibid.*, no. 760, p. 723.



Baumstark<sup>7</sup> makes no mention of this manuscript in his history of Syriac literature. The Jacobite Monastery of St. Mark has a manuscript containing homily five in its collection<sup>8</sup>. Homily six is preserved in a manuscript in the National Library in Paris<sup>9</sup>. P. Martin<sup>10</sup> has summarized this homily from the Paris manuscript, and has quoted from it. I. K. Cosgrove<sup>11</sup> has edited homilies one, three, and four using all the known manuscripts, and he has provided a critical apparatus. He has also translated these homilies into English with notes. It was through this work that I learned of the manuscript of homily one which Baumstark had overlooked. Cosgrove has summarized the main points of discussion in these three homilies. He has traced these points through the writings of the Greek and Latin Church Fathers, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian, Novatian, and Origen, and through the writings of the Syriac Church Fathers, Aphraates and Ephraem Syrus. He has also shown how the early Jewish scholars of the Talmudic period refuted these arguments. In the following pages, the main points of all seven homilies have been summarized<sup>12</sup>.

### The Writings of Jacob of Sarug against the Jews

In Homily I, "On the Trinity and the Incarnation", fols. 339 b col. B, l. 36–341 b col. A, l. 39, Jacob of Sarug argues that both Scripture and nature bear witness to the trinity. He maintains that Genesis 1:26, 9:7, Daniel 4:28, and Isaiah 6:3 allude to the trinity, and that natural phenomena such as the sun which manifests itself as sun, light, and heat, and fire which manifests itself as fire, light, and heat, typify the three persons of the Godhead<sup>13</sup>. As proof of the incarnation, Jacob of Sarug draws a parallel between the lives of Moses and Jesus and, then, a second parallel between the lives of Jacob and Jesus. He concludes that the Jews wait

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.* 152, no. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Baumstark, *loc. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Syriac manuscript 196, fols. 203–205, H. Zotenberg, *Manuscrits orientaux: Catalogue des manuscrits syriaques et sabéenes (mandaites) de la bibliothèque nationale* (Paris 1874), no. 46, p. 142.

<sup>10</sup> *Un évêque poète au V<sup>e</sup> et au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle ou Jacques de Saroug, sa vie, son temps, ses œuvres, ses croyances = Revue des sciences ecclésiastiques* 34 (1876) 329.

<sup>11</sup> *Three Homilies against the Jews by Jacob of Sarug* (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of London, 1931). I am exceedingly grateful to the author and to the Goldsmith Library of the University of London for making available to me a microfilm of this valuable work. It is regrettable, that, to the best of my knowledge, no part of this work has ever been published.

<sup>12</sup> I have confined all my references to the Vatican Syriac manuscript 117.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dionysius bar Šalibhi, *infra*. For an identical analogy drawn between the Godhead and the sun in English literature of the Renaissance period, cf. C. A. Patrides, *Cosmic Order during the English Renaissance* — *Isis* 49 (1958) 392.



in vain for the coming of the Messiah because the prophecy has already been fulfilled with the advent of Jesus who "bound and sealed prophecy" (fol. 341a col. B, lines 40-51).

In Homily II, "On Circumcision", fols. 341b col. B, l. 1-343a col. A, l. 23, Jacob of Sarug argues that the Jews "are proud of circumcision as of a crown of choice gold" (fol. 341b col. B, lines 28-29) because they do not understand that faith, righteousness, and the circumcised heart are close to God. Melchizedek was not circumcised, yet he was a high priest, more important even than Abraham who brought him tithes (fol. 341b col. B, l. 35 ff.). Circumcision was not given to the first generations, the first twenty generations being uncircumcised, nor is it necessary for the latter generations, from the time of the death of Jesus. It was only given to the middle generations (fol. 342a col. B, l. 5 ff.) in order to separate them from idolatry which had filled the earth (fol. 342a col. B, l. 27 ff.). God placed a seal upon Abraham "so that the pure one would not become mingled with the unclean" (fol. 342a col. C, lines 19-20). Now that the Messiah has come, circumcision is no longer necessary.

In Homily III, "On the Sabbath", fols. 343a col. A, l. 24-345a col. A, l. 18, Jacob of Sarug opens by saying that the Jews interpret literally Genesis 2:2, "And He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done", when it should be understood symbolically. Since God created the world by the word alone, uttering six words in six days, He performed no tiring acts which necessitated any rest. Therefore, the verse must be interpreted symbolically as referring to Jesus who rested from his suffering on the cross (fol. 343a cols. A, B). Jacob of Sarug, then, passes on to his second argument which constitutes the burden of this homily. At the time of Moses, the earth was filled with paganism. Therefore, God brought down the law from Sinai to teach Israel that there is a creator, and that no man should stray after idols to serve them (fol. 343b col. A). The purpose of the Sabbath was purely didactic, to remind Israel of the one God. Abraham as well as the other ancients did not observe the Sabbath because they were righteous men (fol. 344a cols. A, C), and the law was unnecessary for them. Jesus came and abolished idolatry from the earth and brought the nations to the God of Abraham. Therefore, the law is unnecessary today. Jews have only to accept Jesus as the son of God.

Homily IV, "On the Advent of the Messiah", fols. 345a col. A, l. 19-346b col. C. l. 24, opens with an argument advanced by the Jews. If God has a son, why did He not reveal him to the early generations (fol. 345a col. A)? Jacob of Sarug replies that God kept His son until the earth was completely filled with idolatry, then He revealed him that he might sweep idolatry from the face of the earth. Furthermore, the Jewish argument has no substance because God revealed the seven Noachian laws to Noah and not to Adam, circumcision to Abraham and not to Adam and Noah, and the law to Moses and not to his predecessors, and still the



Jews accept all these as binding (fol. 345a col. A). God made five covenants with mankind, the covenant of the forbidden fruit with Adam, the covenant of the seven Noachian laws with Noah, the covenant of circumcision with Abraham, the covenant of the law with Moses, and the last and most important covenant with Jesus (fol. 345a col. A). As a teacher (?)<sup>14</sup> instructs a child in stages, progressing from the simple to the more difficult, so did God progressively reveal His truth to mankind beginning with the covenant with Adam and culminating with the covenant with Jesus (fol. 345b col. C). Jacob of Sarug argues that the world has been worshipping Jesus, the son, for five hundred years, and still the Jews refuse to acknowledge him despite the fact that Scripture plainly reveals his coming and despite the fact that the magnitude of his accomplishments is plainly evident to all. He concludes by calling upon the Jews to accept Jesus as the son of God.

Homily V, "On the Advent and Passion of Christ"<sup>15</sup>, fols. 346b col. C, l. 25–348b col. B, l. 29, might better be called "On God's Rejection of the Jews". Jacob of Sarug argues that the Jews have been rejected by God and scattered throughout the earth because they shed the innocent blood of the Messiah. Jerusalem, beautifully portrayed in her former glory, now lies desolate because of the crucifixion, and the spirit of prophecy has been taken from Israel because of her refusal to accept Jesus. Jacob of Sarug argues with force and clarity that the Jews should realize this and accept Jesus as the son of God.

Homily VI, "The Debate between the Church and the Synagogue", fols. 348b col. B, l. 30–350b col. A, l. 17, deals with the question of whether the Jews or the Christians are God's chosen people. The Synagogue argues that God performed wonders for the children of Israel in their antiquity, thereby, showing that they are the chosen ones. The Church agrees that God did perform these wonders and even concedes that it was idolatrous in its antiquity (fol. 349a col. A), but insists that the Messiah has freed it from idolatry through the cross and has raised it to the position of pre-eminence. The Synagogue continues by arguing that it stems from illustrious ancestors (fol. 349a col. B) and is, therefore, worthy because of the merit of its forefathers. The Church admits that Israel's ancestors were great and even concedes that its own ancestors were evil, but insists that through the coming of Jesus the Church has become worthy and has succeeded Israel. The Synagogue proceeds to advance its third and last argument, that God made a covenant with Abraham (fol. 349b col. B, l. 40), and since His word cannot be revoked, Israel is God's chosen people. The Church replies that the promise to Abraham was fulfilled in the conquest of Canaan by Joshua (fol. 350a col. B, l. 11 ff.), and, furthermore, that God's promise to Abraham was

<sup>14</sup> The writing is blurred on my photostat. Cf. Dionysius bar Šalibhi, *infra*.

<sup>15</sup> This is the title given in Assemani, *op. cit.* 322.



that He would make him "the father of many nations" (Genesis 17:4-5), not one nation as the Jews claim (fol. 350a col. C, lines 8-9)<sup>16</sup>.

Homily VII, fols. 350b col. A, l. 18-col. C, is incomplete. It begins "if the nation would read clearly from Scripture, it would learn concerning the son of God". Jacob of Sarug contends that the Jews do not understand Scripture because they interpret it literally rather than symbolically. God does not need animal sacrifices and libations, nor does He desire them. He demands that man fulfil the law of righteousness. The blood of the sacrifices was a symbol of the blood of the crucifixion through which Jesus redeemed the world. Now that the Messiah has come, the law of sacrifices has been uprooted, and God has scattered Israel throughout the nations so that Jews would no longer be able to bring animal sacrifices in Jerusalem.

From the contents of these seven homilies against the Jews it is difficult to establish the historical situation that may have occasioned their composition. The tone of Jacob of Sarug seems restrained. He appears to be a thoroughly convinced Christian who cannot understand why the Jews refuse to accept the divinity of Jesus. He argues with the Jews attempting to convince them that they misinterpret and misunderstand Scripture, the phenomena of nature, and the facts of history which all clearly point to the one conclusion, that Jesus, the Messiah, is the son of God<sup>17</sup>. Perhaps the refusal of the Jews to convert to Christianity despite Christian missionary efforts may have occasioned these writings, but there is no evidence in these homilies to suggest either this conclusion or the conclusion that they are an answer to Jewish proselytising attempts.

The contents and tone of these homilies do suggest, however, that in Jacob's own country, Christianity was not being seriously threatened by Jews and Judaism. For when there arose a conflict between Christians and Jews in a remote outpost of the Near East, Jacob of Sarug reacted violently. He was no longer, in the words of P. Martin, "of a sweet, sympathetic, kindly disposition"<sup>18</sup>.

In his "Letter of Consolation to the Ḥimyarite Christians"<sup>19</sup>, we hear Jacob of Sarug speaking with bitter animosity against the Jews.

<sup>16</sup> Aphraates offers the very same argument, Wright, *Aphraates*... 202, sec. I. Cf. Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi, *infra*.

<sup>17</sup> In Jacob's "Poem to the Virgin Mary", published by J. B. Abbeloos, *De Vita et Scriptis S. Jacobi, Batanarum Sarugi in Mesopotamia Episcopi* (Louvain 1867) 262, l. 57, he speaks of the Jews who blaspheme the child of Mary by claiming "that he is not of the father".

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.* 340.

<sup>19</sup> R. Schröter, *Trostschreiben Jacobs von Sarug an die himyaritischen Christen* = ZDMG 31 (1877) 360-405. This letter is also important as a literary document, since it represents one of the few examples of Jacob's prose writings that have survived. On the authenticity of this letter, see Schröter, *loc. cit.*, R. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London 1926) 36, H. Z. Hirsch-



If you were being persecuted by the pagans, there would be a pause to your pains and a surcease to your suffering. Now that the Jews, the enemies of the cross, are arraying (themselves) against you, your pains are greater than (ordinary) pains, and your crown more triumphant than (the ordinary) crown. This murderous nation stirred up a quarrel against you. This (nation) is trained in killing and instructed in bloodshed; and is rich in envy, and its heart is filled with deceit; and is wise in persecuting, and knows how to crucify; and is prepared to kill, and ready to stone; and sets ambushes for the innocent, and its dagger is sharpened for the necks of the good; and its sword is drunk with the blood of the pure, and its blade is drawn against the back of the believers<sup>20</sup>.

The pagans hate you because they do not know your lord. The Jews, out of hatred of your lord, arrange suffering for you. An ancient enmity turns within them to persecute the disciples of the cross. They want to show that they are the rightful heirs of Annas and Caiaphas and the trained disciples of Judas, the traitor<sup>21</sup>.

The contents and tone of this letter strongly suggest that Jacob was very much concerned about the Jewish persecution of the Himyarite Christians<sup>22</sup>. Placing the seven homilies alongside the letter of consolation, we may conclude that the homilies were written under far less compelling circumstances than those which occasioned the letter of consolation.

### Christians and Jews in Sarug and Environs

Jacob of Sarug<sup>23</sup> was born in Kūrtam on the Euphrates, and he was trained in the "Persian School" in Edessa. In 502/3, he was already the *periodeutes*<sup>24</sup> of Ḥaurā in Sarug, and in 518/9, he became the bishop of Baṭnān, the capital city of Sarug. He died in 521. Concerning the origin of the Syriac Church in these places, we know little. It seems likely that Sarug, situated near Edessa, was missionized from this fountainhead of Eastern Christianity.

Rabbinic sources make no mention of any large Jewish community at Sarug in the time of Jacob of Sarug. Martin<sup>25</sup> considers that in the fifth century the Jews were very powerful in certain Syrian villages where they made their strength felt against the disunited and unarmed Christi-

---

berg, *Yīsrā'ēl ba'arāb* (Tel-Aviv 1946) 80-82, A. Vasiliev, *Justin the Great* (Cambridge 1950) 23, and J. Ryckmans, *La persécution des chrétiens himyarites au sixième siècle* (Istanbul 1956) 12, no. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Schröter, *op. cit.* 371/2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 373.

<sup>22</sup> On the history of the period, see Hirschberg, *op. cit.* 75-111; Ryckmans, *op. cit.*, who is mainly concerned with chronology, and A. Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites* (Lund 1924).

<sup>23</sup> Baumstark, *op. cit.* 148-58; Bardenhewer, *op. cit.*, 4, 412/6; E. Tisserant, *Jacques de Saroug = Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 8 (Paris 1924) 300/5.

<sup>24</sup> Wm. Wright, *Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite* (London 1882) 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. cit.* 329.



ans, but there does not seem to be any evidence for this statement. Unfortunately, the historical sources of this period are rather sparse and indecisive. They offer little of value in determining a possible motive for the composition of the seven homilies against the Jews.

## Chapter V

Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi

### *The Treatise against the Jews*

Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi (d. 1171) was one of the outstanding literary figures of the Jacobite movement. He wrote a treatise against the Jews<sup>1</sup> in 1477 of the Seleucid era, corresponding to 1166/7 C. E.<sup>2</sup> This work has been summarized by A. L. Williams.<sup>3</sup> It contains the answers to a series of objections raised by Jews against basic tenets of the Christian faith.

Chapter I opens with a definition of the terms "Israel" and "Jew," and a description of the different Jewish sects. The author continues by suggesting that God destroyed the temple and dispersed the Jews because they crucified Jesus. To the Jewish objection that the temple was destroyed by men, not God, Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi implies that the destruction of the temple was undoubtedly the will of God since the miracles associated with the sacrificial system and the temple cult had ceased after its destruction. Thus God had withdrawn the magical power of the urim and thummim, and had held back the heavenly fire which descended to consume the sacrifices offered upon the temple altar.<sup>4</sup>

In Chapter II, he reminds the Jews that they can no longer observe their feasts and sacrifices since they may be observed in Jerusalem only. He passes on to the subject of circumcision. He observes that the ancients did not practice circumcision. Adam and his sons, Noah, and Melkizedek were not circumcised, yet they were considered righteous men. Concerning the Sabbath, he argues that the Jews were commanded to cease from work in order to study the divine law which reminded them of God's commandments. Had they worshipped Him daily, the observance of the Sabbath would have been unnecessary. Turning to the question of why God gave a covenant and then invalidated it, he answers, using the

<sup>1</sup> De Zwaan, *The Treatise of Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi against the Jews*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52, sec. 7; cf. p. 5, sec. 12; p. 18, sec. 21; p. 19, sec. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Adversus Judaeos* . . . , pp. 109-112.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Jewish tradition, a fire descended from heaven to consume the sacrifices offered upon the temple altar, cf. Yoma 21b, "even though a fire descends from heaven, it is a commandment to bring an ordinary (fire)."



illustration of a teacher instructing a child, that God may give a covenant and then invalidate it when the people have outgrown it.<sup>5</sup>

In Chapter III, "On the Worship of the Messiah," Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi mentions several objections raised by Jews concerning the divinity of Jesus, and why Christians worship him. After answering these, he refers at length to additional prophecies dealing with the abolition of the Jewish sacrifices and feasts.

Chapter IV, "On the Advent of the Messiah," again takes up a number of objections raised by Jews. When the Jews argue, "circumcision has been given us" (p. 20, sec. 4), he answers that its purpose was to differentiate the ancestors from which the Messiah was to come from the other nations.<sup>6</sup> Now that he has come, there is no reason for circumcision. He concludes by drawing an analogy between the sun and the trinity. Just as the sun manifests itself as sun, as brightness, and as heat, and is still one, so does the Godhead manifest itself as three personalities, and is still one.<sup>7</sup>

Chapter V deals in greater detail with the doctrine of the trinity, and presents more questions raised by Jews with regard to the incarnation.

Chapter VI, "On the Passion, Crucifixion, and Ascension of the Messiah," attempts to show that the passion of Jesus was foretold in the Old Testament. To the question, why was Jesus circumcised, he answers, "so that they should not say that he was a transgressor of the law" (p. 35, sec. 19). He continues saying that circumcision was given to the prophets while baptism was given to the apostles, for the New Testament has replaced the Old.

Chapter VII, "On the Resurrection of the Messiah," presents some Old Testament passages which, he insists, speak of the burial, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus. He discusses the Christian belief that the Jews have been rejected by God and the Christians chosen to replace them. He mentions again the virtuous Melkizedek to whom Abraham brought tithes even though he was uncircumcised.

Chapter VIII enumerates several prophecies which Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi suggests refer to baptism. He speaks, as well, of the worship of the cross, the relics of Christian saints, and the veneration of martyrs.

Chapter IX repeats a boast attributed to the Jews, that they are the children of Abraham and the chosen people of God. He replies that God promised to make Abraham "the father of many nations ('ammē)" [Genesis 17:14-15].<sup>8</sup> This refers to the Christians who are many nations, and not to the Jews who are just one nation.<sup>9</sup> Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *supra*, Jacob of Sarug, Homily IV.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *infra*, Chapter VI, "Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi and the Tradition of Ephraem Syrus."

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *supra*, Jacob of Sarug, Homily I.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *supra*, Jacob of Sarug, Homily VI.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. OrChr 45 (1961) 31 n. 1.



concludes his work by calling upon the Jews to acknowledge Jesus and to embrace Christianity.

In his chronicle, Michael the Syrian<sup>10</sup> informs us that Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi wrote refutations against "all the sects and heresies" that attacked the "orthodox faith." The treatise against the Jews must be studied in the context of these other polemic works. Baumstark<sup>11</sup> enumerates the following polemic writings which come from the pen of our author: against Islam, against the Jews, against the Nestorians, against the Chalcedonians, against the Armenians, and against the heathens. To which may be added the polemic against the Melchites.<sup>12</sup>

It is hard to believe that "all these sects and heresies" constituted real threats to the "orthodox faith" of Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi, and that he was forced by historic circumstances to defend his views in a series of polemics against each of them. Furthermore, an examination of the arguments contained in his writings against the Jews, against the Armenians,<sup>13</sup> and against Islam<sup>14</sup> leaves the impression that these refutations are purely theological in character. Their tone is rather moderate, and they do not seem to be concerned with concrete threats to the writer's religious persuasion. Apparently, a tradition had developed in the Eastern Church of writing polemics against contrary theological positions, and a scholar of the stature of Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi, who seems also to have had the use of a very extensive library, was eminently suited to write these polemics.

#### *Christians and Jews in Northern Syria and Asia Minor in the Twelfth Century*

From the introduction of Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi to his *Ecclesiastical History*,<sup>15</sup> we learn that the Christians of Northern Syria lived in troubled times. The Seljuk Turks,<sup>16</sup> engaging in almost incessant warfare with the

<sup>10</sup> J. B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* (Paris, 1905), III, p. 344.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 297.

<sup>12</sup> A. Mingana, *Woodbrooke Studies* (Cambridge, 1927), I, pp. 17-95.

<sup>13</sup> A. Mingana, *Woodbrooke Studies* (Cambridge, 1931), IV.

<sup>14</sup> Mingana Syriac manuscript 89, fols. 39a-84b, A.

Mingana, *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts*, vol. I, *Syriac and Garshūni Manuscripts* (Cambridge, 1933), col. 223. The third chapter of this work has been translated by Mingana, "An Ancient Syrian Translation of the Qur'an exhibiting New Verses and Variants," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 9 (1925), 188-235.

<sup>15</sup> Mentioned in Chabot, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 248-250. On the Seljuk Turks in Northern Syria and Asia Minor, see M. Th. Houtsma (?), "Seldjuks," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IV, 208-213, H. A. R. Gibb, "Seljuks," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. 1957, XX, 308-310, P. Wittek, "Deux chapitres de l'histoire des turcs de Roum," *Byzantion*, 11 (1936), 285-302, and C. Cahen, "La première pénétration turque en Asie-minieure," *Byzantion*, 18 (1946-48), 5-67.



Franks, wreaked vengeance upon the Christian populace. Mar'as,<sup>17</sup> Melitene,<sup>18</sup> and Edessa<sup>19</sup> were captured, pillaged, and destroyed. In the face of persecution, the faith of many a Christian waned. We are not surprised, therefore, to find Dionysius bar Šalibhi exhorting his co-religionists to be more humble and pious before the inscrutable will of God.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from Barhebraeus<sup>21</sup> that there was contact between Christians and Jews in this period. Church ordinances were promulgated prohibiting bishops and other ecclesiastical officials from participating in Jewish festivals,<sup>22</sup> from observing the Jewish Sabbath, and from eating unleavened bread obtained from Jews.

On the situation of Syrian Jewry during the first Crusade, we have a letter<sup>23</sup> from an unidentified Syrian community of Damascus. The author speaks of "the approaching misfortune, because of the fear of the Germans who are about to encamp against us, and because of the bad rumors which frighten us." On the Jewish communities of Syria and Asia Minor in the twelfth century, a copious source is the itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela<sup>24</sup> from about 1170. On the leg of his journey from Aleppo to Mosul, Benjamin found Jewish communities varying in size from twenty in Harran,<sup>25</sup> to seven thousand in Mosul.<sup>26</sup> Aleppo<sup>27</sup> contained a Jewish population of five thousand, Nisibis,<sup>28</sup> one thousand, and Jazirat Ibn Emmar,<sup>29</sup> four thousand. All these communities, located within a two hundred mile radius of Amid, where Dionysius bar Šalibhi served as metropolitan from 1166, enjoyed favorable conditions under Muslim rule.

<sup>17</sup> Chabot, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248. Melitene (Malaṭīqah) was the chief town of the eastern province on the Euphrates boundary of the Seljuk Turks, cf. G. Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1905), p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> Once in 1146, Chabot, *op. cit.*, p. 260, and again in 1148, *ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>20</sup> See his letters of exhortation, *ibid.*, pp. 272-274, 300-303.

<sup>21</sup> P. Kawerau, *Die jakobitische Kirche im Zeitalter der syrischen Renaissance* ("Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin," Berliner byzantinische Arbeiten, Bd. 3, Berlin, 1955), p. 94, on the authority of Barhebraeus.

<sup>22</sup> "Whoever eats or drinks with the Jews will be barred from communion for two years, and must fast twice a week during this time." Quoted in Kawerau, *loc. cit.*, n. 181, from Barhebraeus.

<sup>23</sup> J. Mann, "The Messianic Movements during the First Three Crusades (Hebrew)," *hat-tqūpā*, 23 (1925), 260-261. Cf. Baron, *op. cit.*, IV, pp. 108-109, and p. 293, n. 25. For additional documents from the period of the Crusades found in the Cairo Geniza, cf. S. D. Goitein, "Contemporary Letters on the Capture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 3 (1952), 162-177, and "Obadyah, a Norman Proselyte," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 4 (1953), 74-84.

<sup>24</sup> M. N. Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (London, 1907).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51, n. 4, in English translation.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.



There certainly was contact between Christians and Jews in Northern Syria and Asia Minor in the twelfth century. The political situation of the Syriac Christian community was difficult, while the situation of the Jews, on the whole, was favorable. Under these circumstances, it is not impossible that Jews may have taken the opportunity to proselytise, but there is nothing in either Dionysius bar Šalibhi's treatise against the Jews, or in other documents of this period, to suggest that this was the case.

## Chapter VI

### The Tradition of the Polemic against the Jews in the Syriac Writers

The polemics against the Jews in the Syriac language written over a period of eight hundred years are characterized by similarity of ideas, imagery, and phraseology. When faced with the necessity of presenting anti-Jewish arguments of either an apologetic or a polemic nature, the Syriac writers utilised the tradition they had been taught in the academies in which they had been trained.

Williams<sup>1</sup> maintains that the similarities between these polemic writings do not indicate an absence of creativity and originality on the part of the Syriac writers, but rather the persistence of a common method of Biblical exegesis.

The writers are, in fact, not mere copyists of other men's productions. Indeed, it is very seldom that we are able to trace any copying at all . . . . Of course there is often a great similarity in the interpretation of the Biblical passages, which has given rise to the rather careless assumption on the part of modern writers that the later authors used the earlier; but in reality, . . . this affords little or no evidence of literary connexion, but only of the permanence of the same methods of interpreting Scripture which had prevailed in the Church almost . . . from the very first.

Williams justifiably comes to the defense of the much maligned Syriac writers. It is hard to believe that men who chose to express themselves in poetry, a literary form usually associated with creativity and originality, believed that they were simply imitating others, especially since the metrical forms vary from writer to writer. Ephraem Syrus and Isaac of Antioch wrote in seven syllable verse, Jacob of Sarug, in twelve syllable meter. If, then, we are able to find evidence of close literary parallels in these writings, it may very well be due to the writers' standards of poetry, and not their lack of imagination.

In religious poetry, there is a strong tendency for the poet to express himself in traditional concepts and terminology. This does not indicate an absence of creativity. On the contrary, it may well have been the

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. XVII.



mark of great poetic genius to be able to embody a traditional phrase, idea, or allusion in one's own verse. To express the Christian truth in terms of a traditional vocabulary certainly strengthened the poet's arguments in his own eyes, and enhanced his position in the eyes of his co-religionists who were impressed by his skill in weaving the expressions and motifs of the tradition into his poetry.

An interesting parallel from medieval Hebrew poetry, a literature contemporaneous with the writings of many of the Syriac Church Fathers, is worth mentioning. H. Brody<sup>2</sup> makes an observation on the character of these early Hebrew poets which may be equally true of the Syriac writers.

Generally speaking, these writers surrendered of their own, all individual characteristics in their style and manner of expression. And the stronger the desire for (personal) expression, the more they sought to cast it into the terms of traditional phraseology.

Williams, however, carries his case too far when he insists that there is little or no connection between the Syriac polemic writers other than a similarity in the interpretation of the same Biblical proof texts.<sup>3</sup> It is entirely possible and even likely that there were books of testimonia which served as sources for the polemic writers, but this does not exclude the possibility of literary dependence. In their writings on the trinity, the incarnation, the virgin birth, the advent, passion and ascension of Jesus, the Syriac writers rely heavily on Biblical quotations to validate their position, but in their writings against circumcision they adduce few scriptural verses in support of their arguments, for the simple reason that there are few Biblical passages to which they can turn. They may insist that circumcision of the heart is more important than circumcision of the flesh, pointing to Deuteronomy 10:10 and Jeremiah 9:25. They may also find passages which they can interpret as referring to baptism, but to the crucial question of why circumcision was ordained to begin with, they can find no christological answer in the Bible. The arguments they present in answer to this objection raised by Jews, rest on reason alone, not on Biblical exegesis. When we find that all the Syriac writers offer the same argument, frequently expressing it in the same imagery and phraseology, we must conclude that either they borrowed from one another or that they all depended upon a common literary tradition.

An examination of the Syriac literature dealing with circumcision favors the conclusion that all the works investigated depend upon a common literary tradition. Aphraates, the Persian Sage, writing about

<sup>2</sup> *Mibḥar haš-širā hā-ʿIbrīt*, 2nd. edition, (Jerusalem), p. 11 of the introduction.

<sup>3</sup> See his chapter on books of testimonia, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-13. For a group of testimonia found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, see J. M. Allegro, "Further Messianic References in the Qumran Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 75 (1956), 174-187.



345, is the first writer whose polemic works have come down to us. His writings and the writings of Ephraem Syrus, a younger contemporary of his from Nisibis, show evidence of reliance upon a common literary tradition. When Nisibis fell to the Persians in 363, Ephraem moved on to Edessa, where he founded the "Persian School." With Ephraem we may speak of a polemic tradition, since we are able to trace the transmission of this tradition through the writings of Isaac of Antioch, trained by Zenobius, a disciple of Ephraem's; Jacob of Sarug, educated in the "Persian School" in Edesse; and Dionysius bar Šalibhi, born in Melitene within one hundred miles of Edessa, who wrote almost eight hundred years after the death of Ephraem. We call this literary tradition the "tradition of Ephraem Syrus," although Ephraem himself was not its originator.

### *Aphraates and the Tradition of Ephraem Syrus*

Aphraates, the first of the recorded writers of Syriac polemics against the Jews, shows remarkable similarities to the tradition of Ephraem. Both Aphraates and Ephraem were contemporaries. Aphraates lived in the vicinity of Edessa within the confines of the Sassanian Empire; Ephraem lived in Nisibis within the confines of the Roman Empire. The fact that we cannot establish a case for borrowing or interdependence between the two, strongly suggests that they both relied upon a common earlier tradition.

Aphraates refers to circumcision as "the mark and sign of the covenant" (*rušmā wātā daqyāmā*) [Wright, 206:8. Cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 E, and Jacob, 342a col. B, l. 32, *rušmā*. Cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 E, F, and Jacob, 342b col. A, l. 13, *ātā*].

Aphraates argues that circumcision was given to Abraham

so that when his seed would multiply, it would be separated from the nations in whose midst it went, in order that it would not become mingled (*neḥlaṭ*) with their unclean deeds. (Wright, 206:8-10)

Compare Ephraem:

It was a fold which mingled (*hlaṭ*) continually  
Among the stray folds. (*Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 E)

Jacob of Sarug:

The good Lord cast a seal upon His possession  
That the pure one would not mingle (*neḥlaṭ*)  
/with the unclean that surround him.  
(342a col. C, lines 18-20)

And Isaac of Antioch:

The nation was stamped with circumcision  
That it would not mingle (*men ḥuṭānā*) with /strangers.  
(Bickell, *S. Isaaci* ..., p. 192:660-661)



However, "circumcision without belief has no use or advantage, because belief precedes circumcision." (Wright, 204:7-9).

If circumcision had been given for the advantage of everlasting life, Scripture would have made known that Abraham circumcised (himself), and his circumcision was considered as righteousness. But it is written thus, 'Abraham believed in God, and his belief was considered as righteousness.' (Genesis 15:6). Those, therefore, who believed although they were not circumcised, lived. And (those) who were circumcised and did not believe, their circumcision did not gain them any advantage at all. (Wright, 205:12-18)

Compare the later Syriac writers on the ancients who were considered righteous though they lived without the law (Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 183F-184A, Isaac, 142a col. A, lines 9-13, and Jacob, 342a col. B, l. 5 ff.).

Aphraates maintains that the law was ordained for the members of a given generation, and was then changed in accordance with God's will for succeeding generations.

We know, then, my friend, in truth, that in every generation God established laws. [And] they ministered (*šammeš*) to their time and they were good for it (i.e. the time), and, then, they were changed. (Wright, 215:1-3)

Compare Ephraem:

And observe which commandment  
Ministered to its time and was ministered to  
/(*šammeš zabneh weštammaš*).  
(*Ed. Rom.*, III, 184 F)

But the law of Jesus is everlasting.

In every age, the law and the covenant has been changed. At first, then, God changed the covenant of Adam and gave another to Noah. And once again He gave (another) to Abraham. And He changed that of Abraham, and He gave another to Moses. And when that of Moses was not observed, He gave another in the last generation, a covenant that does not change (*qyāmā dlā meštaḥlāp*). (Wright, 214:4-9)

Compare Jacob, five covenants, *supra*, Homily IV, and Isaac, "his covenant does not change" (*lā meštaḥlāp puqdāneh*) [145b col. A, lines 2-3].

A new circumcision has replaced the old, circumcision of the heart and baptism.

And Jesus, our redeemer, circumcised the nations that believed in him, a second time, with circumcision of the heart. And they were baptised with baptism. (Wright, 215:13-15)

Compare Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 188 A, Isaac, 146b col. B, lines 15-22, and Jacob, 341b col. B, lines 31-32.

As may be seen, there are many striking points of resemblance between Homily XI, "On Circumcision," of Aphraates and the tradition of Ephraem Syrus concerning circumcision which cannot be explained through use of the same principles of Biblical exegesis. Since there was no direct contact between the two of which we know, both must have been familiar with a common earlier polemic tradition. Unfortunately, we know of no Syriac polemics before the time of Aphraates. It cannot



be argued that an earlier Greek polemic tradition provided the link between the two, since the homilies of Aphraates are strikingly free from the influence of Greek style and thought.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we must assume the existence of an earlier Christian polemic tradition against the Jews in an Aramaic dialect which, at present, escapes us.

### *Isaac of Antioch and the Tradition of Ephraem Syrus*

Of all the polemics against circumcision investigated in this study, "Homily Two against the Jews," attributed to Isaac of Antioch and the third of Ephraem's "Sermons on Faith" provide the most striking similarities. Both contain substantially the same arguments on circumcision developed and presented in much the same manner. From a literary point of view, both are written in the same meter, seven syllables to the line, with four lines to the stanza, and they are close, as well, in phraseology and choice of expressions. Finally, both are harsh and vindictive in tone against the Jews.

Isaac refers to the law as a "chain" (*keblā*) [142b col. A, l. 15; cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 188 E], a "bond" (*asūrā*) [142b col. E, l. 2; cf. *Ed. Rom.*, III, 188 E], and a "heavy yoke" (*nīrā qašyā*) [142b col. B, l. 3].

Concerning the righteous who lived without the law, he writes:

With what was Abel triumphant?

And how was Enoch crowned?

How Noah and the house of Seth?

(142a col. A, lines 9-13)

Compare Ephraem:

Let the righteous be unto you

An image of love, and be like them.

See Abel,<sup>5</sup> and become good in Enoch.

Be like Noah, the second head (of mankind).

(*Ed. Rom.*, III, 183 F-184 A)

Circumcision was but a "seal" (*tab'ā*) or "stamp" (*hāt mā*) designed to distinguish Israel from its neighbors.

The nation was stamped with circumcision

That it would not mingle (*men hultānā*) with strangers.

(Bickell, *S. Isaaci* ..., II, p. 192:660-661)

Compare Ephraem:

The Omniscient one made it a sign

For the flock that killed the shepherd.

It was a fold that mingled (*hlat*) continually

Among the stray folds.

(*Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 F)

<sup>4</sup> Th. Nöldeke, *Mandäische Grammatik* (Halle, 1875), p. XXI, Gavin, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2, and Duncan, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. OrChr 45 (1961) 33 n. 8.



It was necessary to guard Israel from outer contamination because "something great" (*meddem rabbā*) [146b col. B, l. 6; cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 E, *meddem*] was being preserved in its midst. Now that "its riches have come forth" (*nḥaq 'utrā*) [145b col. A, l. 12; col. B, lines 5-6; cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 F, *nḥaq meddem*], Israel's strength has left (*šbq*) her [146b col. A, l. 16; cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 F, God "has left (*šabqeh*) the foolish flock"]. A spiritual circumcision which requires "a removal from sin" (146b col. B, lines 15-22; cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 188 A, "circumcise the hateful things from within") has replaced circumcision of the flesh.

The crucial arguments presented by Isaac of Antioch and Ephraem Syrus concerning the original purpose of circumcision and the reason for its invalidation, are almost identical in formulation and phraseology. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Isaac borrowed from Ephraem. The link in the tradition binding Isaac to Ephraem was Zenobius, Isaac's teacher and Ephraem's disciple.

### *Jacob of Sarug and the Tradition of Ephraem Syrus*

The familiarity of Jacob of Sarug with the tradition of Ephraem is clearly discernable in his homily "On Circumcision." Having been trained in the "Persian School" in Edessa founded by Ephraem Syrus, Jacob's reliance upon the polemic tradition of the school is easily understandable.

Jacob refers to circumcision as a "sign" (*ātā*) [342b col. A, l. 13; cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 E, F], a "mark" (*rušmā*) [342a col. B, l. 32; cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 E], and a "seal" (*ṭab'ā*) [342 col. C, lines 19, 37; 342b col. C, l. 28; cf. Isaac, 145b col. A, lines 7, 12, 18; col. B, l. 2].

Jacob maintains that

In the youth of the world when it was raging (*tazzīz*)  
/with the love of images,  
The Lord cast the painful circumcision upon its limbs.  
(342a col. B, lines 27-30)

Compare Ephraem:

That the visible sign which He placed upon them  
Might suppress the violence of their madness (*hēpā dḥpaqrūteh*).  
(*Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 F)

Jacob continues the argument:

The good Lord cast a seal upon His possession (*qenyāneh*),  
That the pure one would not become mingled (*neḥlat*)  
/with the unclean that surround him.

.....  
And the Lord cast circumcision as a mark (*rušmā*) upon Abraham.  
And the fold (*gẓārā*) became (the possession of) the one God among the nations.  
(342a col. C, lines 18-20, 26-29)



## Compare Ephraem:

The shepherd of all made it a mark (*rušmā*)  
 For the foolish fold (*gzārā*) which he had acquired (*qnā*).  
 .....

It was a fold which mingled (*hlat*) continually  
 Among the stray folds.

(*Ed. Rom.*, III, 187 E)

In this relatively short Jacob passage, we find four obvious parallels in language to Ephraem, the nouns *gzārā* and *rušmā*, the verbal forms *hlat* and *nethlat*, and *qnā* and *qenyāneh*. Both passages are completely free from any Biblical allusion or direct reference so that they cannot be related through a common method of Scriptural interpretation. We have here a striking evidence of literary borrowing.

Jacob argues that circumcision was not practiced by the first generations, nor is it necessary for the latter generations.

In the youth of the world, He bound up their limbs  
 Which was unnecessary (*dlā ḥāšhā-wāṭ*) in its childhood and in its old age.  
 In the beginning, when the world was a child, it did not exist.  
 And in the end, since it has grown up, it is not needed.  
 In its youth, when it was raging with the love of images,  
 The Lord cast the painful circumcision upon its limbs.

(342 a col. B, lines 21-30)

## Compare Ephraem:

At the present time, the commandments  
 Of Sabbath, of circumcision, and of purification are invalid.  
 They are superfluous for those of the latter generations.  
 While for those of the middle generations they were necessary (*ḥāšhīn-waw*).  
 For those of the first generations, they were unnecessary (*lā ḥāšhīn-waw*),  
 Because they were sound in knowledge.  
 And neither are they necessary (*ḥāšhīn*) for the latter generations,  
 Because they are sound in faith.

(*Ed. Rom.*, III, 186 C-D)

Again we find the same idea expressed in Jacob and Ephraem in parallel passages using participles of the root *ḥšḥ* which points to a literary dependence of Jacob of Sarug upon the tradition of Ephraem Syrus.

*Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi and the Tradition of Ephraem Syrus*

Written almost eight hundred years after the death of Ephraem Syrus, the treatise of Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi against the Jews manifests remarkable affinities with the polemic writings of the tradition of Ephraem in imagery, phraseology, and development of theme.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 107, suggests that Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi „was very diligent in the use of the writings of his predecessors, in particular Ephraem ...”



Among the epithets of derision by which Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi refers to the Jews we find "the circumcised" (*gzīrē*) [De Zwaan, p. 42, sec. 20, and p. 43, sec. 24; cf. Ephraem, Overbeck, *S. Ephraemi* . . . , p. 6, lines 6 and 18].

Concerning circumcision he writes:

Circumcision was the cause by which the acknowledgment of the family of Abraham from which the Messiah is descended (was shown). Since the effect has appeared (*‘ellānā etglī*), there is no longer any need for the cause.

(De Zwaan, p. 20, sec. 4)

Compare with Ephraem "the something has come forth" (*nḥaq meddem*) [Ed. Rom., III, 187 F], and with Isaac "riches have come forth" (*nḥaq ʿutrā*) [145b col. A, l. 12, and col. B, lines 5–6].

God prefers circumcision of the heart and baptism to circumcision of the flesh (De Zwaan, p. 20, sec. 5; p. 35, sec. 18; cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 188 A–B; Isaac, 146b col. B).

The ancients did not observe circumcision and the Sabbath, yet they were righteous men (De Zwaan, p. 8, sec. 5; cf. Ephraem, *Ed. Rom.*, III, 183 F–184 A; Isaac, 142a col. A, lines 7–13, and col. B, lines 10–16; Jacob, 342a col. B, l. 5 ff.).

Of the Sabbath he writes, that the Jews were to remain idle from work in order to study the law which reminded them of God's commandments (De Zwaan, p. 10, sec. 13; cf. Jacob, 343b col. B, lines 1–3).

Turning to the question raised by the Jews, why did God reveal his covenant and then invalidate it in favor of a new covenant, he answers, using the illustration of a teacher instructing a child, that God progressively reveals His truth, proceeding from the simple to the more difficult (De Zwaan, p. 11, sec. 19; cf. Jacob, 345b col. C).

He attributes the dispersion of the Jews to the crucifixion of the son.

"And, therefore, they have been scattered (*etḥaddar*), and their cities and sanctuaries have been uprooted (*etʿaqqar*).” (De Zwaan, p. 2, sec. 2) Compare with Ephraem:

Today the vineyard of the beloved

Is uprooted (*ʿqir*) and scattered (*mḥaddar*) among the nations.

.....  
Its hedge which was abandoned has fallen.

Today it has toppled, and it has been overturned (*estahḥaḥ*).

(Ed. Rom., III, 211 D)

And Jacob:

O Jew, the cross is the cause of your humiliation.

If you continue to reject, you will continue to be humiliated throughout the /whole earth.

Until the cross, who was like you, O nation, upon the earth?

And from that time on, which nation is overturned (*shḥiḥ*) like you?

(347b col. A, lines 6–11)



The many parallels between Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi and the tradition of Ephraem cannot be explained by "the permanence of the same method of interpreting Scripture." They can only be understood if we agree that this later writer was dependent upon an earlier Syriac polemic tradition. The evidence presented here, clearly suggests this conclusion.

Ephraem Syrus and the "Persian School" in Edessa are the focal points of this tradition of Syriac polemics against the Jews that have come down to us. Isaac of Antioch, Jacob of Sarug, and Dionysius bar Ṣalibhi all indicate familiarity with and dependence upon this tradition. Aphraates, too, shows a literary connection with the tradition of Ephraem, but the earlier Syriac tradition from which they both drew still escapes us.