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An excerpt from a Letter to the People of Homs,
wrongly attributed to Ephrem

British Library ms Add. 17193 (dated AG 1185 = AD 873/4) contains a very miscellaneous collection of 125 short texts,¹ as can be seen even from the list of those which have already been published:

f. 2v (Catalogue, no. 3): Pericope de adultera (John 8:3-11), = ms i in J. Gwynn's edition, *Remnants of the Later Syriac Versions of the Bible*, London 1909, repr. Amsterdam 1973, pp. 46-49 (translation of Bishop Mara, rather than that of Abbas Paul).

f. 4r (Cat. no. 7): on Num. 12:1; see S. P. Brock, "Some Syriac legends concerning Moses", *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982), pp. 237-255, esp. pp. 242-5.

f. 5r, 13v (Cat. nos. 10, 31): Excerpts from Basil, de Spiritu Sancto; collation in D. G. K. Taylor, *The Syriac Versions of the de Spiritu Sancto by Basil of Caesarea* (CSCO 576-7, Scr. Syri 228-9; 1999), pp. 172-3 of text volume.

f. 7a (Cat., no. 16): Excerpt from Gregory of Nyssa, de Anima et Resurrectione, ed. A. van Roey, "Le de Anima et Resurrectione de S. Grégoire de Nysse dans la littérature syriaque", *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 12 (1981), pp. 203-213, esp. 208-9 (tr. p. 212).

f. 8r (Cat. no. 17): Excerpt from Athanasius, de Passione et Cruce, ed. R. W. Thomson, *Athanasiana Syriaca*, III (CSCO 324-5, Scr. Syri 142-3; 1972), p. 153 (of text volume; his ms E).

ff. 8v-9r (Cat. no. 17): Extract from Ephrem, *memrā* against Bardaisan (stanzas 33-42), ed. C. Mitchell, *St Ephrem's Prose Refutations*, II, London 1921, pp. 151-154 (translation on pp. lxx-lxxi).

f. 12rv (Cat. no. 25): Excerpt from Severus, Letter to John the Roman, ed. E. W. Brooks, *A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch* (Patrologia Orientalis 12), pp. 218-222 (no. 24, his ms H); the letter has been reedited in a fuller form in S. P. Brock, "Severus' Letter to John the Soldier", in ed. G. Wiessner,

¹ Number DCCCLXI in W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum acquired since the year 1838*, II, London 1871, pp. 989-1002.

Erkenntnisse und Meinungen II (Göttinger Orientforschungen, Syriaca 17; 1978), pp. 53-75 (= ms C).

ff. 13v-14r (Cat. no. 32): Sayings of Plato, ed. E. Sachau, *Inedita Syriaca*, Wien 1870, pp. 66-7 (his ms B).

f. 14r (Cat. no. 32): Plato, Definitions, ed. E. Sachau, *Inedita Syriaca*, p. 69 (his ms D).

f. 14v (Cat. no. 34), Revelation 7:1-8, in the pre-Harkleian translation, ed. J. Gwynn, *The Apocalypse of St John in a Syriac Version Hitherto Unknown*, Dublin/London 1897, p. 35 (cp. p. xc).

f. 17a (Cat. no. 40): List of Arab rulers up to al-Walid, ed. J. P. N. Land, *Anecdota Syriaca* II, Leiden 1868, p. 11 of Addenda; English translation in A. N. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syriac Chronicles*, Liverpool 1993, p. 43.

ff. 18r-26r (Cat. no. 42): Philoxenus, On the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, ed. A. Tanghe, "Memra de Philoxène de Mabboug sur l'inhabitation du Saint-Esprit", *Le Muséon* 73 (1960), pp. 39-71; English translation in S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Kalamazoo 1987, pp. 106-127.

ff. 26r-32r (Cat. no. 43): Epiphanius, Lives of the Prophets, ed. E. Nestle, *Brevis Linguae Syriacae Grammatica* = Syriac Grammar, 2nd edition, Berlin 1889, pp. 80-107 (conflated text from three manuscripts; for the variants in Add. 17193, see "Die dem Epiphanius zugeschriebenen Vitae Prophetarum in doppelter griechischer Rezension" in his *Marginalien und Materialien*, Tübingen 1893, pp. 37-39).

ff. 32r-33r (Cat. no. 44): Extracts from Severus' Letters; f. 32r, ed. Brooks, PO 12, p. 338 (no. LVII, his ms H); f. 33r, ed. Brooks, PO 14, p. 169 (no. XCII; his ms H).

f. 35v (Cat. no. 47): Four canons of Sergius Amphiator: see A. Vööbus, *Syrische Kanonensammlungen, I. 1A, Westsyrische Originalurkunden* (CSCO 307, Subs. 35; 1970), p. 187; French translation by F. Nau in *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 14 (1909), pp. 127-128 (from Paris syr. 62).

f. 37r (Cat. no. 54): Canons of the Apostles (nos 2-4, 14), ed. A. Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents*, London 1864, pp. 25-27 (Syriac text), cf. p. 168.

f. 45v (Cat. no. 64): Excerpt from Severus, Against the Additions of Julian, ed. R. Hespel, *Sévère d'Antioche, La polémique antijulianiste* IIA (CSCO 295-6, Scr. Syri 124-5; 1968), p. 35 (of text volume).

ff. 47v-55r (Cat. no. 74): Extracts from John the Solitary, Commentary on Qohelet, ed. W. Strothmann, *Kohelet-Kommentar des Johannes von Apamea* (Göttinger Orientforschungen, Syriaca 30; 1988); = his ms B (for a list of the passages, see pp. xx-xxi).

ff. 55r-58r, 61r-69v (Cat. nos. 75, 77): Jacob of Edessa, Scholia on the Old Testament; several are edited in G. Phillips, *Scholia on Passages of the Old Testament by Mar Jacob bishop of Edessa*, London 1864.

ff. 58r-61r (Cat. no. 76): Jacob of Edessa; cf. A. Vööbus, *Syrische Kanonesammlungen*, I, 1A, p. 209.

ff. 69v-70r (Cat. no. 78): From Philoxenus, Letter to the monks of Amid (canons), ed. A. Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents regarding Legislation relative to Syrian Asceticism*, Stockholm 1960, pp. 51-54 (his ms B); cf. also his *Syrische Kanonesammlungen*, I, 1B, pp. 316-325.

f. 71r (Cat. no. 80): Excerpt from the Testament of Levi, ed. R. H. Charles, *The Greek Versions of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Oxford 1908, p. 254. (In the text printed in Wright's Catalogue Levi's age is incorrectly given as 134 [qlđ], instead of 137 [qlz]).

ff. 73r-75v (Cat. no. 88): Dialogue between the Patriarch John and an Emir, ed. F. Nau, "Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716", *Journal Asiatique* XI. 5 (1915), pp. 225-279, esp. pp. 248-253, tr. 257-264; and reedited in A. Saadi, "The Letter of John of Sedreh: a new perspective on nascent Islam", *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 10:1 (1997), pp. 68-84.

ff. 75v-76v (Cat. no. 89): Events of AD 713-716, ed. F. Nau, "Un colloque", *Journal Asiatique* XI. 5 (1915), pp. 253-256, 264-267.

ff. 79r-82r (Cat. no. 93): List of the Apostles and where they preached, ed. M. van Esbroeck, "Neuf listes d'Apôtres apocryphes", *Augustinianum* 34 (1984), pp. 185-192.

f. 83rv (Cat. no. 97): Extract from Philoxenus' Letter to the Stratelates of Hira (recension II): see A. de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabboug. Sa vie, ses écrits, sa théologie*, Louvain 1963, pp. 203-208.

f. 91v (Cat. no. 103a): Extract from John Chrysostom, ad Theodorum lapsum; for this, and other fragments, see L. van Rompay, "John Chrysostom's Ad Theodorum lapsum. Some remarks on the oriental tradition", *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 19 (1988), pp. 91-106, esp. p. 95.

f. 92r (Cat. no. 107): Extract from Proclus, Tomus ad Armenios; see L. van Rompay, "Proclus of Constantinople's Tomus ad Armenios in the post-Chalcedonian tradition", in C. A. Laga, J. A. Munitiz and L. van Rompay, *After Chalcedon. Studies in Theology and Church History* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 18; 1985), pp. 425-449, esp. p. 430.

f. 93r (Cat. no. 108d): Excerpt from Basil, On the Holy Spirit; collation in Taylor, *The Syriac Versions of the de Spiritu Sancto*, pp. 149-151 of text volume.

f. 94r (Cat. no. 110): Excerpt from Gregory of Nyssa, Commentary on the Song of Songs (Hom. 15), ed. M. Parmentier, "Syriac translations of Gregory

Among the hitherto unpublished texts is an excerpt (Cat. no. 23) on folios 10v-11v, which has the following heading: "By the same: from the Letter to the People of Homs, on how it is not necessary for those being baptized to be circumcized; and he shows what circumcision is". Since the previous excerpt is by Ephrem (an unidentified passage), the assumption is that the scribe also attributed this text to Ephrem. If the ascription were correct, this would be a text of considerable interest and surprise, since nothing else is known about any contacts between Homs and Ephrem. On internal grounds, however, it will be seen that the extract cannot possibly be by Ephrem, but is almost certainly a translation from Greek and probably belongs to the sixth century. Before providing the evidence for these assertions, I give the text and translation of the excerpt.

Translation (exact biblical quotations are indicated by italic)

By the same [sc. Ephrem]. From the Letter to the people of Homs, on how it is not necessary for those being baptized to be circumcized; and he shows what circumcision is.

1. Knowledge belongs to those who have believed in our great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ: they are liberated from the yoke of circumcision in the flesh, for at baptism they are circumcised with a noetic *circumcision*, *not performed by hands* (Col. 2:11), as Paul said. And with the three immersions in the water we imitate the three-(day) burial of Christ and his resurrection, and *we put off the old person and put on instead the new, who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him* (Col. 3:9-10), as we receive from here the pledge and firstfruits of the immortality which we shall acquire at the Resurrection and in the life that does not grow old and is blessed.

2. For the circumcision of the flesh which was given to those of old through the covenant to Abram (Gen. 17:11) was also marking out beforehand this noetic circumcision. The casting away of uncircumcision indicated beforehand both the renunciation of birth in the flesh, and the divine gift of sonship. For he who is circumcised puts away from himself that (old) man who is corrupted by desire and intercourse (lit. bed) when he casts away uncircumcision, as he fulfils the type of holy baptism. For how then can he run back again from the truth and from complete purification and perfection in mind to the shadow and to the type that was in the flesh, and to the reproaches, while their very actions blasphemously portray that *Christ died in vain for us* (Gal. 2:21),

exactly as Paul wrote to the Galatians who were rushing back, from the perfect and spiritual circumcision in the Gospel that comes through divine baptism, to the minutiae (or: brevity of speech) of the Law that guides children, and were receiving circumcision in the flesh. For he said, *Who has bewitched you, O senseless Galatians?* (Gal. 3:1) For behold *Christ crucified has already been depicted before your eyes. For thus are you foolish, in that you started out in the Spirit, but now you are ending up with the flesh.* (Gal. 3:3). And again, harshly, *Look, I Paul am telling you that if you get circumcised, then Christ will benefit you nothing.* (Gal. 5:2).

3. So then does it seem a small thing by way of loss for those who, after faith in Christ, are circumscised with the circumcision of the flesh, to fall away from grace and from Christ himself, and to be reckoned with unbelievers? (cf. Gal. 5:2-4). These people are in need of a wealth of words, as they shout out from here the enormity of the wickedness. He who has been held worthy through baptism of the noetic and perfect circumcision, and has been joined to the Church of the heavenly city, Jerusalem, which holds all powers and authorities, and the crowds of myriad angels, and the spirits of the just who have been perfected, whose head is Christ; and (who has) attached earthly things to heavenly ones, should they run off again to circumcision in the flesh and attach themselves to the synagogue of the Jews in this matter? (lit. portion).

4. For Moses said in Deuteronomy, *Circumcise the wickedness of your heart, and do not stiffen your neck again.* (Deut. 10:16). Thus, in the case of the person who is known for virtue and uprightness, whom Paul names as *the new interior person* (Rom. 7:22, Eph. 3:16), the commandment of (physical) circumcision is removed, so that the ears too should be circumcised, and they should not listen to, or be a channel for, railings and blasphemies or any evil words; and the eyes likewise, being held back and circumcised from unprofitable sights and ones that result in lusting, (thus) being brought down to the pit of sin, involving every limb; and that (sc. circumcision) of the heart is to cut off the urges that lead to sin. And because everything will readily come about as a result of the noetic circumcision of *the laver of rebirth* (Tit. 3:5), those who have believed in Christ will benefit, and will receive the power of effecting these things from there, through the spiritual rebirth, and escape from the mortality that (came) through sin.

The author cannot be Ephrem

A number of linguistic features make it absolutely clear that Ephrem cannot be the author. These concern the presence of several words which are not found in any Syriac writers until the fifth or sixth century. These concern particular Greek loan words and Syriac word formations. The text contains two particles of Greek origin: *'ara* (ἄρα) and *man* (μέν), neither of which is attested in any fourth-century Syriac author.² The earliest Syriac authors to use *'ara* seem to be John the Solitary (Dialogue on the Soul, ed. Dederling, p. 67) and Narsai (who uses it no less than 57 times);³ *man* is likewise first attested in fifth-century writers (quite common, for example, in both Narsai and Jacob of Serugh). A further Greek loanword, the verb *yaqqen* (< εἰκόν) is not certainly attested, it seems, until the sixth century, from which time on it is not uncommon.

Four Syriac word formations which again point to a date considerably later than Ephrem are the adverbial form *mgaddpānā'it* ("blasphemingly") and the adjectives *nāmosāyā*, *ṭubtānā* and *metyadd'ānā* ("noetic"). The adverb⁴ is first attested in the writings of Philoxenus (e. g. Commentary on the Prologue of John, ed. de Halleux, p. 53). The adjective *nāmosāyā* is not found in any fourth-century Syriac writers, and is first attested in the early Syriac translation of Titus of Bostra (preserved in a manuscript dated November 411); in native Syriac authors it first occurs in John the Solitary, Narsai and Jacob of Serugh. *Ṭubtānā* (as opposed to *ṭubānā*) is likewise not found in fourth-century writers, but becomes common from the fifth century onwards. *Metyadd'ānā* (a calque on Greek νοητός), is also unknown to fourth-century Syriac writers; it is first found in the Syriac translation of Titus of Bostra's work against the Manichaeans (ed. de Lagarde, p. 133, of "oil"), but in native Syriac writers it does not feature until the late fifth and early sixth century, in Narsai (only rarely) and Philoxenus; from the sixth century onwards, however, it becomes very common. The precise phrase used in the extract, *gzurtā metyadd'ānitā*, occurs in Evagrius, Kephalaia (ed. Guillaumont) IV. 12 (S2), Severus, Against Julian (ed. Hespel, CSCO Scr. Syri 104) I, p. 16, and Zacharias Rhetor, Eccl. Hist. (ed. Brooks), II, p. 110.

2 See my "Greek words in Syriac: some general features", *Scripta Classica Israelica* 15 (1996), pp. 251-262, esp. 258-260 (reprinted in my *From Ephrem to Romanos*, Variorum Reprints² 1999, ch. XV).

3 See my "Greek words in Ephrem and Narsai: a comparative sampling", in *Aram* 11/12 (1999-2000), pp. 439-449, esp. p. 440.

4 For the formation, see my "Diachronic aspects of Syriac word formation: an aid for dating anonymous texts", *V Symposium Syriacum* (OCA 236, 1990), pp. 321-330, esp. 326-327.

The text is translated from Greek.

Though *metyadd'ānā* (like several Greek loan words) certainly started out in translated texts, it was in due course taken up by native Syriac writers, and so is not in itself an indication that the present extract is in fact a translation from Greek. Evidence that this is in fact the case comes from the biblical quotations. This can be seen from the following indicative cases:

Deut. 10:16 (section 4):

LXX καὶ περιτεμεῖσθε τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν καὶ τὸν τράχηλον ὑμῶν οὐ σκληρυνεῖτε

Peshitta *bishut lebkon* (whether or not it is a corruption of *qashyut lebkon* = Syro-hexapla)⁵ is clearly based on the LXX and not the Peshitta, and further confirmation that this is the case is the choice of a different word for “neck” (= Syh).

Gal. 3:1 (section 2).

ὦ ἀνόητοι Γαλάται, τίς ὑμᾶς ἐβάσκανεν οἷς κατ' ὀφθαλμοὺς Ἰησοῦς χριστὸς προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος

Peshitta Although the opening of the quotation is identical with the Peshitta, the rendering of προεγράφη by *qaddem 'ettsir* is typical of sixth-/seventh-century translation style⁶ and is indeed found in the Harkleian here, but the author can hardly be quoting the Harkleian since in other respects it is different.

Col. 2:11 (section 1)

Peshitta

5 Fol. 165r in A. Vööbus, *The Pentateuch in the Version of the Syro-Hexapla* (CSCO Subs. 45; 1975).

6 For the development of translation style in general, see my “Towards a history of Syriac translation technique”, in R. Lavenant (ed.), *III Symposium Syriacum* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 221; 1983), pp. 1-14, repr. in my *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, Variorum Reprints 1992, ch. X.

Julian of Halicarnassus⁸ and his Homily 46⁹. These parallels can best be seen by juxtaposing the texts, with the common content italicized:

Letter to the People of Homs (para. 2)

For *the circumcision of the flesh which* was given to those of old through the thr covenant to Abraham was also marking beforehand this through noetic circumcision. *The casting away of uncircumcision indicated beforehand both the renunciation of birth in the flesh and* he divine gift of sonship.

For he who is circumcized puts away from himself that (old) man who is corrupted by desire and intercourse (lit. the bed) when he casts away uncircumcision as he fulfils the type of holy baptism.

2nd Letter to Julian (ed. Hespel, pp. 14-15)

For we know that *the circumcision* which is in *the flesh, which* existed previously as a type, fulfils the image of the baptism of salvation, for through *the casting away of uncircumcision he indicated the renunciation* of birth in the flesh and made those who are circumcised *sons of God.*

Homily 46 (PO 35, p. 296)

For he who is circumcised casts away from himself that (old) man who is corrupted by pleasure and sleep (mg. the bed) when he casts away uncircumcision, (an act) which is for him the type of holy baptism.

In this connection it is also worth noting that it is a little later in the Second Letter to Julian that Severus uses the term “noetic circumcision” (cited above); furthermore, he also mentions in the same context Abraham, the Galatians, and quotes Col. 2:11 – very much as we find in the present Letter to the People of Homs. Since there is already a certain overlap in common phraseology between these two texts of Severus (which are certainly several years apart), it would seem that the theme was one that was embedded in his mind, and this makes it all highly probable that the real author of the present excerpt from a Letter to the People of Homs can also be identified as none other than Severus himself.¹⁰

8 Ed. R. Hespel, CSCO Scr. Syri 104, 1964, pp. 14-15. The original Greek happens to be preserved in a Greek Catena on Exodus: F. Petit, *La chaîne sur l'Exode. 1. Fragments de Sévère d'Antioche* (Traditio Exegetica Graeca 9), Louvain 1999, no. 380 (p. 26). L. van Rompay, in the Syriac-Greek glossary which he has contributed to this volume (p. 205), is certainly right in suggesting that *šdy'* should be read instead of *šry'* in line 2 of p. 15 of Hespel's edition of the Syriac translation.

9 Ed. M. Brière, PO 35, p. 296. The original Greek is again preserved in the Greek Catena to Exodus, ed. Petit, no 605 (p. 48)

10 The alternative explanation, that a later writer is drawing successively on these two very different texts of Severus, seems very much less likely.

The content

Baptism as a replacement of the Jewish rite of circumcision is a theme commonly found in writings from the general Syrian area (and elsewhere). In one of his *madrāshe* Ephrem indeed has a very similar idea to that expressed in the Letter, when he states that “with the hidden circumcision he (Christ) dismissed open circumcision”,¹¹ “hidden circumcision” (*gzurtā ksitā*) being baptism. Here it is significant that Ephrem employs the term “hidden”, which in his terminology serves as the equivalent of the later term “noetic”. In the East Syriac baptismal rite the prayer over the baptismal oil specifically links “circumcision not by hands” with the oil, and Narsai, in his *memrā* on the baptismal rite plays on this imagery when he states that “the priests holds the iron (instrument) of the oil on the tip of his finger, signs the body and the sense of the soul with its sharp edge”, and at the invocation of the Holy Spirit “he sharpens it (sc. the oil) like iron in order to circumcize iniquity”.¹²

11 Hymni de Virginitate, IX. 1. For the links between circumcision and baptism in Ephrem, see G. Saber, *La théologie baptismale de saint Ephrem*, Kaslik 1974, pp. 38-43.

12 Mingana, *Narsai doctoris syri homiliae et carmina*, Mosul 1905, I, p. 365.