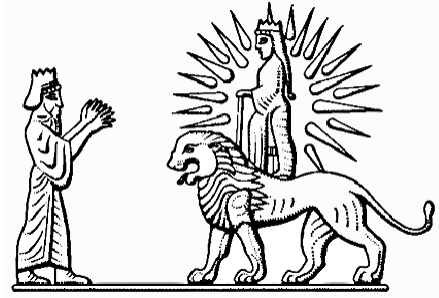


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“The Originality of Syriac Historiography”

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ABDUL-MASSIH SAADI Chicago

The Originality of Syriac Historiography

Introduction

Certain events in history may play a crucial role in determining the destiny of a nation, a community, a movement and even a religion. A combination of events and factors, both favorable and unfavorable, contributed to the development of the early West Syriac tradition in the sixth and early seventh centuries. Three Byzantine emperors implemented vacillating and largely unfavorable policies toward the West Syriac church. However, the rise of the Ghassanid kingdom and its rulers, particularly Harith and Mundhir, presented greater hope for the West Syriac church, encountering the adversarial policy of the Byzantine emperors. Because the Byzantine army needed the Ghassanids to protect their southern frontier from Arab raids and to aid them in their constant wars against Persians, the West Syriac people saw in the Ghassanids a protective ally, one that could buffer them from the potentially harmful Byzantine policy.

The treatment of the origin of the West Syriac tradition and the Ghassanid era in modern historiography raises questions concerning the character of Syriac historiography. For example, some modern scholars have claimed that the Syriac historical writings are slavish copies, unoriginal, unreflective, and lacking imagination.¹ As a result of such hasty claims, the tendency of

modern scholars has been to homogenize Syriac sources and pay little attention to the particular perspectives of each historian.

As a case study, I will examine the sixth century episode of the Ghassanid King Mundhir, within the framework of the struggle of the West Syriac Church for its survival, in the writings of four Syriac historians. I will also show each historian's perspective and demonstrate the significance of and the similarities and differences in their perspectives. Acknowledging such perspectives is essential in any scholarly use of these sources because these perspectives reveal their originality and vitality.

By the turn of the sixth century, Syriac writings began to reflect greater independence and particularity as the West Syriac Church further developed its own identity after the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). Syriac historians recorded obstacles confronting the church, as well as the successes and/or failures in carrying on their faith and preserving their church. They also wrote about the supportive role that the Ghassanid rulers played in the sixth century in revitalizing the West Syriac Church. Thus, they set before us an important historical account of the life of the West Syriac Church.

The Syriac historians I will examine are from different historical periods, and their

1 William Wright, *Short History of Syriac Literature* (1st ed. 1894; Amsterdam: Philo, 1966) 1-2; Wright quoted Renan as holding similar views, *De Philosophia Peripatetica apud Syros* (1852) 3; J. B. Segal, "Syriac

Chronicles as Source Material for the History of Islamic People," *Historians of the Middle East* (eds. B. Lewis and P. Holt; New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) 246-58.

histories reflect perspectives of the sixth, ninth, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. John of Ephesus (d. 589) was an eyewitness to most of the events he recorded during the sixth century.² The Anonymous Chronicle up to the Year AD 819 contains a good portion of the chronicle of Dionysius of Tellmahre (d. 845).³ Michael the Syriac (d. 1199) compiled several sources dealing with events of the sixth century, and it included the writings of John of Ephesus (d. 589), Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), John of Litarba (d. 738), Dionysius of Tellmahre (d. 845) and Ignatius of Melitene (d.

1064).⁴ The fourth historian is Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) whose primary sources were the former writings, in addition to his own historical interpretation.⁵ These historians lived in different ages and in different social and political environments. The story of Mundhir, therefore, comes to us through the particular lenses of these historians. Through them, one can better understand both the changes in the church and how these perspectives reflected the ecclesiastical, political, social and cultural conditions in different periods.

A Brief Account of the Ghassanid Kingdom

Around the fifth century, an immigrant Arab tribe from Yaman established a Christian Kingdom in the south of Syria. This kingdom was converted to Christianity at the time of the Byzantine emperor Anastasius (491-518), who was an advocator of the doctrine of One Nature. In the sixth century, this Christian kingdom emerged with considerable power extending from the border of Palestine in the west to the border of al-Hirah (in Iraq) in the east, bordering the Persian Empire.⁶ This is known as the Ghassanid Kingdom. The Ghassanids were known also as “the Arabs of the Romans” because of their alliance with the Byzantines, as opposed to “the Arabs of the Persians,” who allied themselves with the Persian Empire, and who are known also as Lakhmids or Manatdhira.

The Byzantine authorities found in the Ghassanids strategic allies because they could protect their southern border from constant Arab raids, and they could aid them against the Persians. Thus, the Byzantines supported the Ghassanid Kingdom and paid them an annual allowance to bolster their troops.

It happened that these Arab Christians adopted the Christological doctrine of One Nature (Monophysite/Henophysite) as opposed to the Two Natures (Diophysite) theology approved by the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. But when the Christological statements became politicized and divided the Christian communities, the Syriac communities adhering to the One Nature theology found allies in the Ghassanids. Indeed, the Ghassanid King Harith visited the Byz-

2 Iohannis Ephesini, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (ed. E. W. Brook; Part 3, CSCO 105/54; hereby John.

3 *Chronicon Anonymum ad annum Domini 819: Chronicon AD Annum Christi 1234 Pertinens* (ed. J. Chabot, CSCO, Syri ser. 111, 14; Paris: E. Typographeo Reipublicae, 1920). Hereby Anonymous.

4 *Chronique de Michel Le Syrien* (ed. J. Chabot; Vol. 4; Paris: Culture et Civilisation, 1910). Hereby M.S.

5 Gregorii Barhebraei, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (ed. J. Abbeloos and T. Lamy; Lovanii: Excudebat Car, 1872);

Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon Syriacum* (ed. P. Bedjan; Paris: 1890). Hereby Bar Hebraeus.

6 Fred Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquest* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981) 43-44; Theodore Noldeke, *The Princes of Ghassan From the House of Gafna* (Beirut: Catholic, 1933) 7-9; See also Irfan Shafid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (Vol. 1, part 2; Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1992) 694-96.

antine Capital, Constantinople, in AD 563 and requested the emperor Justinian to permit ecclesiastical freedom for the Syriac communities. According to John of Ephesus,⁷ it was in response to Harith's request that Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora facilitated the ordinations and missions of several itinerary bishops, among whom was Jacob Baradaeus "in the sixteenth year of the reign of Justinian."⁸

King Mundhir indeed supported these Syriac communities by providing strategic ecclesiastical help, and he also successfully protected the southern border. But while the Byzantine emperors depended on him to protect the southern border, they did not entirely trust him because of his church affiliation and other political considerations. The contemporary historian, John of Ephesus, relates how the emperor Justin II (d. 578) decided to assassinate Mundhir. According to John's Chronicle, emperor Justin II wrote to Mundhir saying: "Because of urgent matters, I have written to Patrician Marcion to discuss them with you; thus, immediately and without delay, go to him, and discuss these matters."⁹ At the same time, Justin II wrote to the military commander, Patrician Marcion saying: "Now, I have written to Mundhir, the Arab, to come to you; be alert! Immediately when he arrives, behead him without delay, and report to me."¹⁰ But in an unusual twist of fate, the name of Mundhir was inscribed upon the letter intended for Marcion; and conversely, the name Marcion was inscribed upon the letter intended for Mun-

dhir. Upon the discovery of the plot, Mundhir retreated to his territories, excusing himself from defending the Byzantine border.

As a result of Mundhir's retreat, the Persians and their Lakhmid allies raided into Syria as far as Antioch and caused great devastation. The emperor was then forced to persuade the offended Mundhir to resume his alliance with the Byzantines. According to the contemporary historian, John of Ephesus, it was only Mundhir's Christian sentiments at seeing the destruction inflicted by the Persians that convinced him to accept reconciliation with Justin.

However, the Byzantine Commander of the Army, Maurice, who subsequently became emperor (582-602), wove another complicated plot against Mundhir. Maurice prepared an expedition to fight the Persians. He planned to surprise the Persians by a sudden raid across a bridge of boats at Neapolis; but when the armies arrived, they found the bridge destroyed, leading them to believe that the Persians were already aware of and prepared for their expedition. Thus, Maurice's expedition failed; and he accused Mundhir of spying for the Persians. Furthermore, Maurice persuaded Emperor Tiberius (578-582) to agree to Mundhir's arrest. Through an elaborate conspiracy, Maurice succeeded in arresting Mundhir, by means of a Byzantine friend of Mundhir's. This "friend" invited Mundhir to a meeting, only to hand him over to his captors. With Mundhir out of the way, the Byzantines divided the Ghassanid Kingdom among fifteen phylarchs.

7 John of Ephesus, "Lives of the Eastern Saints," (ed. E. W. Brook; *Patrologia Orientalis* 18.2; Paris: 1924) 153-58.

8 This date places the event between 542-543, which is prior to the visit of Harith. Both M.S. and Bar Hebraeus agree with this date. Cf. M.S., II, 245-46; Bar Hebraeus I, cols. 215-16.

9 John, IV, 284-85:
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10 John, IV, 284-85: ܡܘܢܕܝܪ ܠܡ ܫܘܚܘܬܐ ܕܡܘܢܕܝܪ
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Comparison and Contrast of the Historical Accounts

The four Syriac historians recorded this episode in some detail. Their versions, however, differ from each other on a number of points, which carry particular significance in relation to the context within which each one analyzed and wrote. These differences may express a difference in style, but they may also dramatically alter the history and significance of that history. Thus, the significant of these various perspectives demonstrate the originality of their historical writings. This analysis will take the following points for comparison and contrast: the chronological order of events, the Mundhir-Justin relationship, the Mundhir-Tiberius relationship, the Mundhir-Maurice relationship and Mundhir's ecclesiastical role.

Chronological Order

With regard to the chronological order, John of Ephesus, Mundhir's contemporary, unlike the other three historians, did not care to arrange the events in a chronological sequence. Michael did organize most of Mundhir's episodes in sequence, but followed the sequence loosely when he wrote in detail about Mundhir's role in the Church. Both Anonymous and Bar Hebraeus, however, were careful to place the events in chronological order. While Anonymous speaks almost exclusively about the political aspects of Mundhir, Bar Hebraeus divides the story into two aspects, the ecclesiastical and the secular, in his two books, the Ecclesiastical History and the Secular History.

Mundhir-Justin Relationship

Concerning the Mundhir-Justin relationship, all four historians agreed that it resulted in horrible tensions, but they disagreed on the reasons for and the consequences of this relationship.¹¹ John reported that after achieving great victories, Mundhir thought that the emperor Justin would reward him. But the emperor, without proper inquiry, treacherously conspired against Mundhir.¹² Michael, however, recorded the same episode with reference to the reason, which he says resulted from Mundhir's request that Justin send him gold. Michael and Anonymous characterized Justin as an unwise leader. Anonymous spoke about Justin's mental illness (ܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܢܐ ܕܝܫܘܢܐ), and Michael elaborated on Justin's arbitrary calculations and decisions that gave the Persians vital advantages to prevail over the Byzantines.¹³ Bar Hebraeus, in contrast, clearly believed that Justin considered that what Mundhir had done against the Lakhmids would provoke the Persians to wage war against the Byzantines.

The four historians each mentioned Justin's plot against Mundhir's life, but they differed regarding its consequences.¹⁴ Although all four gave similar accounts of the episode, they clearly differed in their use of sources. Bar Hebraeus, for example, utilized a source which suggested that Mundhir, after he discovered the plot, did in fact reconcile with the Lakhmids and then joined with them to fight the Byzantines. It was only John who recorded that after three years of a continual offer of reconciliation by Justin that Mundhir agreed to reconcile

11 John, IV, 3, 280-82; M.S., 347; Bar Hebraeus 85; Anonymous, 205-207.

12 John, 281-82,

13 Anonymous, 207.

14 John, IV, 282-83; M.S., 370-71; Bar Hebraeus 85-86; Anonymous, 205.

through the mediation of Justinian the Patrician, who was the commander of all Byzantine forces, and only on condition that Justin confess his responsibility for the letters.¹⁵

Mundhir-Tiberius Relationship

Regarding the Mundhir-Tiberius relationship, all four historians agreed that it was excellent until the arrest of Mundhir.¹⁶ While John was careful to describe Tiberius in favorable terms, he also asserted that Mundhir was innocent. Michael agreed with John's claim that Mundhir was innocent, but he utilized different sources, which refer to Tiberius blaming Mundhir during Mundhir's visit to the capital Constantinople. Apparently, Bar Hebraeus and the Anonymous utilized the same source as Michael in reference to Tiberius blaming Mundhir, but contrary to John and Michael, they passed no judgment on Mundhir's innocence.

Mundhir-Maurice Relationship

Regarding the Mundhir-Maurice relationship, all four historians agreed that it was strained and hostile.¹⁷ John portrayed Maurice as "treacherous," a "false accuser" and as an ardent Chalcedonian. Throughout the story of Mundhir, John did not once attribute to Maurice the title of King (ܡܠܟܐ). Maurice, according to John, was responsible for annihilating the Christian Ghassanid Kingdom, which resulted in political and religious disaster.

Michael too shared John's description of Maurice as a false accuser, but he did not

elaborate further. Neither Bar Hebraeus nor Anonymous recorded the episode of the Bridge War; instead, Anonymous wrote in greater detail about a different battle at 'Ant (ܐܢܬ), where both Mundhir and Maurice displayed insufficient military leadership, and this lack of leadership allowed the Persians to attack and escape. This military blunder, according to Anonymous, was the reason for Maurice's anger and what led him to accuse Mundhir before the emperor Tiberius.

Mundhir's Ecclesiastical Role

Concerning Mundhir's ecclesiastical role, both John and Michael presented Mundhir as a successful arbitrator and of utmost help for the life of the church. He quelled the quarrels among disputing groups within the church, and with his help, persecution against the West Syriac Church ceased. Both John and Michael saw the Tiberius-Mundhir relationship as a helpful phenomenon for the unity and peace of the church. And they also claimed that Tiberius was very supportive of Mundhir's efforts. Although Michael used sources different from John's, both agreed on the message. While Anonymous particularly ignored Mundhir's ecclesiastical role, Bar Hebraeus referred to several occasions, mentioned also by Michael, concerning his successful arbitrating role among the disputing church parties.

The historiography and more specifically the particularity of each historian's perspective greatly complicates questions concerning the relationships between communities of the early West Syriac Church. Among these questions is that of the unity

15 John, IV, 285.

16 John, III, 173-74, IV, 218-9; M.S., 370-71; Bar Hebraeus, 88; Anonymous, 209-11.

17 John, III, 173-74, IV, 218-19; Bar Hebraeus, 88; Anonymous, 210.

of the church. In light of these historical perspectives, we can now, with greater confidence, trace clearly the circumstances of

the beginning of the West Syriac tradition based on the Syriac historiography.

Notes on the Beginning of the West Syriac Tradition (6th and 7th century)

It would be inaccurate to attribute to a single event or person the resuscitation and preservation of the West Syriac Church. Harith and Mundhir, the Tayyaye “Orthodox” [Monophysite] rulers, as well as John of Tella, Jacob Baradaeus, and many others, played important, supportive roles.

Equally important was the resistance and persistence of the West Syriac communities, especially those inhabiting the border areas between the Roman and Persian Empires. These communities enjoyed a kind of “security zone” and an unusual “hands off” treatment by the Byzantines on one side, and the Persians on the other. All these factors secured the continuity of the church.

Following the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the progress and regress of each church party, namely the Diophysites and Henophysites [Monophysites: adherents of One Nature Christology], depended largely on the attitude of the Byzantine emperors at the time. The Henophysites strove to quickly regain their losses by convincing the current emperor, or the one to come, of the fairness of their cause. They never thought of having a separate local hierarchy, or considered a form of a church other than the church of Antioch and its jurisdiction. Even to this day, they cling to this title.

After a short time, their efforts were crowned by the famous creed, Henotikon

(AD 482), of the emperor Zeno, which was an attempt at compromise between the two Christological Doctrines (which was accepted by most of the Eastern Churches, but rejected by Rome). But during the reigns of Justin (518-527), Justinian (527-565), and Justin II (565-78), the West Syriac Church faced difficult times. It did not, however, lose hope. The situation continued to ebb and flow depending on the circumstances that favored or disfavored the various parties. The persecution against the Henophysites was not thorough, and many of their bishops continued in their sees, albeit with limited freedom. John of Ephesus reported that most of the Orthodox bishops were not courageous enough to ordain priests for the Orthodox believers in public for fear of persecution.¹⁸ John of Tella (d. 538), on the other hand, as John of Ephesus wrote, accepted the risk, and responded that “there is no fear in love” (1Jn. 4:13), and boldly ordained everywhere. As a result, John reported, “many of the faithful turned back to orthodoxy.”¹⁹ John had much freedom to ordain, and provide ministry and pastoral care in the bordering countries like Persia, Arzun and Armenia.²⁰ John was not alone in such missions; others worked with him both in secret and in public in the middle of the sixth century.²¹

In the middle of the sixth century, the Ghassanid King Harith intervened with Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora

18 *John of Ephesus, Lives of the Eastern Saints* (ed. E. W. Brook; *Patrologia Orientalis* 18.2; Paris: 1924) 516. Hereby Lives.

19 Lives, 517-18.

20 Lives, 519.

21 Lives, 530ff.

to permit the ordination for bishops, Jacob Baradaeus and others.²² Jacob made a great contribution by providing West Syriac communities with pastors who would provide pastoral care. Jacob's activity, however, was not extraordinarily influential, as some historians have asserted. Some historians have even claimed that Jacob founded the West Syriac Church. On the contrary, despite the valuable service that Jacob contributed to the church, he was very dependent on many persons who directed and instructed him. Bar Hebraeus described him as "pure and gentle" (ܐܘܪܗܘܡ ܘܥܘܠܡܝܢ); but Bar Hebraeus added that Jacob was directed by persons surrounding him as if he were in a play (ܐܘܪܗܘܡ ܘܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܘܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܘܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܘܥܘܠܡܝܢ).²³ The other three historians characterized him in similar ways.²⁴

King Mundhir, Harith's son, followed his father's policy, and intervened with the emperor Tiberius to cease the persecution against the West Syriac Church. After this, he met the Diophysite Patriarch of Antioch for the same purpose. And indeed, as John of Ephesus wrote, the persecution stopped.²⁵ Mundhir also interceded with the emperor Tiberius to release the clergy and lay people whom were arrested over church issues.²⁶ Mundhir was a persistent arbitrator among the disputing groups of the West Syriac Church. For a while, he succeeded in restoring peace and unity among them, and continued his role as arbitrator, sometimes even by correspondence.²⁷

The West Syriac communities saw in the Ghassanid power a helpful external aid in their struggle for survival. The Ghassanid power afforded a sort of strategic balance in their striving to hold ground in the face

of the official, imperial, Byzantine support for the Diophysite church. John of Ephesus, and Michael even more so, dreamed that Mundhir's efforts, with the support of the emperor Tiberius, would bring peace and unity to the whole church. However, the dream was not realized, and the Ghassanid Kingdom was ultimately annihilated as a result of a Byzantine conspiracy, led by emperor Maurice. But there continued to be hope. After the assassination of Maurice in 602, and the succession of Phocas, Anonymous speaks about the release of Mundhir and his son from prison.²⁸ Ultimately, this document reflects the lingering hope the Syriac communities placed on Mundhir to support the Syriac church.

Practically, the hope for unity and reconciliation continued to ebb and flow in the beginning of the seventh century. In the period between 602 and 630, the Persians invaded Syria. As a result of Persian favor, the West Syriac clergy recovered from their previous losses. Michael reported that all the Episcopal Sees were everywhere directed by Orthodox bishops.²⁹ In 630, the war ended, and the emperor Heraclius himself led negotiations with the West Syriac Patriarch, Athanasius Gamolo (the Camel Driver, 595-631) to find a solution to the conflicts among the church parties within the whole Empire. But suddenly, their negotiations were abruptly altered because of the arrival of the Mhagrae, the Arab Muslims. The new policy brought by the Mhagrae was to fix and crystallize the status quo of all church groups.

On several documented occasions, dated in the middle and late seventh century, we find Christians of different beliefs praying together and attempting to supersede their

22 M.S., 310.

23 Bar Hebraeus, 233.

24 John, 39, 218-19; M.S., 356-7; Anonymous, 11, 242.

25 John, IV, 42, 224.

26 John, IV, 42, 224.

27 John, IV, 39, 40, 225-27.

28 Anonymous, 219.

29 Anonymous, 224; M.S., 390-91.

differences.³⁰ But the new dominant policies of the Mhagraye led previous disputing church groups to a final and complete separation. A voice of complaint concerning the Muslim policy towards the churches is preserved in Michael's Chronicle. The com-

plaint was directed towards the Muslim rulers who allowed and encouraged the separation of the churches, in the hope that this policy would weaken the churches and strengthens the Muslim position.³¹

Conclusion

In summary, each historian demonstrated his own peculiar view and distinct perspective, based on his own convictions and the surrounding circumstances. While John of Ephesus (6th century) was an eyewitness and a contemporary to most of these events, he was more than just a chronicler, he was emotionally involved. Michael (12th century), on the other hand, utilized other sources besides John's writing, and tended to focus instead on the ecclesiastical role of Mundhir. Michael shared John's sympathy toward the loss of Mundhir, but only in regard to Mundhir's ecclesiastical role. Conversely, Anonymous and Bar Hebraeus, though they used different sources,

brought new information and showed no interest in Mundhir's fate. Finally, the fact that these Syriac sources reveal such particular and specific attitudes negates the possibility of the hasty assertion made by those scholars who have seen no originality in this Syriac historiography. Therefore, the Syriac chronicles were not "merely another copy," not "unattractive," "passive and uninterested," or "lacking imagination." On the contrary, as this paper is meant to demonstrate, the Syriac sources are indeed creative, dynamic and vital sources, which transmit several traditions in the light of their historical context.

30 Abdul-Massih Saadi, "The Letter of John of Sedreh: A New perspective on Nascent Islam," *Journal of the*

Assyrian Academic Society 11.1 (1997) 68-84.
31 M.S., 517.