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SYRIAC STUDIES

THE CHALLENGES OF THE COMING DECADE

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ABSTRACT

In response to an invitation by the General Editor, the paper reflects on the present state of Syriac studies as well as on the opportunities and challenges of the future. In addition to a brief discussion of the geographical changes in the worldwide presence of Syriac Christians and Syriac scholars, some suggestions are offered for work to be carried out in the coming years. The paper closes with some thoughts on the academic study of Syriac.

[1] The Syriac Institute, Beth Mardutho (formerly: The Syriac Computing Institute), and the web-based journal *Hugoye* will forever be remembered as marking the entrance of Syriac studies into the electronic age. The elegant Meltho fonts produced by Beth Mardutho and their Unicode application bring Syriac texts to our computer screens daily; now, it is hard to imagine what our lives would be like without them. For middle-aged Syriac scholars—like the present writer—who had to overcome their initial skepticism and fear of change, these quite radical developments took place in the last two decades. What remains to be expected, wished or dreamed for in the coming decade? Which other advancements

does the future have in store for us? How will the technological progress impact our scholarship, and, likewise, how will our scholarship impact the developing technology?

[2] In this time of rapid change, it is an impossible task to make predictions about the future. Instead, I would prefer to share with the *Hugoye* readers some thoughts about the developments in our field, and some suggestions about what could be achieved in the coming years. Once in a while it is useful to look back and ahead; *Hugoye*'s tenth anniversary is an excellent opportunity to do just that.[1] I will briefly discuss three topics. First, the geographical and sociological changes taking place among Syriac Christians as well as among students and scholars. Second, I will highlight tools for teaching and research that need to be created. And third, I will speak in a more general way about the present state of the academic study of Syriac Christian culture.

CHANGING GEOGRAPHY: CHANGING EXPERIENCES AND CHANGING INTERESTS

[3] There can be no doubt that geographical changes will further mark the development of Syriac studies in the coming years. In addition to a number of universities in Europe, North America, South Africa, and Australia, important centers of study and culture have always existed in the Middle East, the home of Syriac Christianity. Housed in monasteries or institutes of education, and often having important manuscript collections at their disposal, these Middle Eastern centers played an important role in the intellectual and cultural emancipation of Syriac Christians throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They also contributed to the development of Syriac studies in Europe. The names of Ignatius

[1] For earlier overviews, see S. Brock, "Syriac Studies in the Last Three Decades," in R. Lavenant (ed.), *VI Symposium Syriacum 1992*. Orientalia Christiana Analecta 247 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1994), 13–29; A. de Halleux, "Vingt ans d'étude critique des Églises syriaques," in R. F. Taft (ed.), *The Christian East. Its Institutions and Its Thoughts. A Critical Reflection*. Orientalia Christiana Analecta 252 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1996), 145–179; H. Teule, "Current Trends in Syriac Studies," in J.P. Monferrer-Sala (ed.), *Eastern Crossroads. Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 143–156.

Ephrem Barsom (d. 1957), Philoxenus Yuhanon Dolobani (d. 1969), Addai Scher (d. 1915), and Ignatius Ephrem Rahmani (d. 1929) come to mind, among many others: important leaders and scholars within their respective communities, they also interacted and collaborated with Western scholars. Their work, as well as their living example, remains important today.

[4] While active centers producing fine scholars and important publications still exist in the Middle East, there has been a setback in recent years, mainly for two reasons. First, due to the political instability in the Middle East, local working conditions are often far from ideal and contacts with the West sometimes difficult. Second, Christians from the various Syriac traditions continue to leave the Middle Eastern countries for destinations in the West, thus depriving the local communities of much of their human and intellectual capital. Throughout the twentieth century, Syriac Christian communities paid a disproportionate price in turbulent Middle Eastern areas, and—it is sad to say—they continue to do so in the first years of the twenty-first century. One hopes that the centers of Syriac Christian culture in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq will be able to recover and to regain some of their historical role; one hopes, too, that the monuments, libraries, and manuscript collections will be preserved and receive the attention they badly need. Syriac Christians and scholars alike will never give up their focus on the historic homelands of Syriac Christianity, but it has to be admitted that the presence of Syriac Christianity has significantly weakened. Quite interestingly, in Turkey there seem to be the first signs that the tide may be turning. Some Christians who left their homeland several years ago are beginning to return and to rebuild their lives there. In many ways there now seem to be new and better opportunities for Syriac Christianity as well as for the historical study of the Syriac monuments and manuscript resources.[2]

[5] From the viewpoint of students and scholars, the decline of Syriac Christianity in the Middle East has been compensated (to a degree) by developments elsewhere. First, there are the flourishing communities in Kerala, India. Not only do these communities fully take up the historic legacy of Syriac Christianity, but they also have

[2] For a discussion of some recent publications on Syriac Christianity by Turkish scholars, see H. Teule, "Current Trends," 153–54.

developed a number of important initiatives for the preservation and study of the Syriac traditions. The St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (SEERI) at Kottayam, Kerala, continues to play a vital role in these developments. Second, there is much activity in the Diaspora communities of Europe, North and South America, and Australia. As some of these communities include people of the second, third, or fourth generation, patterns of religious and cultural life are already well-established. In addition, contacts and fruitful interaction between the Diaspora communities and the homelands are maintained.[3] The hierarchies of the historic churches have learned to deal with the Diaspora situation, adjusting their policies in order to improve communication with their faithful in far-off lands, and to make full use of the new opportunities. The global landscape of Syriac Christianity will continue to change in the coming years. It is to be expected, however, that in the process of shaping their own religious and cultural identity, the Diaspora communities will continue to cherish their historic heritage and to study it. Links between Diaspora communities and academic centers in Western countries have been forged in the past—Beth Mardutho and *Hugoye* are illustrations of this—and such links are likely to grow in the coming years.

[6] New centers of Syriac studies are emerging in some of the countries of the former Soviet Union: in Russia and in several East European countries. In some cases, earlier centers of Oriental or Early Christian studies are being brought to new life, making use of the existing manuscript and library resources; in other cases it is just the curiosity and enthusiasm of students and professors that led to the discovery, or rediscovery, of Syriac Christianity, and to the modest beginnings of an appropriate academic infrastructure.[4]

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[3] For an overview of Syriac religious and cultural life in the Diaspora communities, see S. Brock a.o., *The Hidden Pearl. The Syrian Orthodox Church and Its Ancient Aramaic Heritage* (Rome: Trans World Film Italia, 2001), esp. III, 99–103 (the focus is on the Syrian Orthodox presence).

[4] See H. Teule, "Current Trends," 152–53. Teule mentions the 1999 rebirth of the Russian periodical (1910–1926) *Christianskiy Vostok* ("The Christian East") and further focuses on new developments in Moscow and Romania. New initiatives could be mentioned for other countries as well, esp. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

[7] None of these new developments—in the Middle East, Turkey, India, the Diaspora communities, or Russia and Eastern Europe—will leave the traditional study in Western academic centers unaffected. New research interests will develop, hitherto neglected fields will be explored, and, hopefully, new forms of interaction and international cooperation will be established. *Hugoye*, with its easy access to readers and contributors everywhere on earth, will not only reflect these changes but help to shape them.

[8] The potential of Syriac studies, therefore, may be said to be richer than ever before. New students and new researchers, having geographic, cultural, and educational backgrounds and experiences quite different from those of the traditional *mestaryonê*, will find their own topics and their own methodologies, and they will infuse new blood into our discipline. History will have its course and does not need to be predicted or guessed at here. Let us only express the wish that we will find the best possible ways of dealing with the new challenges and the new opportunities.[5]

SYRIAC STUDIES: THE CORE FIELDS, AND THE BASIC TOOLS FOR THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

[9] To whatever new research questions and new methodologies these recent developments will lead, the core of Syriac scholarship will remain the study of the language—our only means of communication with Syriac Christians of earlier days—and the interpretation of texts. Admittedly, an impressive number of new texts have been published and translated in recent decades, but when it comes to the basic tools of language and literature, it is difficult to argue that the present-day student is much better off than her or his fellow students of eighty or hundred years ago. Eighty-five years after A. Baumstark's *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (1922), we still don't have an updated history of Syriac literature. And the best we can do in the fields of grammar and lexicography is to put our hands on the works of the masters of old, which often

[5] To the geographical areas listed above we should add the growing interest in Syriac and in Syriac Christianity among students and scholars from Japan and South Korea.

exist in beautifully executed reprints: Theodor Nöldeke's grammar,[6] and the dictionaries by Carl Brockelmann (second edition, 1928), Robert Payne Smith (1879–1901, with a Supplement posthumously published in 1927), and Jessie Payne Smith (first published in 1903). I am not suggesting that no significant progress has been made. As a matter of fact, we now have a number of excellent concordances, in particular for the Old Testament and New Testament Peshitta, to which most recently *A Key-Word-in-Context Concordance* of the Old Syriac Gospels, by J.S. Lund (in collaboration with G.A. Kiraz), was added (2004). Much more, however, can and should be done, in particular when we consider the fact that the new technologies allow the manipulation of large amounts of data. Here I would like to single out three concrete projects, for each of which important steps have already been taken. My suggestions concern the Syriac *lexicon*, *textual corpora*, and an *encyclopedic* project.

[10] For some decades, considerable knowledge and experience in Aramaic and Syriac lexicography have been built up within the *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* project, presently based at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. It is within the framework of this project that we soon will have at our disposal a new edition of C. Brockelmann's *Lexicon Syriacum*, translated into English, revised, and slightly updated by Michael Sokoloff. Along with two other outstanding dictionaries by Sokoloff, covering the neighboring fields of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic—both of direct relevance to students of Syriac!—the new Brockelmann & Sokoloff will pave the way for the creation of new and up-to-date tools in the field of Syriac lexicography. Discussions for new projects are also in the works.[7]

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[6] On the 2001 publication of the reprint of the English translation of the 1898 second edition of the *Kurzgefasste syrische Grammatik*, see L. Van Rompay, in *Hugoye* 4/2 (July 2001).

[7] An "International Syriac Language Project" has been set up by Terry Falla (University of Melbourne), with the collaboration of several scholars. On the second ISLIP meeting, see I. Ramelli, "Session on Syriac Lexicography, International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Groningen, The Netherlands, July 25–28, 2004," *Hugoye* 7/2 (July 2004). Some papers of an earlier conference on Aramaic lexicography were published in *Aramaic Studies* 1.2 (2003).

[11] Related to this is the need for searchable textual corpora for different purposes: lexical, linguistic, and thematic. Would it not be wonderful to be able to search the writings of Ephrem, Jacob of Serug, Narsai, Jacob of Edessa, and Isho'dad of Merv? The *Leiden Armenian Lexical Database*, created by Jos Weitenberg at Leiden University, and the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, based at the University of California at Irvine, come to mind as obvious models.

[12] The third type of database I would like briefly to mention is of a quite different nature. For several years students of Syriac have been talking about the need for a Syriac Encyclopedia,[8] and concrete steps have been taken towards creating an "Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage," as a publication within the Beth Mardutho program. Although much work has been done, and a considerable number of entries have been submitted, final execution of the work has been delayed. While it is true that the field of Syriac is partly covered in a number of existing encyclopedias—dealing with Late Antiquity, Early Christianity, Eastern Christianity, or Near Eastern studies—none of these do justice to our field as a whole, and in its own right. There can be no doubt that an encyclopedia, created by a team of Syriac scholars, and aimed at students and scholars of Syriac as well as at a larger readership, will serve as an indispensable frame of reference, will inspire and guide young students, and will greatly enhance the visibility of our field. The existing, though somewhat dormant project, therefore, should be awakened urgently and forcefully. The encyclopedia should cover the earlier as well as the later and contemporary periods, and should include ample references to adjacent fields and disciplines, as the strength of Syriac studies lies in its multidisciplinarity and in its interconnectedness with other fields, rather than in its isolation.

[13] In order to make the project manageable, short- and long-term goals should be set. On the one hand, we should work towards the publication of a modest encyclopedic dictionary containing between three and four hundred entries. This could be published within a year or so, as many of the entries already are available and

[8] If my memory is correct, it was W. Witakowski, of Uppsala University, who first suggested the idea of a Syriac encyclopedia to the Business Meeting of the 1988 Syriac Symposium at Louvain. He referred to the example of the impressive *Coptic Encyclopedia*.

need only minor updates. On the other hand, we should keep working on a larger electronic database, in which many of the existing articles can be introduced as a starting point, but which should be expanded in the coming years. The more comprehensive electronic database can be more detailed and can include discussion of existing scholarship, whereas the printed dictionary will be more succinct and only provide basic information.

[14] The "Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage," in its two phases as proposed here, is not one of the many desiderata in the field of Syriac studies; rather, it is a concrete project that already has been created and waits to be carried out. There is no justification for further delay.

SYRIAC STUDIES: TEXTS, AUTHORS, OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

[15] In 1947, the Belgian Syriac scholar Jacques-Marie Vosté, who then was professor at the Angelicum in Rome, published a paper, entitled "De la besogne pour les jeunes syriacisants."[9] In it he listed what he regarded as—and mainly within his own field of expertise—the most urgent tasks for young Syriac scholars. This publication turned out to be Vosté's spiritual testament, for he died one year later (at the age of 66). For us, reading it sixty years later, the paper is an important historical piece. Not only is it interesting to see which items in Vosté's list have received scholarly attention and which have not, it is also worthwhile to notice the different conditions that prevailed in Syriac studies in Vosté's day. Throughout the paper, Vosté's enthusiasm is moving: to the young scholars he promises a life full of excitement and happiness; to the universities supporting them, he promises fame, the whole world's gratitude, and even some financial gain. I wish we could share in more of Vosté's optimism!

[16] Given his background in biblical and exegetical studies, it is no surprise that editions of biblical texts rank high on Vosté's wish list. He singled out as most urgent the need for an edition of the Old Testament Peshitta and of the New Testament Harklean version. In both areas Vosté's suggestions were taken up by later scholars.

[9] J.-M. Vosté, "De la besogne pour les jeunes syriacisants," *Le Muséon* 60 (1947), 171–86.

The Old Testament Peshitta edition, begun by the Leiden Peshitta Institute not long after Vosté wrote, is expected to be completed in the next couple of years. The project thus will have lasted fifty years, rather than "a few years" (*quelques années*), as Vosté predicted (p. 175). The study of the Harklean New Testament has been integrated within the work of the Institute for New Testament Research of the University of Münster. Here again, the problems turned out to be much more complex than first could be anticipated.

[17] As Syriac scholars we may wholeheartedly agree with Vosté's prediction that the universities that would undertake such editions "would cover themselves with glory" (p. 174), but present-day university administrators tend to look elsewhere for their glory. Vosté calculated that the universities would fully recover their financial investment in the form of the royalties they would earn from the unique publications that were going to be produced (p. 175). Experience has taught us otherwise! Universities no longer want to assume a Maecenas role for the arts and the humanities; instead, they have become business enterprises in which Syriac studies are seen as marginal at best. Projects in Syriac studies, as in the humanities in general, have to go through cumbersome procedures and heavy competition in order to get external funding. Successful projects normally are not limited to Syriac, but are embedded in much broader, multidisciplinary frameworks.

[18] Perhaps now even more than in Vosté's day Syriac studies owe their strength to the commitment and perseverance of individuals. Apart from the two aforementioned team projects, in which the universities of Leiden and Münster were—and to a certain extent still are—directly involved, other editions that Vosté suggested were subsequently carried out by individuals. This is the case for the edition of the Old Testament Commentary by Isho'dad of Merv, to which Vosté himself gave much of his last strength. The first volume, containing the Syriac text of the Genesis Commentary, was published in 1950, co-authored by Vosté and his much younger Louvain confrère Ceslas Van den Eynde. Van den Eynde continued on his own and completed the work in a series of splendid editions and translations (1955–1981).[10] Another East-

[10] Vosté strongly argues that Syriac texts need to be accompanied with translations. Publishing texts without translation would be

Syriac exegetical compilation, the *Gannat Bussâmê* ("The Garden of Delights"), arranged according to the periods of the liturgical year, which Vosté saw as a veritable gold mine—promising "la plus grande satisfaction" to those who would study it (p. 180)—has been meticulously explored by G.J. Reinink (University of Groningen), who now is in the process of producing a full edition with translation, the first volume of which appeared in 1988.

[19] Other texts recommended by Vosté for publication and translation have received little attention so far. This is true for the writings of the Syrian Orthodox author Jacob (Severus) bar Shakko (p. 183), who worked a few decades before Barhebraeus, as well as for a number of liturgical texts (pp. 184–185). Other areas referred to by Vosté in a more general way are hagiographical, ascetical, and mystical literature. In poetry Vosté singles out Narsai, Jacob of Serug, and Giwargis Warda: several of Narsai's *Mêmrê* remain unpublished, and, while Jacob of Serug has fared better than Narsai (especially after the 2006 expanded reprint of Bedjan's five-volume edition), Giwargis Warda remains very little studied to this day.

[20] Vosté's selection of texts was clearly determined by his work on the collections of East-Syriac manuscripts in Iraq, which suffered losses and destruction during and after World War I. In the course of his work in Iraq, he located and briefly described a number of manuscripts (namely those of Alqosh, Kirkuk, and ʿAqra), lamented the definitive loss of others, and rescued some to the Vatican Library. Unfortunately, the Syriac manuscripts of Iraq are still not secure. Their proper documentation and preservation are badly needed. Moreover, in the last decade of the twentieth century as well as in the first years of the twenty-first century new catastrophes do not cease to threaten them. *L'histoire se répète*—sadly and almost unbearably!

[21] The lack and desirability of editions, translations, and studies are not limited to the texts listed by Vosté. Each of us could easily make a list. I would like to single out a few names. A full edition of the works of John the Solitary of Apamea, one of the most fascinating authors of the early period of Syriac Christianity, is still missing. No general studies of his world of thought or sources exist. This is all the more surprising as there is a growing interest in

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"multiplier l'inédit" (p. 178). Van den Eynde's publications show to what extent his translations and notes are an integral part of his creative work.

asceticism in the Syriac and late ancient world, and John really brings an original voice to the world of fifth-century asceticism. The same is true for Jacob of Edessa, one of the most learned authors of Syriac literature and probably its best Hellenist. Here again, there is no lack of interest in his works, but a number of them remain unpublished and no overall monograph is available.[11] The works of many of the later authors are still lingering in manuscripts. What about Moses bar Kepha, Dionysius bar Salibi, Emmanuel bar Shahhârê, Yohannan bar Zoʿbi, Khamis bar Qardâhê, and Gabriel Qamsâ? Some parts of their works have been published or studied, often long ago, but no recent progress has been made. How to explain this lack of initiative, this lack of energy on the part of Syriac scholars?

[22] It is true that text editions and translations do not always have a positive reputation in the academic discourse, and that doctoral candidates often find it more attractive (or are even actively encouraged) to study a specific theme of Syriac Christianity on the basis of already published and translated texts. This tendency toward the monograph over and against the text edition and translation is to be regretted. Especially in the case of previously unedited and unpublished Syriac texts, there is no substantive academic foundation for the lack of prestige in executing such studies. The disclosure and the first interpretation of texts seem to me to be the noblest task of Syriac scholars, a task we should cherish above anything else. It is imperative, therefore, that we keep the standards of Syriac education high—in particular its linguistic and literary components—in order to allow future generations of Syriac scholars to carry out their work with the same rigor as the best editors and translators of the past.

[23] There may be an additional problem here, as the present-day requirements of many academic programs are so complex and wide-ranging that the basic study of languages and literatures is often given short shrift. This brings us back to the problem of the marginal position of Syriac in many universities. One can find students of Syriac in very different academic departments: religion, history, and art departments, and programs in Near Eastern

[11] A much delayed collective volume, to be edited by R.B. ter Haar Romeny and K.D. Jenner (Leiden University) and dealing with several of Jacob's writings, is scheduled to appear in 2007.

Studies, Semitic Studies, and Arabic or Islamic studies. Though the focus of a dissertation may be entirely on Syriac, in the preliminary stages of a doctoral program many other topics, languages, and methodologies will have to be learned. While I am convinced that Syriac has its proper place in all these different departments, and that Syriac studies greatly benefit from these diverse contexts, there is the possible problem of time pressure, the more so as university administrators are increasingly eager to abbreviate the number of years students spend in Ph.D. programs.

[24] Many of us will have noticed that in recent years symposia and conferences on Syriac topics are well-attended by a wonderful crowd of enthusiastic people with very different backgrounds—reflecting the healthy diversity hinted at above. This often leads to fascinating discussions and enriching encounters. One also realizes, however, that many of the attendees, while enthusiastically dealing with matters Syriac from a variety of angles, have only a limited knowledge of the Syriac language or no knowledge at all. We should not complain too much about this, as it is one of the consequences of the growing popularity of Syriac studies in recent years. Moreover, we may learn from the viewpoint of experts in different fields, even if they are not as strong in the Syriac language as we would like them to be. But there is a risk that Syriac texts are used without much precision or are quoted in translations without being checked against the Syriac original. Unfortunately there even have been some lamentable examples of poor, or less than poor, Syriac in recently published monographs. For several reasons—some of which mentioned above—it may not always be easy for students to learn Syriac, or to find experts with whom to discuss the specific problems posed by the texts with which they are dealing. In addition, as pointed out above, the tools for learning Syriac are less than ideal.

[25] There seems to be a real challenge here, which poses itself equally to Syriac scholars and to all those who are interested in Syriac Christian culture. On the one hand, we should let the Hidden Pearl be revealed to anyone who is interested in discovering it and learning from it. On the other hand, in dealing with Syriac texts we should never desist from applying the highest possible standards. Even though our understanding and interpretation of ancient texts will always be incomplete and provisional—every generation of scholars offering new insights

differing from those of the previous generations—the language should be studied in its full depth and be taken as the solid starting point for any discussion. Proper study of language and style should always be an integral part of our engagement with Syriac texts. May our field further grow and flourish in the coming ten years and beyond! May Hugoye bring and keep us together both in the real world and in cyberspace![12]

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