REPORTS

Conference Report

Fifth Dorushe Graduate Student Conference on Syriac Studies (Duke University, March 28-29, 2014)

Erin Galgay Walsh and Emanuel Fiano, Duke University

The 2014 Fifth Dorushe Graduate Student Conference on Syriac Studies convened at Duke University, Durham, NC, on March 28-29, 2014. This gathering, organized in cooperation with Beth Mardutho's Dorushe Graduate Student Association, was hosted by the Department of Religious Studies at Duke University, and generously sponsored by Duke University's Graduate Program in Religion, the John Hope Franklin Center for the Humanities, Duke's Center for Late Ancient Studies, the Evelyn and Valfrid Palmer Endowment Fund, the Warren Roman Catholic Endowment Fund, and the Dennis & Rita Meyer Endowment Fund. Co-chairing the conference were Emanuel Fiano and Erin Galgay Walsh of Duke University, along with a multi-institutional advisory board including Michael Petrin (University of Notre Dame), Alberto Rigolio (Oxford University), Daniel Schriever (Yale University), and James Walters (Princeton Theological Seminary). Dr. Lucas Van Rompay, Professor of Eastern Christianity at Duke University, served as the faculty advisor. His constant support, along with the efforts of the administrative staff of Duke's Department of Religious Studies (Ms. Marissa Lane and Ms. Tammy Thornton), made the conference possible.

The success of the conference testified to the great vitality of Syriac studies at Duke. As such, it served as a fitting tribute to what will soon be Prof. Van Rompay's fifteen years of generous teaching at this institution, as well as to his lifelong commitment to the promotion of scholarship on Syriac Christianity. Prof. Van Rompay delivered a moving keynote lecture, attended by scholars from both Duke and other institutions. Reflecting on the practices of our guild, he observed that "our field of study, its object, and its sources are inextricably linked to the recent history of the Syriac Christian communities and to the ways in which these communities and their cultural heritage have entered into the academic and larg-

er cultural consciousness of the West." Drawing upon his most recent research, Prof. Van Rompay discussed Syriac scholars' inheritance of "patterns of thinking that were deeply embedded in a world of western hegemony and colonialism," and he invited younger generations of Syriac students to "work hard to replace them with our own values based not on objectification, but on genuine respect of the cultures and the communities that we study." This invitation to renewed self-reflection, and to a balanced and thoughtful relationship with our objects of inquiry, set the tone for the conference.

This gathering of Dorushe, which saw the participation of scholars from the US, Canada, Great Britain, and Norway, included even more participants than the previous conference held at Yale in 2009, thus testifying to the ongoing expansion in the field of Syriac Studies. Twenty graduate students presented their current research, organized around thematic areas. A new feature of this edition of Dorushe was the option to deliver a dissertation interim report, along the traditional format of the conference paper.

Three of the papers dealt with issues of translation. Jonathon Stuart Wright (Oxford University), in his "The Syriac Translation of *Joseph and Aseneth*," argued that scholarly work on the Syriac version of this text should move beyond text-critical concerns, to consider how the translation represents the interests and preoccupations of its sixth-century milieu. He also called for an appreciation of the text's location in the manuscript in which it appears. Emilio Bonfiglio (Oxford University), speaking on "(Pseudo?)-John Chrysostom in Syriac Language," provided an overview of the preserved works of Chrysostom in the Syriac tradition, including those whose attribution to the bishop has been challenged. Chrysostom's *Homilies on His First Exile* served as a test-case for the role of the Syriac version in assessing the paternity of those questioned texts. Alberto Rigolio (Oxford University), discussing "*Erostrophus*: An Anonymous Syriac Dialogue Featuring Socrates," offered a preliminary analysis and partial translation of this philosophical composition about the soul. Rigolio also discussed chronology, original language of composition, and the meaning of the text's presence in a famous seventh-century Syriac manuscript.

A few participants' research revolved around fourth- and fifth-century Syriac Christianities. Philip Forness (Princeton Theological Seminary) presented a dissertation interim report titled "Miracles

and Sufferings: A Case Study on the Legacy of Chalcedon in the *Homilies* of Jacob of Sarug," in which he discussed this author's debated Christology. Relying on other contemporaneous writings, and analyzing Jacob's use of biblical exegesis, Forness showed the need for contextualizing Jacob's homiletical production within the controversies of his time. James Walters (Princeton Theological Seminary), with his dissertation report "Aphrahat and the Construction of Christian Identity in Fourth-Century Persia," invited the audience to read the Persian Sage's *Demonstrations* not as a straightforward reflection of Christianity at his time, but rather as a rhetorical and performative work, aimed at promoting, through the definition of both "external" and "internal" boundaries, a particular kind of Christian identity. Emanuel Fiano (Duke University), in his "The Trinitarian Discussions in Fourth-Century Syria and Their Ecclesiological Setting" (also a report about a dissertation project), focused on four episodes (the trial of Paul of Samosata; the schism in Antioch; Ephrem's anti-Arian production in Edessa; and the composition of the earlier layers of the Abgar legend in Edessa) to highlight elements of continuity in the institutional developments of the Church of Syria at the time surrounding those theological debates.

Dina Boero (University of Southern California) and Reyhan Durmaz (Brown University) focused their attention on the rich resources of hagiographical literature. In her dissertation report, "Symeon and the Making of the Stylite," Boero presented her research on the rise and development of a cult around Symeon the Stylite. Her work builds upon previous scholarship concerning the holy man in Late Antiquity, by turning attention to the process of building the cult and to the key figures involved in it. The multivalent subject of grief was at the center of Durmaz's presentation, entitled "Grief, Tears and Lamentation in the *Life of Mor Aho of Riš'ayno*: A Hagiographical Discourse Analysis." Drawing out the various expressions of grief and analyzing the rhetorical efforts of this eighth century author, Durmaz challenged her audience to attend to the discourse of emotions within ascetic and hagiographical literature.

The hagiographical tradition was also at the center of another series of presentations, animated by an interest in the role gender plays in such writings. Ashley Edewaard (University of Notre Dame), in her "Portraits of Women in Theodoret's *Religious Histo-*

ry," expounded this author's portrayal of three female ascetics. According to Edewaard, this Syriac author conceives of women as both prone to sinfulness and capable of overcoming their tendency through imitation of Mary. For Theodoret, she concluded, femininity may be described as a surmountable obstacle. Michael Petrin (University of Notre Dame), speaking on "John the Recluse's Select Narratives of Holy Women: The Question of Gender", illustrated the eighth-century Syrian monk's anthology of female saints' lives. An analysis of the colophons that John included in his manuscript, containing quotations from Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*, allowed Petrin to suggest that the choice of the female ascetics as the subject of his work proleptically alluded to the inclusive eschatological community, in which women would be allowed to partake. Julie Kelto Lillis (Duke University) presented her dissertation research on language and imagery for virginity in Ephrem's corpus. Her project treats the breadth of definitions for virginity among early Christian authors, and places Ephrem's representations of the virginal body into conversation with Greek and Latin speaking authors.

Other speakers focused on liturgy or apotropaic practices in their talks. Neil Raman (The University of the South), in "The Reception of the Eucharist," analyzed Narsai's *Homilies* 17 and Jacob of Sarug's homily *On the Partaking of the Mysteries*. Raman argued that, as a result of extensive preaching on the dangers of taking the Eucharist while in a state of sin, the reception of communion was rare at the time of those two authors. James Prather (Abilene Christian University) discussed "The Liturgical Impact of the Gospel of John on the Syriac Church," highlighting peculiar theological and literary motives that the utilization of various Johannine loci allowed to emerge in the Syriac hymnographic tradition. Part of Prather's talk dwelled on Ephrem's interesting usage of the image of the soldier piercing Christ's side (John 19) in his *Hymns on Nativity* 8. Nils Hallvard Korsvoll (Norwegian School of Theology), in "Christian Connection? A Structural Comparison of Syriac Amulets and Syriac Baptismal Exorcism Formulae in Late Antiquity," concentrated on the religious origin of these artifacts, sometimes alleged to be Jewish, Mandaic, or Manichean. Korsvoll's analysis of general parallelisms between the ritual structure and vocabulary of Syriac amulets and those of Syriac baptismal exorcism suggests the possibility that those objects may have been Christian.

Three presenters explored the use of the Hebrew Bible among fourth-century Syriac authors. In his paper, "Between Love and Awe: How *Genesis* Reads Ephrem," Daniel Picus (Brown University) explored how Ephrem's hymnography uses "rhetoric of participation" to accentuate the active quality of the biblical text on the senses. This quality of Ephrem's writing rendered the congregation's encounter with scriptural text a richly sensual experience. Erin Galgay Walsh (Duke University) called attention to the function of the *Esther* narrative within Aphrahat's account of salvation history in her presentation, "The *Book of Esther* in the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat." According to Walsh, Aphrahat alternates between a historical exegetical strategy and a typological approach between two *Demonstrations,* emphasizing Mordecchai's lineage and role within the story. Aphrahat's use of *Esther* sheds light on how the text functioned as Scripture within Syriac Christianity. Nicholas Wagner (Duke University) examined Aphrahat's biblical citations to revisit the claims of previous scholars in his paper, "Aphrahat's Biblical Text: A Reconsideration of *Memoriter*." Using *Demonstration* XVI as a test case, Wagner demonstrated the viability of claims that Aphrahat had direct access to the biblical text, leading to a re-evaluation of places where Aphrahat conflates and manipulates the biblical text as meaningful within his exegetical project.

A last theme prominently represented at the conference was that of encounters with various forms of "otherness" in the Syriac tradition. Vince Bantu (Catholic University of America), in his talk titled "Egyptian Ethnic Identity Development in the Syriac Writings of Timothy Aelurus," examined the ethnic rhetoric contained in this author's writings. Employing the notion of "ethnic boundary maintenance" (as opposed to "nationalism"), Bantu argued that the Coptic- and Syriac-speaking anti-Chalcedonian movements of Late Antiquity aimed at defining orthodoxy as coterminous with ethnic identity. John Zaleski (Harvard University) delivered a talk entitled "The Debate of Catholicos Timothy I and the Caliph al-Mahdi: Scriptural Exegesis and *Surat al-Ikhlas* in Christian-Muslim dialogue during the early ʿAbbasid Period." In his paper, Zaleski set Timothy's historicizing exegetical tendency, displayed in the dialogue, in the context of comparable Christian and Jewish interpretive modes. Through the further analysis of one locus in the text, Zaleski argued that the debate between Timothy and the Caliph demonstrated the relevance of inter-religious scriptural exege-

sis to early-ʿAbbasid-period Christian-Muslim dialogue. Finally, Jacob Lollar (Florida State University), presented his paper "An 'Unorthodox' Defense of 'Orthodoxy:' The Setting, Sources, and Purpose of the Syriac *History of John the Son of Zebedee*." Lollar argued for a fourth-century, Syriac, and possibly Edessene composition of this hagiographic tale, which would have been written in order to combat Marcionism through the upholding of the authority of John over against Paul's.

In addition to paper presentations and dissertation reports, two *Instrumenta* sessions were held during the conference. Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent (Marquette University) spoke about the resources accessible through the Syriaca.org website (The Syriac Reference Portal), a collaborative effort to open up the possibilities of digital humanities for the field of Syriac Studies. A second *Instrumenta* session featured the work of Colin Clarke and Barrett Fullerton (CCED, University of Toronto) in the field of Syriac epigraphy. Through the Canadian Centre for Epigraphic Documents (CCED), this website maps and catalogues examples of Syriac epigraphy in a fully searchable website (epigraphy.ca). Both of these presentations emphasized the potential for digital humanities to sponsor collaborative work across the various subfields of Syriac Studies, as well as provide greater access to materials for research.

The conference closed with a lively panel discussion entitled "Syriac Studies: What's Still Missing and What's to Come." Prof. William Adler (North Carolina State University) chaired the panel, which included Prof. Maria Doerfler (Duke Divinity School), Kyle Smith (University of Toronto), and Stephen Shoemaker (University of Oregon). Each speaker reflected on the role of Syriac studies in their own research, and a great deal of attention was paid to the place of Syriac within the larger fields of Late Antiquity and Early Christianity. These scholars also shared their experiences entering the ranks of the academia, encouraging younger scholars to frame their projects in ways that translate across disciplinary boundaries and appeal to broader audiences. A major theme among the panelists' remarks was the need for younger scholars to traverse linguistically defined boundaries of early Christian and Late Antique discourses, in order to re-narrate traditional historiography of the period in light of Syriac sources. Additionally, the speakers encouraged doctoral students to enlarge the scope of dissertation work in Syriac.

The diversity of interests and methodologies represented at the conference confirmed the ongoing growth and continued strength of the field. Among the presenters were several students whose primary research areas lie in other fields, such as Jewish Studies or liturgical studies; their engagement with Syriac materials demonstrates young scholars' ability to build bridges between Syriac Studies and other disciplines. In addition to providing a forum for sharing research, the Dorushe conference offered an opportunity for fostering community among the next generation of Syriac scholars. Building on the enthusiasm around the Dorushe Conference at Duke, plans are already in the works for the next meeting at Brown University in 2016. The vitality of this graduate organization bodes well for the future of Syriac Studies in North America.