

# The Ancient Near East in the Late Antique Near East: Syriac Christian Appropriation of the Biblical East

ADAM H. BECKER

In the summer of 2005 I had a friendly but persistent disagreement, while staying in south eastern Turkey at Deyr-ul-Zafaran, the Syrian Orthodox monastery just outside the city of Mardin, which also serves as the see for the archbishop of the Mardin diocese, a region which is both a literal and a spiritual homeland for many of the Syrian Orthodox (or West Syrians, as they are also known).<sup>1</sup> For several days I had spoken only a pigeon English-Turkish and it was a great pleasure when someone with a familiar — Boston! — accent approached me and started speaking. My interlocutor turned out to be a scholar like myself, but one of Syriac Christian descent, in fact, the author of two books on Assyrians, that is, East Syrians or “Nestorian” Christians, in America.<sup>2</sup> Appropriate to the interests of this essay, his name was Sargon, a third generation Assyrian American whose family comes in part from Kharput, near modern Elaziğ in south eastern Turkey. Our disagreement was over an issue that understandably angers some Syriac Christians.<sup>3</sup>

It is a commonplace to find in books and articles on the history of Syriac Christianity, especially those published by either ecclesiastical or

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<sup>1</sup>They are also known inaccurately as “Monophysites.” For a discussion of the numerous names used for the various churches that identify with the Syriac tradition, see John Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Powers* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 1–32. I would like to thank the editors for their work on both the colloquium and this volume. Sargon Donabed was kind and patient enough to read the manuscript and provide numerous useful comments. I dedicate this article to Bridget M. Purcell as a small recompense for the inspiration she has provided in other, more significant matters.

<sup>2</sup>Sargon Donabed, *Remnants of Heroes: The Assyrian Experience: The Continuity of the Assyrian Heritage from Kharput to New England* (Skokie, Ill.: Assyrian Academic Society Press, 2004). See also Sargon Donabed and Ninos Donabed, *Assyrians of Eastern Massachusetts* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Arcadia, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>I use the term “Syriac Christian” here for Christians from all the churches that identify with the Syriac linguistic, cultural, and ecclesiastical traditions. It serves as a form of short hand and I do not use it as a definitive appellation somehow essential to the identity of the communities addressed here. In other words, I am aware of the political definitional problems that arise from using such a term, especially one that has been employed as an outsider term until recently.

nationalist-ethnic organizations, claims about the ancient pedigree of the Syriac peoples. Related to these claims is an easy slippage in contemporary discussions between the use of diverse ethnic terms, such as Syriac, Aramaic, Assyrian, and Syrian.<sup>4</sup> For example, the website of the Assyrian International News Agency divides the long history of the “Assyrian people” in the following manner.<sup>5</sup>

1. Emergence: beginnings to 2400 B.C.
2. First Golden Age: 2400 B.C. to 612 B.C.
3. First Dark Age: 612 B.C. to 33 A.D.
4. Second Golden Age: 33 A.D. to 1300 A.D.
5. Second Dark Age: 1300 A.D. to 1918 A.D.
6. Diaspora: 1918 A.D. to the present

The website provides a detailed explanation of what constitutes each of these periods. The “First Golden Age” is the period of the *floruit* of ancient Assyrian culture. “This period would see 1800 years of Assyrian hegemony over Mesopotamia, beginning with Sargon of Akkad in 2371 B.C. and ending with the tragic fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.”<sup>6</sup> The “First Dark Age” ends with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, traditionally placed at 33 C.E. The “Second Golden Age” includes the period of the growth of the Syriac Christian communities as well as the centuries of their greatest literary production. This period came to an end, according to this account, due to the ongoing economic oppression of Christians by Arabs as well as the Mongol invasion of the late thirteenth century. This led to the “Second Dark Age” which itself ended with the nadir of the Assyrian genocide, concomitant with the more well known Armenian Genocide, and the subsequent Assyrian global diaspora. Strikingly, according to this account, the different Assyrian communities only in the later period began to define themselves by church affiliation. Before this they were rather an ethnic community.

The continuity between ancient Assyria and the Christian communities from Mesopotamia known as Assyrian is constituted in a number of ways. For example, Assyrians today celebrate the Akitu festival, the ancient Assyrian new year celebration, in the same way that Kurds, Iranians, and some central asian Turkic peoples continue to celebrate Norouz, the ancient Persian new year festival. Some modern celebrants of the Akitu infuse the event with contemporary notions of ancient Assyria, wearing

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<sup>4</sup> On the development of the term “Assyrian,” see Wolfhart Heinrichs, “The Modern Assyrians — Name and Nation,” in *Semitica. Serta philologica Constantino Tseretli dicata*, (ed. R. Contini Riccardo Contini, Fabrizio Pennacchietti and Mauro Tosco; Torino: Silvio Zamorani, 1993), 99–114.

<sup>5</sup> “Brief History of Assyrians,” [cited 13 August 2006]. Online: <http://www.aina.org/aol/peter/brief.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

toga-like costumes in imitation of modern reconstructions of ancient dress. Similarly, some modern Assyrian church architecture specifically imitates modern reconstructions of ancient Assyrian architecture,<sup>7</sup> while ancient Assyrian iconography has been reproduced in nationalist literature and webpages, often with the Assyrian national flag superimposed on it. Furthermore, academic articles are published making arguments for racial and cultural continuity.<sup>8</sup> The most significant connector between the past and the present is the name “Assyrian” itself, which facilitates these socio-historical confluences.

My immediate response to many of these claims of continuity is: hogwash. As others have pointed out, Western missionaries to the region in the nineteenth century introduced the idea that the indigenous Christians were an ancient race, or the remains of Nineveh, to steal from the title of A. H. Layard’s book on the archeology of the region which also makes such suggestions.<sup>9</sup> Syriac Christians were equated by European travelers, missionaries, and diplomats, with the lost tribes of Israel, the last of the ancient Assyrians, and, since they used the same language as Jesus, the oldest Christian churches in the world.<sup>10</sup> These modern ideas about the special continuity between the Syriac present and the ancient world were then taken up by Syriac Christians and must be understood as a modern invention worthy of the study of a Benedict Anderson or an Eric Hobsbawm rather than an ancient historian.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Alison Salvesen, “The Legacy of Babylon and Nineveh in Aramaic Sources,” in *The Legacy of Mesopotamia* (ed. S. Dalley, et al.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 157 for a similar comment.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the paper of the Assyriologist Simo Parpola, “Assyrian Identity in Ancient Times and Today,” n.p. [cited Oct. 19, 2006]. Online: [www.aina.org/articles/assyrianidentity.pdf](http://www.aina.org/articles/assyrianidentity.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains: With an Account of a Visit to the Chaldean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis, or Devil Worshippers; and an Inquiry into the Manners and Arts of the Ancient Assyrians* (2 vols.; London: J. Murray, 1848–1849).

<sup>10</sup> See for example Asahel Grant, *The Nestorians or The Lost Tribes* (New York: Harper, 1841); Henry Holme, *The Oldest Christian Church, Supplying the Missing Link of Centuries. A Historic Revelation from the Assyrian Mountains of Adiabene, the Gozan of Scripture* (London: Marshall Brothers, 1896[?]); and W. A. Wigram, *The Assyrians and Their Neighbours* (London: G. Bell, 1929).

<sup>11</sup> For the development of modern Assyrian identity and nationalism, see H. L. Murre-van den Berg, “A Syrian Awakening: Alqosh and Urmia as Centres of Neo-Syriac Writing,” in *Symposium Syriacum VII*, (ed. René Lavenant; Orientalia Christiana Analecta 256; Rome, 1998), 499–515; idem, “The Church of the East in the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century: World Church or Ethnic Community?” in *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam* (ed. J.J. van Ginkel, H.L. Murre-van den Berg and T.M. van Lint; Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 301–320; Robert William De Kelaita, “On the Road to Nineveh: A Brief History of Assyrian Nationalism 1892-1990,” *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 8.1 (1994): 6–30.

At one point in my conversation with Sargon he referred me to the Episcopalian missionary Horatio Southgate's "Narrative of a Visit to the Syrian (Jacobite) Church of Mesopotamia" from 1844.

I observed that the Armenians did not know them under the name which I used, *Syriani*; but called them ASSOURI, which struck me the more at the moment from its resemblance to our English name *Assyrians*, from whom they claim their origin, being sons, as they say, of Assour, (Asshur,) who 'out of the land of Shinar went forth, and builded [*sic.*] Nineveh, and the city Rehoboth, and Calah, and Resin between Nineveh and Calah: the same is a great city.'<sup>12</sup>

This passage appears on a website that lists references to the Assyrians as a continuously existing people up to the present.<sup>13</sup> Clearly some modern Assyrians feel threatened and are publishing testimonia lists online. The point we are supposed to take from the Southgate evidence is this: the Assyrians were called Assyrians before the Europeans came — thus the claims about ancient origins are true and the Assyrians have always been Assyrians. There are other instances of this and the issue is in part one of semantics: "Assyrian" was a term that Aramaic-speaking Christians employed to refer to themselves for centuries, but does this make them Assyrian? I would like to present a compromise position, one lying between the radical discontinuities I tend to focus on as a historian and the continuities my interlocutor Sargon was arguing for.

This compromise position would not please some Assyrian nationalists —such as the author of the timeline I cited above — and it in fact maintains the position that a large part of Assyrian self-understanding is dependent on Western sources. However, the difference is that this positioning vis-à-vis an Occidental Other does not find its origin in the nineteenth century, but rather in the sixth century and even before. Syriac Christians lived on the margins of the noisy and prolific Christian cultures of the Roman Empire and, despite the aspersions they often cast on things Greek, commonly took their self-understanding from texts and ideas coming from the West. Moreover, those Syriac Christians who lived in the Sasanian Empire further identified with the East as they found a place for themselves within that realm. Elsewhere, I have addressed what

<sup>12</sup> Horatio Southgate, *Narrative of a Visit to the Syrian (Jacobite) Church of Mesopotamia: With Statements and Reflections upon the Present State of Christianity in Turkey, and the Character and Prospects of the Eastern Churches* (New York: Dana and Company, 1856; repr., Piscataway, N.J.: Georgias Press, 2003), 80.

<sup>13</sup> "Assyrians from the Fall of Nineveh to the Present," [cited 19 August 2006]. Online: <http://www.christiansofiraq.com/facts.html>. We also find at this site among other references a passage from the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, the West-Syrian Patriarch (1126–1199), in which he comments on the connections between ancient Near Eastern kings and Syriac Christians. For this text, see J. B. Chabot, ed., *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche, 1166–1199* (Paris: Leroux, 1899–1904), appendix II, 748–51 (p. 750 is quoted on this webpage).

has been referred to as the “Egyptianization” of Syriac Christianity.<sup>14</sup> This entailed the disappearance of the indigenous pre-monastic tradition of celibacy, while the “influx of western monasticism, and more specifically western monastic texts, effected a rewriting of monastic history, thus obfuscating the origins of Syriac Christianity and early Syriac monasticism.”<sup>15</sup> This “Egyptianization” of East-Syrian monasticism from the sixth century onward culminates in the very late Mar Awgen (St. Eugenios) tradition, which holds that monasticism was brought to Mesopotamia by an Egyptian monk.<sup>16</sup> A similar process can be seen in the appropriation of the works of Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399) and the later Alexandrian Neoplatonic commentary tradition on Aristotle’s logical works to articulate in a more technical manner ideas that can be found in the works of the fourth-century Syriac poet Ephrem the Syrian.<sup>17</sup>

I would suggest that, to a much lesser degree and in a different manner, there was also an “Assyrianization” of Syriac Culture particularly from the sixth century onwards. By “Assyrianization” I mean the process whereby Syriac-speaking Christians in Mesopotamia employed the Assyria they found in the Bible as well as in Greek sources translated into Syriac as a model for understanding themselves and their place in the world.<sup>18</sup> I emphasize that this was only a tendency, one that showed itself at certain times in response to specific conditions. The biblical Assyria shows up in a number of Syriac sources and serves as a paradigm for understanding events as diverse as saints’ lives and the Arab conquest.<sup>19</sup> A tendency to auto-orientalize appears in some of the earliest of eastern Christian sources: for example, the second century Tatian’s strong self-identification as a *barbaros* Assyrian vis-à-vis the Greek

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<sup>14</sup> Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 172–75.

<sup>15</sup> Becker, *Fear of God*, 173.

<sup>16</sup> J.-M. Fiey, “Aones, Awun et Awgin (Eugène). Aux origines du monachisme mésopotamien,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 80 (1962): 52–81.

<sup>17</sup> Becker, *Fear of God*, 150–53.

<sup>18</sup> See comments at Sebastian P. Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties,” *Studies in Church History* 18 (1982): 18–19 (repr. as ch. VI in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* [London: Variorum, 1984]). A similar argument may be found in John Joseph, “The Bible and the Assyrians: It Kept Their Memory Alive,” *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 12.1 (1998): 70–76.

<sup>19</sup> For the latter see Amir Harrak, “Ah! The Assyrian is the Rod of My Hand!: Syriac View of History after the Advent of Islam,” in *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam* (ed. J. J. Van Ginkel, H. L. Murre-Van den Berg, T. M. Van Lint; *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 134; Louvain: Peeters, 2005), 45–65.

tradition.<sup>20</sup> (With this it is worth noting Drijvers' elevation of Tatian to central but forgotten importance in earliest Syriac Christianity.<sup>21</sup>) This process was facilitated by the continuing use of the geographical name Assyria or Asorestan in Middle Persian in the Sasanian era. This issue of auto-orientalizing is perhaps best exemplified in a pre-Christian mosaic from Edessa: it is not clear if the figure in a mosaic from c. 200 simply reflects Orpheus as he was often depicted in classical art with his Phrygian cap or whether his turban-like headwear in this context may have been read as simply local flavor.<sup>22</sup> This seems to be an instance of easterners depicting something as eastern.

The process I am addressing can be divided into two parts: One, the spatial, temporal, and cultural localizing of their church and its history within an East described within scripture and, two, a tendency to treat Christians within that space-time-culture complex as a people or a nation, especially one descended from the scriptural nation of Assyrians. A corollary to this ethno-geographic localization via the biblical text is the appropriation of Biblical Israelite "people" language, something commonly done by Jews and Christians at different points in history.<sup>23</sup> This corollary finds its fullest development in the much later tradition of the "lost tribe." Also related to these tendencies is the notion that Syriac is the original language, the one God spoke when he created the world.<sup>24</sup>

In addressing "Assyrianization" I am not referring to the actual reception of ancient near eastern culture, such as vocabulary, dialogue and dispute poems, and wisdom traditions such as those of Ahiqar.<sup>25</sup> I am interested, rather, in evidence that is more difficult to interpret. For example, the references to ancient near eastern Gods in some of the Syriac sources, especially those in the transitional period of the fourth through sixth centuries, reflect both the remnants of extremely old cults but also a Christian re-imagining of these cults. With regard to pre-

<sup>20</sup> Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments* (ed. and trans. M. Whittaker; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 1.1–2.17.

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Han J. W. Drijvers, "East of Antioch. Forces and Structures in the Development of Early Syriac Theology," in *East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac Christianity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), ch. I.

<sup>22</sup> J. F. Healey, "A New Syriac Mosaic Inscription," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 51 (2006): 313–27. Note what looks like a phrygian cap in mosaics depicting locals, H. J. W. Drijvers and J. F. Healey, eds., *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene: Texts, Translations, and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), Am 2 and 4a.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 66–94.

<sup>24</sup> Milka Rubin, "The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49 (1998): 306–33, esp. 322–28.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Salvesen, "Legacy of Babylon," 139–61. However, 157–58 briefly addresses "Syriac Views of the Assyrians".

Christian religion in the sources it is difficult to draw a line between the reflection of reality and the plain fantasy of idolatry.<sup>26</sup>

One Eastern Syriac text that exemplifies a number of these issues is the *History of Karkha d-Beth Slokh and the Martyrs therein*.<sup>27</sup> Karkha d-Beth Slokh was the capital of the ancient province of Beth Garmai and is today the modern city of Kirkuk, which since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has become a center of violent contestation between Sunni Arabs and Kurds. The *History* attests to a striking local Christian civic pride. We find something similar earlier in the Syriac sources in an effort on the part of Christians in Edessa to link their city to Jesus and the apostles. Such an effort is apparent in the Abgar tradition,<sup>28</sup> the related story of the *mandylion*,<sup>29</sup> the Thomas tradition of the city, which included the maintenance of the apostle's supposed remains in an eponymous church,<sup>30</sup> and in literary texts, such as Jacob of Sarug's homily on Edessa and Jerusalem.<sup>31</sup> The *History* consists of three parts:<sup>32</sup> the ancient history of the city, the origins of Christianity and the persecution under Shapur II in the fourth century, and more recent persecutions under Yazdegard II in 445. The ancient history of the city includes the story of its foundation by "Sardana," son of "Sanherib," its enlargement under the Achaemenid ruler Darius I, and its transformation under the Hellenistic king, Seleucus I. The text begins:

The king of Assyria, whose name in Syriac was Sardana, established the foundations of this great city. This king was great and feared in the whole world and his kingdom was one of the three of the inhabited (earth). This Sardana was the son of Sanherib, who was the thirty-second in line to (or: of the thirty-two kings since) Balos, the first king of the Assyrians. In the days of this Sardana Jonah was sent by God to Nineveh, this man who by his prophecy and preaching moved the Ninevites. Sardana submitted to the preaching of the prophet and proclaimed a fast for the Ninevites. They put on sackcloth. God saw their

<sup>26</sup> An example of this problem can be found in Jacob of Serug's *Memra on the Fall of the Idols*, Jacob of Sarug, *Homiliae selectae* (ed. P. Bedjan; Paris and Leipzig: O. Harrassowitz, 1905–1910) III.795–823.

<sup>27</sup> *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan; 7 vols.; Paris and Leipzig, 1890–1897; repr. Hildesheim, Germany: O. Harrassowitz, 1968), II:507–35.

<sup>28</sup> E.g., Sebastian P. Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity," in *Eusebius, Christianity and Judaism* (ed. H. W. Attridge and G. Hata; New York: Brill, 1992), 212–34.

<sup>29</sup> Han J. W. Drijvers, "The Image of Edessa in the Syriac Tradition," and Averil Cameron, "The Mandylion and Byzantine Iconoclasm," both in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation* (ed. H. L. Kessler and G. Wolf; Bologna: Nuova Alfa 1998), 13–31 and 33–54 respectively.

<sup>30</sup> J. B. Segal, *Edessa, "The Blessed City"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 175–76.

<sup>31</sup> Jacob of Sarug, *Homiliae selectae*, V.731–47

<sup>32</sup> The text is fully summarized in J.-M. Fiey, "Vers la réhabilitation de l'Histoire de Karka d'Bét Slōh," *Analecta Bollandiana* 82 (1964): 189–222.

penitence, as it is written, and he turned the heat of his wrath from them and he did not destroy them. In the fifteenth year of that son of Nimrod, Arbak, the king of Media, showed forth rebellion against the kingdom of the Assyrians, to which he was subject.<sup>33</sup>

The name “Balos” suggests that this text ultimately relies on a Greek source, since it reflects the Greek “Belos,” cognate with the Hebrew “Ba‘al,” “Belos” being commonly referred to euhemeristically as the first king of Assyria, even as Dido’s father in the *Aeneid*.<sup>34</sup>

Sardana, son of Sanherib, seems to be the seventh century B.C.E. Esarhaddon, son of Sennacherib.<sup>35</sup> The name may come from the Greek “Asordan.” However, Sardana is also reminiscent of “Sardanapalus,” the Assyrian monarch described in the *Persica* of Ctesias of Cnidos as a sybarite who died when he set his court on fire after a two-year siege by the Medes.<sup>36</sup> This figure was taken up as exemplary of Oriental decadence in the eponymous play by Byron and Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*. There is confusion in the manuscript of the *History* in that this Sardana is also referred to as Sargon. This is Sargon II, the father of Sennacherib, who destroyed the northern kingdom of Samaria. The Peshitta version of this name is attested as in use from the seventh century onward among Christians. For example, the father of John of Damascus was named Sargon.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Sardanapalus is often equated with Ashurbanipal, the son of Esarhaddon. In any case, the Sardana described here is neither a sacker of cities nor a slave to a life of luxury. Rather, this eastern king is described as a pious ruler who built the city of Karkha d-Beth Slokh as a defense against Arbak the Mede.<sup>38</sup> Their struggle is covered in the East-Syrian commentary tradition, but Karkha d-Beth Slokh is never mentioned by the commentators.

After a relatively detailed description of the building projects of Darius and Seleucus in the city, the text describes how the city was

<sup>33</sup> *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:507.

<sup>34</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* I.621, 729.

<sup>35</sup> 2 Kgs 19:37; Isa 37:38. His father laid siege to Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E., while he ruled 681–669.

<sup>36</sup> Felix Jacoby, ed., *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), III.C.F 1.23–28.

<sup>37</sup> Isa 20:1. Frederick A. Aprim, *Assyrians: The Continuous Saga* (Philadelphia: XLibris, 2004), 210–12 and the plaque reproduced on p. 213.

<sup>38</sup> This story appears elsewhere, e.g., Išo‘dad of Merv, *Commentaire sur l’Ancient Testament* (ed. J.-M. Vosté et C. van den Eynde; Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 126–186 [passim]; Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1950–1981), IV: Isaiah and the Twelve, 94 (120). For Sardanapalus as the last king and Belus as the first, see, e.g., in the *Chronicle to 724* (ed. E. W. Brooks; *Chronica Minora II* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 3/3; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1904), 84 (versio: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 4/4, 68). This tradition derives from Greek sources.

converted to Christianity by Mar Addai and Mar Mari, two mythical apostles who are responsible in Syriac tradition, especially in the later period, for the conversion of Mesopotamia.<sup>39</sup> The first person they convert is a Joseph, after whom, according to the text, the Monastery of the Followers (or, House) of Joseph (*dayrā d-bēyt Yawseph*) is named (although the modern site is associated with Joseph the husband of Mary).<sup>40</sup> Christianity flourishes in the city until the heresy of Mani begins to spread under Shapur I (d. 272).<sup>41</sup> Much of the rest of the text consists of descriptions of the various persecutions against the Christian community orchestrated by Manichean heretics and especially by the Sasanian authorities, and the development of cult sites around the locations of persecution under the guidance of the city's various bishops. There is often an extremely local feel in these descriptions: the author refers to places that the audience must have known, for example, "the church which Tuqrete built is the one which John the diligent pastor and distinguished priest rebuilt there."<sup>42</sup> There is the "place of the fig tree" where a series of martyrdoms occurred and now special devotions are offered.<sup>43</sup> And we are told that bishop Isaac "was stoned on a hill which is above the Kenar village, which is by the Neqator inn."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See the two main texts concerning these figures: George Howard, trans., *The Teaching of Addai* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981) and Amir Harrak, trans., *The Acts of Mār Mārī the Apostle* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). The liturgy is also attributed to them.

<sup>40</sup> J.-M. Fiey, *L'Assyrie Chrétienne: Contribution à l'étude de histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du nord de l'Iraq* (3 vols.; Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1967–1969), III.49–50.

<sup>41</sup> The chronology of the text is clearly confused. It seems to set the second-century Roman Emperor Hadrian and a persecution of Christians which occurred under him after the time of third-century heresiarch, Mani (*Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* [ed. P. Bedjan], II:512).

<sup>42</sup> *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:513.

<sup>43</sup> "There was persecution in the city not only by murder but also robbery of possessions, imprisonments, and bitter tortures, with the result that even women, female covenanters, who were known for their virginity, who had come from the capital city (lit. city of the kingdom) due to the persecution which had begun against the church and were abiding in our city—they were slandered before the Paygān Salār (Sasanian official) by some Manicheans who were in the city. That accursed beast ordered that they be killed outside the city in that place called 'The White Poplar.' After the crowning of these holy (or: consecrated) women, in the place where they were crowned a fig tree sprouted up from their blood. It was as a remedy for whoever fled to it for succour. But the Manicheans when they saw the miracle which was done cut down that fig tree and burned that spot with fire. Then God, who does not allow those who love him to be spurned by enemies, gave power over them to the pain of the lion which torments them until they came to an end and were done away with from the city. That spot in which the holy women proved glorious is named the place of the figtree until today. Now a place of refuge is made there for all believers and from year to year

In this text, the bishops of the city are like the rulers of the past, Sardana, Darius, and Seleucus, and just as its ancient structures were founded by these rulers, so its bishops laid the foundations for its holy places after each persecution. In contrast, the Sasanians are distant kings whose only involvement in civic life is their occasional persecution of Christians.<sup>45</sup>

An important link between the hoary antiquity of the city and its more recent Christian history is the figure of Jonah, who appears at the beginning of the text. While the original biblical book of Jonah attests a tendency toward universalism inasmuch as the God of the whole world enjoins the hero to prophesy to “pagan” Gentiles, in this context Jonah functions as a link to a particular, local past. Furthermore, Jonah links the story to other developments in the same region in the sixth and seventh century. As Alison Salvesen has pointed out, it is probably not a

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whenever they complete the remembrance of the great day of crucifixion and go up to the great place of the martyrs (or: martyrion), as is the custom of the city, the whole ecclesiastical crowd, the pastor and the flock in all its orders, a cross at the front and before them, they turn off to the place of the figtree in a great pomp with praises and holy songs (?) of thanksgiving, which are fit for God, the Lord of all, as a shame to the infidels (lit. deniers) and a pride for the believers, and upon us sinners mercy, pity, and salvation, amen.” *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:513–14; translation from Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, eds., *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], 77–78). “Tahmizgard went up to the place which is called the place of the figtree, there where the martyrs were killed in the days of King Shapur, and he sat on the seat of judgment and he arranged before the crowds all vessels of torture of every sort and he said to them, ‘Yazdgard the king commands thus: if you do not listen to his kingship and his commands and you do not do his will and you do not worship the great God, the sun, and you do not honor fire and water, the children of Hormizd, your lives will be finished on account of this (lit. in these things).’ Along with tortures there were with them also sixteen elephants which they brought that they might crush all of those who would not deny the Messiah. The blessed Isaac then took the torture implements and kissed them. He placed them upon his eyes and said, ‘Greetings (lit. peace) to these irons by which we will enter that palace of the lofty kingdom and enjoy the habitations (lit: huts, booths) of light which were prepared for us by our Lord the Messiah from before the foundations of the world.’” *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:522–23. The text describes “the place of figtree” as: “the second holy Mt. Sinai, the place of the divine presence (*škīntā*), the habitation of light which celebrates the treasure of the bones of the holy ones.” *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:532

<sup>44</sup> The name “Neqator,” derives from Nicator, which was the epithet of Seleucus I.

<sup>45</sup> Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 57 sees this focus on Assyria as “a chauvinist assertion of a provincial identity”; however, this is fit into a larger argument about provincial contrariness, an argument which seems to reflect contemporary European speculation about colonial subjects rather than the historical subjectivity of Christians in Mesopotamia.

coincidence that it was the bishop of Karkha d-Beth Slokh who introduced the so-called Fast of the Ninevites into the East-Syrian liturgy in the late sixth century.<sup>46</sup> Sabrisho', the bishop of the city who instituted this fast was acting like the righteous king Sardana who listened to the prophet Jonah.<sup>47</sup> The Fast of the Ninevites entails special portions within both the West and East Syrian liturgies, including the *Ba'utha d'Ninewe*, rhythmical prayers attributed to St. Ephrem. In Nineveh itself there was a monastery of Jonah which later became the Mosque of Nabi Yunis in Mosul.<sup>48</sup> It is important to emphasize that Nineveh was called *Nineveh* by Syriac Christians in Late Antiquity. In fact, the city was the main Sasanian settlement in the area and became more significant in the late Sasanian period, under Khusraw II (d. 628).<sup>49</sup> Its bishops are attested for the sixth and seventh centuries, but it continued to be occupied until much later.<sup>50</sup> Now it is simply part of the larger city of Mosul, an Arab garrison town on the other side of the Tigris in an area that was previously semi-occupied but which only became a full city in the late seventh century.<sup>51</sup>

Along with that of Jonah there are a number of holy sites associated with biblical figures in upper Mesopotamia. Like the Mosque of Nabi Yunis, these sites have historically been visited by Muslims, Christians, and Jews, but often go back to Christian origins. The biblical prophet Nahum of the seventh century B.C.E, according to the prophetic text which bears his name, prophesied among the Ninevites and was, "of Elqosh."<sup>52</sup> Elqosh is a disputed site, but the town of Alqosh, north of Mosul, has been posited by locals as this city (and some modern scholars have accepted the authenticity of this assertion). There was a monastery and a shrine of the Prophet Nahum there from at least the tenth century

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<sup>46</sup> Fiey, *L'Assyrie Chrétienne* II:20; II:498. See the Rogation of the Ninevites in Arthur John MacLean, trans., *East Syrian Daily Offices* (London: Rivington, Percival & Co., 1894), 226–28, or S. Y. H. Jammo, *The Rogation of Nineveh: A Compilation of Penitential Texts, Translated to Modern Chaldean* (Troy, Mich.: St. Joseph Chaldean Church, 1992). See, for example, the discussion of this liturgical innovation during the time of plague in *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)* ed. A. Scher, *Patrologia Orientalis* 13: 4 (1907–1918):II 633 (313).

<sup>47</sup> See Jonah 3:5: "And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth." Cf. Jonah 3:5–10

<sup>48</sup> Fiey, *L'Assyrie Chrétienne* II:493

<sup>49</sup> Chase Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66–70.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 72

<sup>51</sup> For the foundation of Mosul, see *ibid.* 63–89.

<sup>52</sup> Nah 1:1

C.E.<sup>53</sup> This localizing was reinforced by texts such as the *Lives of the Prophets*, which, among a number of other languages, was translated into Syriac.<sup>54</sup> The eastern traditions around Esther and her tomb, which remains a holy place for Jews in contemporary Iran, could provide another perspective on this eastern reception of biblical figures depicted as from the east.

Daniel is another eastern scriptural figure who takes on special significance in the Church of the East. References to Daniel and his companions are commonly found in early Christian martyr acts. However, when used in texts composed in the Persian Empire these figures have a more precise significance. For example, in the *Martyrdom of Simeon bar Sabba'e*, which describes the mid-fourth-century martyrdom of the Catholicos (i.e., Patriarch) as well as others, Guhishtazad,<sup>55</sup> a Christian martyr at the Shah's court is specifically compared to Daniel.

This is the believer, son of Daniel the believer, to whom he was similar in all things. The former served Darius, the latter Shapur. The former the King of Media and Persia, the latter the king of Persia and Media. The former did not fear the lions, the latter was not moved nor agitated by the sword.<sup>56</sup>

This local "Danielic" awareness appears in several places in this text as well as other Syriac martyr texts.<sup>57</sup> We also find it in the Mesopotamian apocalypticism of the seventh century, such as the *Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel*, in which Sennacherib also plays an important role.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Fiey, *L'Assyrie Chrétienne* II:396–400; on Jews and Christian contesting the site, see 398–99.

<sup>54</sup> On this text and its Christian provenance, see David Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995).

<sup>55</sup> J.-M. Fiey, *Saints syriaques* (ed. L. I Conrad; Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 2004), 87–88. This may be the same as another Guhishtazad identified in the sources, *ibid.*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:177.

<sup>57</sup> On the prior page when the confessor prays: "Introduce me to the number of your heavenly sheep, that I may be a son to the apostles and a brother to the martyrs who have been crowned in the West and a good model for your people in the East." *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:176.7–9. At one point the texts states: "This is the true martyr of the land of the East who through Simeon who was bishop and martyr of the East was ensnared to life." *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:178.1–3; see also II:183.10–11. This tendency can be found in other texts, e.g., in the Pethion-Adurhormizd-Anahid cycle we find the prayer: "Show also now, Lord, your great power, as you showed it to Hananyah, Mishael, and his holy companions" (i.e., Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah). *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:616.18–19. See also Barḥadbēšabbā 'Arbaya, *La second partie de l'histoire ecclésiastique*, ed. and trans. F. Nau, *Patrologia Orientalis* 9:5 (Paris, 1913), 595.

<sup>58</sup> Matthias Henze, ed., *Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 68–69. See pp. 2–11 for a discussion of apocalypses attributed to Daniel.

Parallel to this modeling of persecution on that of eastern kings in the Danielic tradition, so also the good relations between Christians and the government could also be put in scriptural terms. In the canons of the Synod of Mar Aba of 544, Khusraw I is said to be a second Cyrus.<sup>59</sup> The significance of being from the East, particularly Persia, can also be seen in how Syriac Christians addressed Christianity's place vis-à-vis Zoroastrianism.<sup>60</sup> For example, both West- and East-Syrian sources place a particular focus on how it was that the Magi knew that Jesus was going to be born.<sup>61</sup> This speculation could at times become extensive. For example, the East Syrian Theodore Bar Koni (d. after 792) quotes a supposed dialogue between Zardosht (Zoroaster) and his disciples in which Zardosht tells them about the coming of the Messiah.<sup>62</sup>

The manuscript tradition of the pseudepigraphic 2 Baruch seems to depend partly on the tendencies I have been discussing. This text was composed by Jews in the period after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The text was preserved fully intact only in one Syriac manuscript.<sup>63</sup> However, part of the text has been copied repeatedly and become part of the West-Syrian liturgical tradition. This is the so-called Epistle of Baruch, which presents itself as a letter from the pseudepigraphic scribe of Jeremiah to the nine and a half tribes of the dispersion (78:1–87:1).<sup>64</sup> The interest in this particular portion of the text appears to derive from a self-conscious connection to the group of people referred to in it. The West-Syrian preservation of 2 Baruch and especially

<sup>59</sup> J.-B. Chabot, trans., *Synodicon Orientale ou recueil des Synodes Nestoriens publié, traduit et annoté* (Notices et extraits de la Bibliothèque Nationale, Tome 37; Paris: Imprimerie Nationale 1902), 307–8; O. Braun, trans., *Das Buch der Synhados oder Synodicon Orientale* (Stuttgart: J. Roth, 1900; repr. Amsterdam: Philo, 1975), 99.

<sup>60</sup> One question that needs resolving is the degree to which material from Greek and Latin authors affected Syriac Christian perceptions of Zoroastrianism; cf. Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997).

<sup>61</sup> The Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, written 775/6, preserves a possibly sixth- or seventh-century document, “The Story of the Magi,” which provides details about the names of all twelve. Witold Witakowski, “The Magi in Syriac Tradition,” paper read at the Syriac Studies conference in Washington, D.C. in August, 1995 (I thank Prof. Witakowski for sharing his unpublished work with me).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Bibliotheca Ambrosiana B. 21 Inf., fols. 257a–265b in Milan, from the sixth or seventh century. Some short portions exist in West-Syrian lectionaries. There is also an Arabic version which follows the Syriac, but shows some Muslim adaptations, as well as a Greek fragment. See A.F.J. Klijn, “2 (Syriac Apocalypse of ) Baruch,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983–1985), I:615–16.

<sup>64</sup> Thirty six copies of the letter are extant, cf. Mark F. Whitters, *The Epistle of Second Baruch: A Study in Form and Message* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 12–14.

the Epistle of Baruch is perhaps a case where Christians who understood themselves as eastern in some way had a special identification with a particular text because it was marked as eastern in orientation.<sup>65</sup>

Joel Walker, in his recent book as well as in an article in the journal *ARAM*, suggests that, however “reinterpreted through the prisms of exegesis and folklore”, there were “memories of ancient Assyria” within the Christian community of the later Sasanian Empire.<sup>66</sup> Walker’s work focuses on the *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, a perhaps early seventh century martyr text whose cult site at Melqi, an unknown site outside of Arbela, seems to have been the important Neo-Assyrian site of Milqia, where the akitu temple of the goddess, Ishtar of Arbela, stood. Based on the suggestion of Paul Peeters, Walker argues that “the Qardagh legend must have developed as a narrative that explained, for a Christian audience, how the tell at Melqi became a center for trade and religious observance.”<sup>67</sup> Corresponding to the spatial continuity of the Milqia/Melqi site is the connections the *Legend of Mar Qardagh* draws between its hero and the ancient Near East. In typical classical biographical style the text describes Qardagh’s lineage.

Now holy Mar Qardagh was from a great people (*gensā*) from the stock of the kingdom of the Assyrians (*’ātūrāyē*). His father was descended from the renowned lineage of the house of Nimrod, and his mother from the renowned lineage of the house of Sennacherib. And he was born of pagan parents lost in the error of Magianism.<sup>68</sup>

Walker astutely goes through the place of Nimrod and Sennacherib in late antique, particularly Syriac, exegesis.

Beyond this it is worth noting the popularity within the region as a whole of Nimrod, the primordial king of Genesis transformed in later tradition into a giant who persecuted Abraham. The *Acts of Mar Mari*, a text that purports to describe the origins of Christianity in the East but in

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<sup>65</sup> Whitters, *Epistle of Second Baruch*, 21 argues that the ms. 7a1 in which we find the one full Syriac version of 2 Baruch may derive originally from a Jewish collection aimed at responding to the destruction of the temple, since the manuscript also contains 4 Ezra and an excerpt from book 6 of Josephus’s *Jewish War*. However, I think it is more likely that the compilation is a later collection and, closer to Whitters second suggestion, that, if anything, the compiler’s interests reflect sixth and especially seventh century Christian concerns about Jerusalem.

<sup>66</sup> Joel Thomas Walker, “The Legacy of Mesopotamia in Late Antique Iraq: The Christian Martyr Shrine at Melqi,” *ARAM* 18–19 (2006–2007): 501. See also idem, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 249–54 and passim.

<sup>67</sup> Walker, “Legacy of Mesopotamia,” 498.

<sup>68</sup> *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan),:II:443, text also in J.-B. Abbeloos, “Acta Mar Qardaghi,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 9 (1890): 5–105 (paragraph 3), translation from Walker, *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 20.

fact derives from perhaps the early Islamic period, praises Jesus specifically for the transformative power of his name in the East:

Glory to you, Jesus, power that cannot be overpowered, for it was through simple and uneducated people that you filled the earth with the knowledge of the truth! Who could say to the East, mother of magic and astrology (*kaldāyūtā*), that it would bend its knees in worship of the Living and True God? Who could say to the sons of powerful Nimrod, that instead of an adversary tower that they built against God, they would offer him the fruits of love and thanksgiving, acknowledging him as the true Creator?<sup>69</sup>

Modern Urfa, that is, ancient Edessa, a key center for early Syriac Christianity, maintains to the present day a tradition that Nimrod resided in the city. On the rock acropolis that forms a natural fortress in the middle of the city, the two columns remaining from an earlier structure, one of which bears one of the oldest extant Syriac inscriptions, are commonly known as the throne of Nimrod.<sup>70</sup> The most popular tourist destination in south eastern Turkey, Nemrut Dag, or Nimrod Mountain, where the famous massive heads of the kings of Comagene remain, also attests to the continuous tradition in the region of a special identification with Nimrod.

Walker's work is brilliant in its fine balance of textual and concrete archeological analysis. However, I wonder if he is correct in positing a folkloric continuity between the Neo-Assyrians and the late Sasanian period. He fully brings together the little evidence we have for the "dark ages" running from the Median sack of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E. through the centuries that follow. To be sure, we know that local beliefs and practices persisted for a long time, in fact even later than the last datable cuneiform tablet of 75 C.E. Although transformed or Hellenized, the local gods continued to receive worship in Late Antiquity. But as Walker himself acknowledges we have no evidence for Milqia/Melqi itself from 600 B.C.E. to 600 C.E. Melqi then continued to be a Christian center through the Middle Ages; as Walker points out, "the monastery at Melqi had become the burial chapel for the metropolitan bishops of Arbela."<sup>71</sup> He then sums up the relationship to the Assyrian past: "The only trace of its pre-Christian heritage were the garbled memories of 'Assyria' embedded in the *History of Mar Qardagh*."<sup>72</sup> I would question this.

I doubt any near eastern connections can be found that are not also attested in scripture or post-scriptural exegetical tradition. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the positive focus on the ancient Near East which

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<sup>69</sup> *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), I:90; translation from Harrak, *The Acts of Mār Mārī the Apostle*, 74–75.

<sup>70</sup> Drijvers and Healey, *Old Syriac Inscriptions*, As1 (D27).

<sup>71</sup> Walker, "Legacy of Mesopotamia," 500.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

we find in this text and in others only appears in the sixth century, at the same time that the Church of the East was coming into its own. Furthermore, the antagonists in the *Legend of Mar Qardagh* are Zoroastrians and the site at Melqi seems to have been a Zoroastrian fire temple. Thus, we have to look at the synchronic function of such myths and at how the ancient past is being employed to address contemporary communal issues.

Another text that engages in the kind of “Assyrianizing” I am addressing is the *Life of Mar Behnam*, where Sennacherib, the Zoroastrian (!) king of Assyria, as well as his children convert to Christianity after miraculous healings.<sup>73</sup> This is not unlike the story behind the “prayer of Nabonidus” and other tales of pagan kings converting after a divine cure, such as the story of St. Nino and the conversion of the royal family of Georgia to Christianity. This focus on Assyria, particularly the depiction of it as a space open to Christianization, also may help to explain the passage in the *Liber Scholiorum* of Theodore Bar Konai in which Zoroaster is described as a captive brought from Samaria to Assyria who flees Nineveh for “Sagastan” in order to fulfill his desire for women.<sup>74</sup> Apparently, according to this anti-Zoroastrian anecdote, the moral standards of the Assyrian women were higher than those in Sagastan.<sup>75</sup>

I suspect that parallels to the kind of scriptural self-localization that I have been discussing can also be found in Rabbinic sources, however, with one significant difference. In the opposite way, the Rabbis — no matter how many centuries Jews lived in Mesopotamia and however much the relationship between Palestine and Babylonia was renegotiated — understood themselves as in *Galuta*, exile. As we know, exile became a central metaphor for Judaism until the metaphor was concretized with the rise of Jewish nationalism. Scripture as well as Jewish and Christian traditions carry with them a certain geography and it is natural for Jews and Christians to employ this geography when they reside in those regions it describes (as some of the contemporary American evangelical Christian support for the invasion of Iraq shows for Christians who do not

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<sup>73</sup> *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), II:97–441. For a discussion of this text, see Helen Younansardaroud, “Die Legende von Mār Behnām,” in *Syriaca: Zur Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie, und Gegenwartslage der syrischen Kirche: 2. Deutsches Syrologen-Symposium (Juli 2000, Wittenberg)* (ed. M. Tamcke; Münster, Hamburg, and London: LIT Verlag, 2002), 185–96.

<sup>74</sup> Sagastan may be the contemporary province of Sistan in eastern Iran. However, it may be used in general to refer to any land associated with the Sakas, an ancient Iranian people, who lived in Central Asia and were possibly related to the Scythians.

<sup>75</sup> Theodore Bar Konai, *Liber Scholiorum* (ed. A. Scher; (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scrip. Syri, ser. II, t. 66; Paris: Carolus Pousielgue, 1912), 295.24–27.

even reside in Mesopotamia). We find a similar phenomenon in the spread of the Thomas tradition among the Christians of India. Once this story reached India, the exotic India of the *Acts of Thomas*, a c. 200 C.E. text composed in Syria, possibly Edessa, became local and indigenous.

A catalyst to this imaginative localization in the East may have been the method of exegesis of the Church of the East. Although the distinction between Alexandrian and Antiochene exegesis is no longer as clear as scholars once thought, there is a strong tendency in Antiochene — and therefore Syriac — exegesis, especially in the Church of the East, to look at texts on the historical level.<sup>76</sup> Here I do not mean “history” in our modern sense of the word, but rather “history” as it is practiced in patristic exegesis, such as Theodore of Mopsuestia’s commentaries, where there is a focus on God’s interest in humans’ wellbeing from generation to generation and the diversity of scripture is not simply allegorized away.<sup>77</sup> Such exegetical work would have had a particular effect on readers who lived in those lands described by scripture, although the tendency shows up more often in hagiography, perhaps due to the popular interest of such texts.

Another factor that may help us to understand this tendency is the political dynamic of the Christian community of the Sasanian and later Arab empires. Christians in the East never had a Constantine. Communal differences would have increased after the Arab conquest: increasing arabicization would have sharpened their awareness of cultural difference and increased a sense of “Assyrian” peoplehood. Arabs had been settling on the margins and even within the cities of Aramaic speakers for several centuries, but with the Arab conquest in the seventh century Syriac Christians became aware of a new people. In fact, as scholars have pointed out, for some time the early Muslims were simply understood by Syriac Christians in ethnic terms as descendents of Hagar and not as introducing any particularly new theology or religious practice.<sup>78</sup>

Instead of the older historiographical model, which simply posits a progressive hellenization of Syriac Christianity and a move away from an

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<sup>76</sup> For a general discussion on the relationship between Alexandrian and Antiochene exegesis, see Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 161–213.

<sup>77</sup> See, e.g., D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch: A Study of Early Christian Thought in the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 61. On Theodore’s influence on the Church of the East, see Becker, *Fear of God*, 113–25.

<sup>78</sup> See, e.g., Sebastian P. Brock, “Syriac Views of Emergent Islam,” in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (ed. G. H. A. Juynboll; Carbondale-Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 9–21, 199–203; repr. in Sebastian P. Brock, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum, 1984), ch. 8, and G. J. Reinink, “The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam,” *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993): 165–87.

indigenous form of Christianity, I am imagining a development of indigenous Christianity via the negotiation of received traditions from the West. Ephrem of Nisibis (d. 373), an author who has in the past been represented as a pure Semite, has been re-characterized in more recent scholarship as a Nicene Christian, more in tune with Roman church developments than he was previously imagined.<sup>79</sup> In contrast, it is especially by the early sixth century that we begin to see Christians in the East imagining themselves as easterners, not coincidentally at the time when the separate church hierarchies were developing for both the West and the East Syrians.<sup>80</sup> This development of self-consciousness is closely tied to the influx of Greek texts, ideas, and monastic practices into the East.

Aside from the historiographical interest it may have, this material may help us to think about the complex relationship between ethnicity and religion.<sup>81</sup> Scholars have noted a shift in Late Antiquity from a focus on ethnic identity to one on religious community.<sup>82</sup> Christianity (and its opposite in a sense, Judaism) come into being, where previously the opposite of Jew was Greek. Religion began to take on the characteristics associated in the West with “religion,” such as the centralization of scripture, an emphasis on monotheism (or rather, henotheism), and a concern for communal boundaries. Daniel Boyarin states “Christianity’s new notion of self-definition via ‘religious’ alliance was gradually replacing self-definition via kinship and land.”<sup>83</sup> This fits with much of Boyarin’s earlier work and the distinctions he draws between Paul and

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<sup>79</sup> E.g., Sidney Griffith, “Setting Right the Church of Syria: Saint Ephraem’s Hymns against Heresies,” in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus* (ed. W. E. Klingshirn and M. Vessey; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 97–114

<sup>80</sup> E.g., Becker, *Fear of God*, 12, or Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: Routledge, 2003; first published *Die Apostolische Kirche des Ostens*. Klagenfurt: Verlag Kitab, 2000), 7–41. For the West Syrians, see Ernest Honigmann, *Évêques et Évêchés Monophysites d’Asie Antérieure au VIe Siècle* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium Subsidia 2; Louvain, 1951) and now Volker-Lorenz Menze, *The Making of a Church: The Syrian Orthodox in the Shadow of Byzantium and the Papacy* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2004).

<sup>81</sup> This conversation has been invigorated of late for the pre-Constantinian period with the publication of Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Also see Eduard Iricinschi’s contribution to this volume as well as Aaron Johnson’s *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius’ Praeparatio Evangelica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 109–39.

<sup>83</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Borderlines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 202.

other Jews,<sup>84</sup> and is further played out, according to him, with imperial Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>85</sup>

My interest in this is not one of either/or-ness: is it religion, or peoplehood, or sometimes both? But how do these categories relate to one another? Is it that while in our (post-)nationalist setting religious arguments raise the stakes and make social conflict more intractable and the barriers of ethnic difference greater,<sup>86</sup> while in Late Antiquity it was ethnic arguments that could raise the stakes since in the end the religious world was one that was shared? Religion and ethnicity are complexly related in our own world, each often serving to shore up the claims of the other. In a sense, Boyarin's view of Late Antiquity is a mirror image of Durkheim's reading of modernity: while the latter saw a shift from religion to nationalism in the modern period, the former finds a shift from ethnicity to religion in Late Antiquity.<sup>87</sup> However, the rise of religion as a category in Late Antiquity is not as simple as this seems to suggest.

Yes, for many, Christians were a people from all the peoples, the only land that Christians belonged to was the metaphorical one in heaven, and the only Jerusalem was the one above. Land and genealogy were metaphorized away and language was often treated as an interchangeable system of conventional equivalencies, ultimately based upon a notion of semiotics found in Greek philosophical literature, such as Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*. However, there were exceptions to this: the rise of the cult of the saints and the very beginnings of pilgrimage to the holy land that we see in this period point to a counter trend of localization and particularism.<sup>88</sup>

Furthermore, I am not suggesting that Syriac Christians did not engage in Christian universalism as well. For example, the Syriac *dehltā* ("fear") as opposed to the more specific *dehlat alāhā*, equivalent to the Greek *theosebeia*, and its opposite, *dehlat ptakrē* ("idolatry"), developed into a

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<sup>84</sup> For example, see his discussion in Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>85</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 18.

<sup>86</sup> Janet Jakobsen, "Is Secularism Less Violent than Religion?" in *Interventions: Activists and Academics Respond to Violence* (ed. E. A. Castelli and J. Jakobsen; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 53–67.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. "The greatest work ever written in the sociology of religions, Émile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), is, at its core, a discussion of how nationalism becomes the chief religion of a putatively secular, but only nontheist modernity." Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terror: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 63.

<sup>88</sup> For example, see comments at Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 86 and 124.

term not unlike *religio* or the Arabic *dīn*. For example, in the preface to the c. 600 Syriac collection of prophecies aimed at converting the pagan community of Harran “fear” is employed in this way as a general abstract category.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, from Bardaiṣan of Edessa (d. c. 222) onward we find references in Syriac literature to the special, that is, metaphorical, peoplehood of Christians.<sup>90</sup> They are a people, like the Arabs, the Gauls, and the Brittani, but since they are everywhere they transcend the local.

Elsewhere I have commented on the tendency in the Syriac version of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*, probably translated from Greek in the late fourth century, to employ pedagogical terms.<sup>91</sup> This tendency, however, must also be understood as a downplaying of Eusebius’s habit of using racial language in his discussion of Christianity. For example, the Greek *to genos* (“race”) is rendered *tulmādā* (“instruction”).<sup>92</sup> In fact, the Syriac tendency to understand Christianity in pedagogical terms may be understood as a form of universalism, especially since conversion to Christianity is often set in pedagogical terms in Syriac sources.<sup>93</sup>

Despite some intriguing and unique examples of the tendency toward universalism within Syriac texts, the material I have discussed in this essay shows a strong emphasis on peoplehood, land, and language among Syriac Christians and much of this derives from scripture. The recent project in Leiden led by Bas Ter Haar Romeny has looked at a tendency toward ethnic communal notions among the West Syrians and the development of the church into an ethnic community during the Middle Ages.<sup>94</sup> However, it is not always clear in which direction the tendency goes. In fact, some texts use categories that simply confuse our own and further analysis is required. For example, in the very late *History of Mar Awgen*, a text which intriguingly describes Jacob of Nisibis, the fourth century bishop who became a representative in the later tradition for Nicene orthodoxy, as a descendent of the family of James, the brother of

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<sup>89</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, “A Syriac Collection of Prophecies of the Pagan Philosophers,” *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 14 (1983): 214 (Syriac) 227 (English); repr. in Sebastian P. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 1992), ch. 7.

<sup>90</sup> H. J. W. Drijvers, *Bardaiṣan of Edessa* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica 6; Assen 1966), 46 (pp. 58–61).

<sup>91</sup> Becker, *Fear of God*, 27–28.

<sup>92</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 17.7; W. Wright and N. McLean, eds., *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius in Syriac* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1898), 88.

<sup>93</sup> See the discussion in Becker, *Fear of God*, 22–40.

<sup>94</sup> Bas Ter Haar Romeny, “From Religious Association to Ethnic Community: a Research Project on Identity Formation among the Syrian Orthodox under Muslim Rule,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16 (2005): 377–99.

the Lord,<sup>95</sup> we find a passage that exemplifies the ethno-religious complex which needs to be unraveled in the Syriac sources. At one point, the text describes a Marcionite “heretic” in the following manner:

There was a certain man from the confession (*tawdūtēh*) of the accursed Marcion, this man who crucified the people (*‘ammā*) of the Christians, and he belonged to the race (*gensā*) from the land of Pontus and was an important person in the kingdom (*malkūtā*) of the Romans.<sup>96</sup>

“Confession,” “people,” “race,” and “kingdom” are terms that often overlap and share multiple valences. Most noteworthy in this passage is the tension between “people” and “race.” Both are ethnic terms, but the latter has no religious valence, while the former, also used at times in Syriac literature as a shorthand for the Jews, that is, the “people” par excellence, has a more biblical sense and is less genealogical. In future work one might attempt to untangle the complex semantic and categorical relations between religion and ethnicity as employed within the Syriac Christian communities, both historically and in the present.<sup>97</sup> Ironically, while I would question the historical accuracy of linking contemporary Assyrians with those of the ancient Near East, the term “Syriac” itself is a modern, Western term only taken up of late by some parts of the “Syriac” community.

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<sup>95</sup> *Acta martyrum et sanctorum syriace* (ed. P. Bedjan), III:397

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, III:402–3.

<sup>97</sup> Note Aaron P. Johnson’s point at the end of his review of Buell’s *Why This New Race* for the Bryn Mawr Classical Review, n.p. [cited 16 Oct. 2006]. Online: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2006/2006-02-31.html>.

"The Ancient Near East in the Late Antique Near East: Syriac Christian Appropriation of the Biblical Past". In Gregg Gardner; Kevin Osterloh (eds.). *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. pp. 394-415.

Griffith, Sidney H. (2016). "The Maná'á Family and Saint John of Damascus: Christians and Muslims in Umayyad Times". In Antoine Borrut; Fred M. Donner (eds.). *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. pp. 29-51. ISBN 978-1-614910-31-2.

Aramaic Language Syriac Language History Of Wine Ancient Scripts Bible College How To Write Calligraphy History Timeline Churches Of Christ Historical Artifacts. More information More like this. 2.

One of the mistakes often made in studying controversial words in the Bible is a failure to consider the entire semantic range, the range of meanings a.

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Eusebius brings his knowledge of Syriac to the interpretation of the Greek Septuagint text, often in an attempt to uncover nuances in the Hebrew original. The Commentary also reflects Syriac and Antiochene Christianity's proximity to Judaism. Basing ourselves on a select number of passages, we will explore what the new Commentary has to tell about Judaism and how it relates to early Syriac exegesis (in particular Ephrem) on the one hand and Greek Antiochene exegesis on the other.

of the Ancient Near East, including Judaism, as suggested by parallels between the biblical and pre-biblical accounts. Egypt.

Unlike most of the other peoples of the ancient Near East, who spoke Semitic languages, the Hittites spoke an Indo-European language; they seem to have migrated into the region from the north. After establishing their empire in Anatolia, this warlike people raided the wealthy regions to the south, most notably bringing the Amorite dynasty of the Old Babylonian empire to ruin about.