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An Ancient Community of Jerusalem and its Heritage: Syriac Christians of the Holy City between Historical Memories and Future Challenges

Abstract:

Jerusalem exerts a force of attraction on every Christian community. Different Christian denominations have historically been, and are still today, part of the Christian culture of the Holy City: Catholics, Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Copts and Ethiopians. Each denomination sought for their spiritual needs to be met as closely as possible to the area where the Passions of Christ transpired; the closer their sites were to the Holy Places of Jerusalem, the greater their supremacy over their confessional competitors. It was not only monks and clergy that sought to come in touch with the earthly Jerusalem, either, but also simple Christians, travellers and writers. Most monks were interested in seeing earthly Jerusalem, but some, rather than see the walls of the Holy City and its holy places, preferred to meditation on the heavenly Jerusalem instead.

This paper will begin from the above premise, and will introduce the reader to the heritage of Syriac Christians in Jerusalem. It will analyze the way in which these Christians belonged to a tradition shaped in the Holy Land and bequeathed them through their own identity and, respectively, how these are expressed, adapted and narrated in specific literary sources.

Keywords: Syriac communities, the Holy City, the Monastery of St Mary Magdalene, the Convent of St Mark, Bethlehem

Syrians in Jerusalem in Early Islamic Times

The Syriac Orthodox community was quite closely connected to the Holy City of Jerusalem. Syriac Christianity had its centre in the area around Antioch, the place where the followers of Christ were first called Christians; they also had a notable presence in the former Sassanid capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and in the Persian Gulf, and even beyond the Mesopotamian area, reaching as far as the Asian space. This branch of Christianity became divided into two distinct Churches in the 5th century, during the Christological struggles which, from sister churches, saw the two Syriac denominations (the East Syriac, or 'Assyrian' Church, and the West Syriac, or 'Jacobite' Church) become bitter competitors. Both the East and West Syrians have nevertheless maintained a continuous interaction with the Holy City throughout, and have even contributed to the creation of a spiritual and cultural heritage in the Holy Land. Looking back through history, we see that data about Syriac Christian travelers to Jerusalem was already in existence since pre-Islamic times. The Syriac monastic literature distinctly mentions the "habit" of Syriac monks, as of all lay people, of undertaking pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Egypt¹.

We know from Christian sources of a purported agreement between Omar and the Byzantine Patriarch of the Holy Land, Sophronius of Jerusalem, penned in the year 638 – the year the Arabs invaded the Holy City – a questionable document that would appear to have protected the communities of the Holy City, and which was full of clauses and conditions that were later repeated in any further treaty of protection that Muslims have afforded Christians throughout history. To invoke a selection of historical sources, the Anonymous Syriac Chronicle, the Annals of Eutychius of Alexandria, and the Universal Chronicle of Michael the Great (1166-1199) respectively, all mention that Omar made peace with the inhabitants of the Holy City, and describe his presence in the Holy City in the company of Sophronius of Jerusalem with whom the Muslim leader negotiated the new political and religious realities and conditions of the Holy City².

However, the Syrians were also part of a broad diversity of Christian communities active in the Holy City during early Islamic rule. According to tradition, at the beginning of the 9th century the Abbasid Caliph Harun

¹ Fiey, 1969, pp. 113-126; Meinardus, 1967, pp. 112-129.

² Chabot, 1937, pp. 254-255 (syr.); p. 199 (lat.); Breydy, 1985, pp. 139-140 (ar.), p. 119 (germ.); Chabot, 1901, pp. 425-426. See also Karkenni, 1976, p. 71.

al-Rashid offered protective rights over Jerusalem to the Frankish King Charlemagne³. In the context of Charlemagne's charitable foundations, the alleged agreement seems to testify to a Greek, Syrian, Armenian, Latin and other denominational Christian liturgical presence in the churches of the Holy City, especially on the Mount of Olives⁴. The continuous presence of the Syrians in Jerusalem led them to establish an Episcopal See for their own Church in Jerusalem, during the time of East Syriac Patriarch Timothy I at the beginning of the 9th century. This was most probably owed to the increased mobility between Mesopotamia and Palestine, and especially warranted by the increasing interest of both Syriac monks and the Syriac faithful in the spirituality of the Holy Places. Conversely, the the East Syriac Church also appears to have ordained a bishopric of their own, sometime in in the late 8th or 9th century. However, West Syrians were present in much greater numbers, especially in the coastal cities of Acre, Tyre and Tripoli, places through which Syriac pilgrimage routes passed and where large groups likely remained as traders, in time founding their own churches on the Mediterranean coast. Consequently, it was the Metropolitan Bishop "of Jerusalem and of the sea-coast" that embodied the church administration of this West Syriac community of Palestine, much earlier, in the 6th century⁵. Yacob Koriah Karkenni argues that the West Syrians probably also had a bishopric in Tiberias in the early medieval period, which only lasted for a short time⁶. It is hard to believe that, for some time, the West Syriac church possessed more than one bishopric in the Holy Land; nevertheless, smaller parishes and churches doubtlessly existed, and these were not few. These churches were established for liturgical worship by those who originally came as pilgrims or traders and settled there, representing clear evidence of an ongoing transfer of Christian individuals from Mesopotamia to Palestine.

At the beginning of the second Christian millennium

Beginning in the 11th century and in particular during the time of the Crusades, the Syriac community had a relatively strong presence in the Holy City. Under later Seljuk and Ottoman rule, Syrians experienced what scholars a "marginalized existence"⁷. In A.D. 1099, the Crusaders

³ Runciman, 1935, pp. 606-619.

⁴ Karkenni, 1976, p. 9.

⁵ Kaufhold, 2003, pp. 149-150. Karkenni, 1976, p. 60.

⁶ Karkenni, 1976, p. 60.

⁷ Murre-van den Berg, 2013, p. 61.

conquered the Holy City, and Syrians lost many of their churches and monasteries. When the West Syriac Patriarch Michael Rabo visited the Latin Patriarch of the Holy City, the situation again appeared satisfactory. This was most likely Michael the Great's second sojourn to Jerusalem after his arrival for the Easter celebrations at the Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalene in 1168. It would appear that, from that time onwards, the Syriac Orthodox Church would come into possession of the chapel of St James in the Holy Sepulchre of the Holy City⁸.

Located in the "Syrian Quarter", the Syriac Christians were affected by the time of the city's conquest at the hands of Ṣalāḥ ad-Din. Sources show that the West Syriac Bishop of the Holy City at that time was Athanasius, the brother of Michael Rabo. The bishop was forced to leave the Holy City, and died in Antioch two years after his departure from Jerusalem⁹. The Muslim conquest very likely determined many Syriac monks and Christians to flee to Cyprus and to other places. From the 9th century and up to Ṣalāḥ ad-Din's conquest of Jerusalem, the West Syriac Christians had as their traditional core the Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalene, which was probably built before the time of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, who in 806/7 destroyed the Church of Saint Mary Magdalene (alongside many other churches, as per the testimony of Michael Rabo¹⁰). The pretext of their destruction was that they were built after the Muslim conquest, and therefore went against Muslim law. Later, on the site of this destroyed church another was built, also dedicated to Mary Magdalene¹¹.

The question therefore arises: what is known about the sister church of the West Syrians in terms of churches and monastic possessions in Jerusalem. According to Amnon Linder, an East Syriac community was present in Jerusalem in the 7th century¹². Archaeological evidence shows that, no later than this period, an East Syriac monastery probably existed on the Mount of Olives¹³. Sebastian Brock discusses the available data surrounding this possibility, and launches a valid hypothesis about the existence of an East Syriac hermitage near Jericho in the 7th century¹⁴. Otto Meinardus proposes a later date (9th century) for the establishment of this East Syriac monastic retreat – too late a date, in this author's view, considering that there is evidence that an East Syriac diocese for Jerusalem

⁸ Chabot, 1905, p. 332; Abbeloos and Lamy, 1874, col. 545-546; Meinardus, 1963, p. 65.

⁹ Chabot, 1905, pp. 411-412.

¹⁰ Chabot, 1905, p. 21; Vööbus, 1970, p. 29, n. 41.

¹¹ See Setton, 1989, p. 76.

¹² Linder, 1996, p. 153.

¹³ Baramki and Stephan, 1935, p. 84; Meinardus, 1967, p. 124; Linder, 1996, p. 153.

¹⁴ Brock, 2001, p. 203; Fiey, 1983, pp. 34-38.

had already been founded by that time, which would have created much earlier conditions for local monastic development¹⁵. We should also not exclude the possibility of other East Syriac activity from the same period in the Holy Land, and basing this on plaster inscriptions in Syriac excavated in Tel Mšāš, east of Beersheba. One fragment was written in Estrangelo script and contained the word: *yšw* ܝܫܘܐ. Another fragment is much more complete: “*māran ishō mšihō*” (our Lord, Jesus Christ).¹⁶

To return to the West Syriac community and to their Church of Mary Magdalene, we might add that, in the 12th century, a bishop named Ignatius Gadina renovated and enlarged the holy edifice¹⁷. As the centre of the West Syriac community of the Holy City, the monastery also possessed some additional properties which were seized by the Crusaders. The colophons of three Syriac manuscripts, analyzed by Andrew Palmer, show how the local West Syriac Bishop Ignatius Gadina and his successor Thomas (III), the Metropolitan of Jerusalem¹⁸, negotiated with the local power-holders to reach favourable agreements for the community, either managing to recover lost properties or to preserve the properties under threat of being abusively seized¹⁹. After Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn’s conquest of Jerusalem, the Monastery of Mary Magdalene did not immediately lose its splendor. Sometime in the last decade of the 12th century, Michael Rabo mentions that his West Syriac community still held the Monastery²⁰. Barhebraeus also confirms, in his Syriac Chronicle, that 70 West Syriac monks still lived in the Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalene in 1236²¹. Most likely, the convent was later transformed into a Muslim school²².

The Monastery of St Mark – the continuity of the Syriac tradition weakened by loss of the Monastery of St Mary Magdalene

This did not mean, however, that the West Syrians were left without a spiritual centre in Jerusalem. Towards the end of the 13th century, the Monastery of St Mark became the centre of the West Syriac Christians in Jerusalem. The existence of the Syriac monastery of St Mark (Mor Markos)

¹⁵ Meinardus, 1967, p. 124; Baramki and Stephan, 1935, p. 83.

¹⁶ Brock, 2001, p. 203; Fritz and Kempinski, 1983, pp. 38-85.

¹⁷ Martin, 1889, pp. 54, 75, 76.

¹⁸ Linder, 1996, p. 154.

¹⁹ Palmer, 1992, pp. 81-84. See also Kaufhold, 2003, p. 154.

²⁰ Chabot, 1905, p. 386.

²¹ Abbeloos, 1872, col. 659. See also Voste, 1929, p. 83; Meinardus, 1963, p. 66; Vööbus, 1970, pp. 122-123. See also Altaner, 1924, p. 45.

²² See Meinardus, 1963, p. 66.

dated to before the Ottoman decrees, with the structure most probably built during the Crusader period²³. Indeed, the monastery's inception is obscure²⁴. Heleen Murre-van den Berg points out that it was "acquired from the Copts sometime in the late 15th century. This coincided with a period of increased pilgrimage to the Holy City from what, by then, had become the heartland of the Syriac Orthodox Church — the hilly country of Tur Abdin in southeastern Anatolia"²⁵. Murre-van den Berg's opinion is accurate, as the *Ethicon* of Bar Hebraeus (specifically, the *memra* on travelling to Jerusalem)²⁶, alongside other sources such as Sergius of Ḥāḥ's report on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem from the end of the 15th century²⁷ distinctly show that pilgrimage to the Holy City was a spiritual goal on the agenda of both Syriac monks and lay people.

The monastic settlement of St Mark is identified, by tradition, with the site of the Upper Room of the Last Supper (Mark 14:12-25), the house of Mary, the mother of John Marcus the Apostle. A large icon placed above the entrance to the church emphasizes the symbols of different biblical scenes understood to have transpired in that place (Jesus' Last Supper with the twelve Apostles, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that represents the point of the universal church's inauguration)²⁸. The monastery is situated in the Old City's Armenian Quarter. The Syrians' connection with the biblical identity of this place was later supported by a 6th century inscription discovered in 1940, which can be seen today in the courtyard of the convent. It encloses the following statement in Syriac: "This is the house of Mary, mother of John, called Mark. Proclaimed a Church by the Holy Apostles under the name of Virgin Mary, Mother of God, after the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into Heaven. Restored after the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in the year 73 A.D."²⁹.

It is likely that the convent's beginnings were owed to by the West Syrians' loss of their other churches and monasteries in the Holy City, such that their Bishops came and stayed at the Monastery of St Mark. The first bishop to made the monastery his home was Ignatius III, in A.D. 1471³⁰; since that time, the convent underwent a cycle of destruction and restoration. As to the cultural patrimony of the Monastery of St Mark, it

²³ Murre-van den Berg, 2013, p. 61.

²⁴ Karkenni, 1976, p. 41.

²⁵ Murre-van den Berg, 2013, p. 61.

²⁶ Teule, 1993, pp. 104-111 (engl.), 121-130 (syr.).

²⁷ Kaufhold, 2015, pp. 371-387.

²⁸ See also Murre-van den Berg, 2013, p. 60, fig. 1; Calder, 2016a, p. 94.

²⁹ See Kaufhold, 2003, p. 160; Palmer, Van Gelder, 1994, p. 36.

³⁰ Karkenni, 1976, p. 45.

must be said that it also represents an important centre for rare manuscript collections: several hundreds of ancient Syriac and Garshuni manuscripts are deposited here. Other manuscripts were sent to the Library of the Syriac Patriarchate in Damascus before 1948; some are now in St. Mark's Cathedral, Taaneck, New Jersey³¹. The notable emphasis this community placed on its Syriac identity can be seen from the fact that the monastery also has a journal, *al-Hikmat* ('Wisdom')³², whose goal – promoted even on the cover, both in Syriac and Arabic – is to “take care to keep Syriac learning and language alive”³³. The first volume has been published in 1914; however, owing to wartime conditions, it was suspended until 1927, not least because Salim Sami and Michel Haqqi, two members of the journal's editorial board, lost their lives during the war³⁴.

As a place of Syriac tradition in Jerusalem, the heart of spirituality, Saint Mark's convent is, by its location, implicitly a place of pilgrimage for the Syriac Orthodox faithful which mostly arrive during the Easter period with the main goal of praying at the Holy Sepulchre³⁵. One further reason for Syriac pilgrims to come and visit the Holy City is the chapel of St Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (located behind the Edicule, in the Rotunda) which, after many disputes (mostly with Armenians) still belongs to the West Syrians³⁶.

From Jerusalem to Bethlehem. A living religious culture and community and their unpredictable future

Another place in the Holy Land where Syriac culture is still preserved today and worthy of mentioning here is Bethlehem, with a Syriac Orthodox population of 1200 individuals (330 households). Most of these came to the Holy Land at the beginning of the 20th century, when they fled the *seyfo* ('sword', in Syriac) in 1915. It was in this context that

³¹ Karkenni, 1976, p. 61; Dolabani, 1994.

³² *Hekhmtho* in Syriac.

³³ Murre-van den Berg, 2013, p. 66.

³⁴ It is worth noting that one of the journal's early editors was Yuhannan Dolobani, who expended great efforts in promoting the Syriac language to these Syriac communities (see Ibrahim, 2009). The Syriac Christians are proud of their identity and language, which was spoken by Jesus Christ as well. In hymns, they chant: “We are Syrian! We are Syrian! The first who tasted belief. Ours is the sweetest of tongues, And our glory, the pride of ages.” St. Mark's Syriac Orthodox Convent, 2003; Calder, 2016b, p. 191.

³⁵ See Brock, Goldfus, and Kofsky, 2006-2007, pp. 415-438.

³⁶ Murre-van den Berg, 2013, p. 61. See also Maier, 2004, pp. 305-312.

they came to Bethlehem and Jerusalem, attested to by the fact that, before 1870, the number of Syriac Orthodox of Bethlehem and Jerusalem was only around 150³⁷. It is interesting that these Syriac Christians are characterized in the local Palestinian society by the moniker of *ṭā'ifāh*, indicating “a religious denomination or sect”, recognized in Palestine. As Mark D. Calder highlights, this system of *ṭā'ifiyyah* is a holdover of the Ottoman *millet* system; more specifically this is a “communal status” that the Syriac Orthodox “achieved in 1923”³⁸. Although they are part of the *ṭā'ifāh siryāniyyah* registration, the Syriac community members of Bethlehem and of other parts of the West Bank possess Palestinian identity cards, not unlike some of those from Jerusalem who, depending of their residence, hold either Palestinian or Israeli Jerusalem identity cards³⁹.

Bethlehem is an important place for Christians in the context of the Church of the Nativity, where processions are organized each year on Christmas Eve. The Syriac Orthodox of Bethlehem celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ on January 7th, in accordance to the Julian calendar, as many churches in the Holy Land also do. On Christmas Eve, January 6th, the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop reaches the Manger Square in Bethlehem, as the first of the four patriarchs who join the event. He is greeted by local government leaders and the clergy of local churches, beginning an impressive procession through the streets⁴⁰. Among other focal points of the procession, one significant to the Syrians themselves is their Church of St Mary, Mother of God, located in the Syrian Quarter (*the Hosh*, or *hus as-syrian*), which includes the church building itself, (built in 1927 as the core of the community) as well as the scouts' building, the Syriac Orthodox club, the library and several residences⁴¹.

Although they are close to local culture and sensibilities, the Syriac Christians of the Holy Land sometimes collide with the local power. One case which has been quite hotly debated was the fate of Mar Sewerus Malki Murad, the former Syriac Orthodox bishop of Jerusalem with the title of “Patriarchal Vicar of the Holy Land and Jordan”, who was arrested on vague charges on April 3rd, 2016, in Bethlehem. He usually resided in the Syriac Orthodox Church of St Mark, in the Old City of Jerusalem, an area under Israeli protection. Sewerus Malki Murad, who had been the leader

³⁷ Brock, and Witakowski, 2001, p. 66; Calder, 2017, p. 56. See also Ferrand, 2021.

³⁸ Calder, 2016a, p. 92.

³⁹ Calder, 2016b, pp. 182-183.

⁴⁰ See Calder, 2017, p. 60.

⁴¹ Calder, 2017, p. 66.

of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the Holy Land since 1996, was released some days later, and was transferred to Brazil. The new Archbishop and Patriarchal Vicar of the Syriac Orthodox Church is Gabriel Dahho, who was installed in April 2021.

Although Syriac Christians have, for centuries, contributed in many ways to the spiritual heritage of the Holy Land, and even though they feel not altogether different from the local ethnic groups, they nevertheless sometimes fall prey to local challenges. In conclusion, no one can know what the future might bring the Holy Land; moreover, we cannot either glean what any specific Christian confession there, in situ, might expect next. But it is beyond doubt that their fate in the Holy Land is, above all, the fate all Christians in general, with their deep history and spiritual heritage, shared.

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