



JEWISH LITURGICAL TRADITIONS IN EARLY SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY

BY

G. ROUWHORST

Several scholarly publications have noted and drawn attention to the presence of a remarkably large number of Jewish traditions in Syriac Christianity, especially during the first four centuries. It is for example generally agreed upon that the Peshitta contains several elements that must have been drawn from targumic or midrashic traditions.¹ Apart from the Syriac translation of the Old Testament, (traces of) Jewish traditions are also to be found in other areas of Syriac ecclesiastical life, such as biblical exegesis², theology³ and asceticism.⁴

The presence of these Jewish elements deserves particular attention for at least two reasons. First, the history of the first centuries of Christianity can to a certain extent be accounted for as a breakaway movement inside the multiform and variegated world of contemporary Judaism. Seen from this point of view, the fact that in one particular geographical area this process took place in a different way and apparently at a comparatively slower pace than elsewhere cannot but provoke the curiosity of every historian interested in the origins of Christianity particularly in relation to its Jewish roots. However, the fact that a strikingly large number of Jewish traditions have been preserved in early Syriac Christianity, is of interest for still another reason. For nearly a century a debate has been going on about the origins of early Syriac Christianity. Generally speaking, two opinions have been defended in this discussion that until now has not yet led to a general agreement. At least since the appearance of F. Burkitt's "Early Eastern Christianity" (London 1904) a considerable number of scholars have upheld the view that Jews must have played a substantial role in the Christianization of a city like Edessa and more generally in the areas east of Antioch where Syriac was spoken, beside Greek or otherwise. A majority of them even goes so far as to ascribe the foundation of the earliest Christian centres in the Syriac-speaking area to a Jewish Christian mission, directly from Jerusalem or Palestine.⁵ On the other hand, there are scholars



who sketch a totally different picture of the origins and the earliest history of Syriac-speaking Christianity. They assume that the Christian belief reached Mesopotamia and neighbouring areas inside and outside the Roman Empire alongside the main trade routes to the east which passed by the Syrian metropolis Antioch. More or less in conformity with this view they consider the earliest Syriac churches to be deeply influenced by the strongly hellenized Church of Antioch.⁶ Now it appears evident that for the outcome of this debate the degree in which early Syriac Christianity has preserved Jewish traditions, is of particular interest. If indeed the number of those traditions—or traces of them—would turn out to be comparatively high, this would provide a strong argument in favour of the theory that Jews played a substantial role in the Christianization of the Syriac area. Moreover, this hypothesis would further gain in probability if those traditions would prove to be old and widespread, in particular if they would appear to date back to the beginnings of Syriac Christianity. Conversely, if the evidence would be otherwise and the number of Jewish traditions would turn out not to be essentially higher than elsewhere, there would be every reason to be sceptical about Burkitt's theory and a more Gentile Christian (Antiochene?) origin of Syriac Christianity would be probable. This would also be the case if the number of Jewish traditions would prove to be relatively high, nevertheless giving the impression to be introduced at a later period or being confined to a limited geographical area.

Among the various types of traditions that are of interest in this connection, those that belong to the area of the *liturgy* merit particular notice, and for the following two reasons. First, without denying the importance of some stimulating and original studies about this issue, it has to be admitted that in comparison with for example the exegesis of the Old Testament in the quest for the origins of Syriac Christianity the liturgy has received relatively little attention. A second reason is that the liturgy is of particular importance because of its communal character. Liturgical rituals are performed, not by individuals but by communities, by groups of believers, even when one must allow for the fact that not all of them participate in a ritual with the same degree of involvement. Moreover, rituals are characterized by a certain stability; usually they are not invented all of a sudden and at least their basic structures are not so easily changed. Therefore liturgical rituals have quite a high representative value. In this respect they differ from ideas and opinions found in the writings of individual authors, such as theologians and exegetes.

Starting from these considerations I want to focus the attention in this



article on the presence, the persistence in one form or another of Jewish liturgical traditions in the Syriac Churches of the first four/five centuries. The question I want to clarify is whether, or rather to what extent those Churches have preserved in their liturgy Jewish ritual traditions or elements of them. And what can be inferred from all this about the origins and the earliest history of Syriac Christianity?

Before entering in detail into these questions, it will be useful to make some preliminary remarks as to the method that will be followed. First, as a matter of fact my concern will not be with those indisputably Jewish traditions present in early Syriac Christianity that are common to all early Christian Churches, such as for example the use of bread and wine in the Eucharist and the rites connected with it, or baptism by immersion. The question is rather to find out whether or not the Syriac Churches have preserved more Jewish liturgical rituals or liturgical elements—and during a longer time—than other Greek or Latin speaking Christian communities. Further, until now I have used quite naïvely the designation “(early) Syriac Christianity.” This designation, however, is quite problematic in so far as it is very difficult to demarcate the borders of the Syriac-speaking region because there were large areas, especially more to the West around Antioch, that were neither purely Syriac nor completely Greek, but bilingual. This has implications for the method we will have to follow and particularly for the selection of the sources. We cannot confine ourselves exclusively to documents written in Syriac. Time and again we will have to take into consideration and make use of texts that have been written in Greek but originate from the bilingual region and betray a clear affinity with Syriac sources.

Traces of Jewish Liturgical Traditions

1. *Church Architecture*

For nearly a century archeologist and historians of liturgy have noted a number of peculiarities in the construction and particularly the ground-plan of a number of ancient churches—the oldest ones dating from the fourth century—in Mesopotamia, as well as in North Syria.⁷ To begin with, the apses of these buildings do not, as usual, contain seats for the clergy. Instead they are filled by the altar that in most other churches of East and West is located further in (the direction of) the nave. Moreover, in the middle of the nave—and this is certainly the most distinctive feature—



one finds an, at first sight, curious structure: a large, walled-in, platform that because of its U-shaped curved wall (near the rear side of the church) forms a sort of counter-apse. This platform is considerably larger than the Byzantine ambos that are likewise situated somewhere in the middle of the church and, for the rest, are also to be found in a number of (West) Syrian Churches. The platform in question differs from these Byzantine/West Syrian ambos in still another respect: in contrast to these lecterns the Mesopotamian/North Syrian type of exedra contains the throne of the bishop and the seats for the rest of the clergy, i.e. precisely the elements one misses in the apses of the Mesopotamian/North Syrian type of church

The explanation of these architectural peculiarities is to be found in a number of literary sources deriving from the area in question. These sources make mention of a “bema” that is situated in the middle of the church and in all respects recalls the raised U-shaped platform of the above-mentioned church buildings. What is, however, more important, is that these writings supply detailed information about the liturgical function fulfilled by the bema. Its function already becomes clear from the earliest reference to the existence of the bema which is to be found in Ephrem’s eighth memra on Nicomedia.⁸ According to the deacon of Nisibis, the bema that was constructed “in the middle” and is described as a “source in the centre around which the congregation flocks together,” was the place where the liturgy of the Word was celebrated, i.e. where the Bible was read, the sermon was held and psalms were sung. This information given by Ephrem, is corroborated by later sources,⁹ in particular by a number of Nestorian commentaries on the liturgy, dating from the seventh till the ninth centuries. From these sources it appears that the entire first part of the Eucharist—including the sermon and the psalms—was celebrated on the bema. This implicated that the clergy remained there during the whole liturgy of the Word: it was only after the preparation of the gifts that the bishop or priest and his concelebrants descended to the sanctuary where the altar stood. And this, of course, explains why there were seats on the bema, but not in the apse or somewhere else near the altar.

In this connection now it is important to note that some authors, among others D. Hickley, have suggested that there could be a relationship between the plan of the Mesopotamian/North Syrian Churches and that of the synagogues as they existed in Palestine and the Diaspora.¹⁰ At least from the second/ third century C.E. some synagogues were provided with platforms that were intended for the reading and the explanation of the Scriptures, i.e. the Torah and the Prophets and, what is still more striking, were called



bemas. Is it therefore not very likely, so the scholars in question concluded, that the groundplan of the Syriac churches, and particularly the use of the bema, is derived from the plan of the synagogues?

Against this theory a number of critical objections may be raised. First, it should be remarked that the only old synagogue of the Syriac-speaking area, of which there remains some physical evidence, is that of Doura-Europos. Moreover, contrary to what Hickley believes, there are no clear traces of a bema in this synagogue.¹¹ As for the numerous synagogues that have been excavated in other areas of the Roman Empire, notably in Galilee, but also in the Diaspora, it has to be stressed that those buildings vary considerably in structure, building plan and interior.¹² What is still more important, among the different buildings excavated there is none of which may be said with certainty that it already at an early period had a disposition identical with or even similar to that of the early Syriac churches.¹³ On the contrary, it is striking that, precisely the synagogues which date of the second and the third century, the period in which one would expect the affinity between (large groups of) Syriac Christians and Jews to be the greatest, have plans that are quite different from those of the later Syriac churches.¹⁴ Moreover, it could be rightly remarked that the word bema is of Greek provenance (one of its basic meanings is: raised platform or tribune).¹⁵ On the basis of all this one might object that it is well imaginable that both Syriac Christians and Jews would have borrowed independently from each other the word βῆμα from Greek to indicate the place from which the Bible was read and explained in their liturgy.

Against this objection the following counter-arguments can be adduced. First, the presence of a platform/exedra that is called "bema," that serves exclusively for the liturgy of the Word (in its entirety) is unique in early Christianity and moreover it does not have a counterpart in non-Christian contemporary religious architecture: apart from the Mesopotamian/North Syrian churches it exists only in the Jewish synagogues. Although one cannot rule out beforehand the possibility that both Syriac Christians and Jews independently adopted the same Greek loan word and gave it the same specific liturgical and architectural meaning, this does not seem to be a very likely solution and it certainly does not gain in plausibility when one realizes that the Jewish bemas are almost certainly older than the Christian ones and that the Christians, when they started constructing their bemas, cannot have been completely ignorant of the plan and interior of synagogues. All in all, in one way or another the architecture of the Mesopotamian and North Syrian churches must, maybe more or less unconsciously, have been influenced by that of the synagogue.



C H R I S T I A N
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA
REG. NO. 118/IV/2016

For further information regarding this
book/text, please contact:

info@thecmsindia.org | *library@thecmsindia.org*
or Visit

www.thecmsindia.org | www.marggam.com

Please join the
'CMSI Benefactors Club'
and support the ongoing projects of
Christian Musicological Society Of India

- Aramaic Project – Reclaim Syriac to Reaffirm Identity.
- Marggam - Christian (digital) Library of India
- Encyclopedia of Syriac Chants
- Directory of Christian Songs
- Music Iconography
- Christian art