

MORAN 'ETHO - 9

S. BROCK

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF SYRIAC LITERATURE

ST. EPHREM ECUMENICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

BAKER HILL, KOTTAYAM – 686 001

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PREFACE

This outline of Syriac literature aims to provide no more than an initial orientation to the subject. The number of authors and writings covered has deliberately been limited to the more important (or, in some cases, the more accessible); furthermore, although it is emphasised that the history of Syriac literature is a continuous one up to the present day, the focus of this outline has been on the period up to the early 14th century. The reasons for these limitations are largely practical ones: Syriac literature of the period up to c.1300 is often of particular significance and importance, and accordingly the editing of Syriac texts has largely been confined to authors of this period; but it should be noted that even here many important works remain unpublished, and reference has on occasion been made to these. On the whole, however, the writers selected and the works specifically mentioned in Section III are for the most part confined to those which are available in published form; within this section the most important authors are indicated with an asterisk(*). Indication is also given of the availability of an English translation (and/or, on occasion, to traslations into other modern European languages); details of these can be found in Section VI. In Section IV preliminary guidance is given to certain specific topics. Some indication of the very large number of texts translated into Syriac is given in Section V. In order to give the reader a first impression of the variety to be found within Syriac literature, a small selection of short samples has been provided in Section VII Finally, Some basic guidance for further reading will be found in Section VII.

In Section III the following abbreviations are used:

E= East Syriac (Church of the East)

ET, FT, GT, IT, LT = English, French, German, Italian, Latin traslation available.

W= West syriac (predominantly Syrian Orthodox)

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A brief outline of Syriac Literature

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I. A BIRD'S EYE VIEW: THE MAIN PERIOD SUSICOLOGICAL

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

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

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

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

II. THE SECULAR AND ECCLEASIASTICAL BACK-GROUND.

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

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

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



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edn 1989). Hymns on Julian.

-K.Mc Vey, <u>Ephrem the Syrian</u>, <u>Hymns</u> (1989). Includes Hymns on Nativity on Virginity, and on Julian.

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-C.Mc Carthy, St. Ephrem, Commentary on the Diatessron (1993).

-E.G.Mathews and J.P.Amar, St.Ephrem the Syrian. Selected Prose Works.

Includes Commentaries on Genesis and on Exodus, Homily on our Lord, and Letter to Publius.

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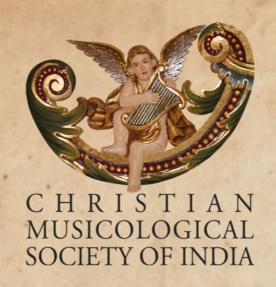
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