

The History of Christian-Muslim Relations

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MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN CONTROVERSY IN
AN UNEDITED SYRIAC TEXT
Revelations and Testimonies about Our Lord's Dispensation

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Revelations and Testimonies about Our Lord's Dispensation is one of a number of Syriac texts with apocalyptic content produced at the end of the seventh century AD and afterwards. Up to now, the text is unpublished and has never been studied. As I am planning an edition of the text with Alain Desreumaux, I have made a first attempt at analysing it; it is the result of this preliminary inquiry that I present here. *Testimonies*, as I am going to call the text, is anonymous, without date or indication of the place of composition. We are thus compelled to seek internal arguments that will allow us to situate the text in place and time.

Testimonies is preserved in two late manuscripts of the eighteenth century: Vatican syr. 164 (dated 1702 AD)¹ and London, BL add. 25,875 (1709 AD).²

Content of the manuscripts

The content of the two manuscripts may be seen from the following table.

Vatican syr. 164 (1702 AD)	London, BL add. 25,875 (1709 AD)
(ff. 1-63) <i>The Cave of Treasures</i>	(ff. 1-50) <i>The Cave of Treasures</i>
(ff. 65 ^v -71 ^v) Question of Simeon Cephas about the origin of the divine Sacraments and Baptism	(ff. 50 ^v -54 ^v) Question of Mar Simcon Cephas about Eucharist and Baptism

¹ See S.E. Assemanus, *Bibliothecae apostolicae Vaticanae codicum manuscriptorum catalogus*, Rome, 1759, pp. 329-31.

² W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1838*, London, 1872, vol. III, pp. 1064-9, no. DCCCCXXII.

Vatican syr. 164 (1702 AD)	London, BL add. 25,875 (1709 AD)
(ff. 71 ^v -73) Question of Ezra the Scribe regarding the End of Times and the Kingdom of the Ishmaelites	(ff. 54 ^v -57 ^v) Question of Ezra the Scribe regarding the Kingdom of the Ishmaelites
(ff. 75 ^v -79) <i>The Testament of Adam</i>	(ff. 57 ^v -58 ^v) <i>The Testament of Adam</i>
(ff. 79-109) Testimonies of the Prophets regarding the Dispensation of the Messiah	(ff. 58^v-77^v) Revelations and visions of the Just Ones of old and of the true Prophets regarding the Dispensation of the Messiah
f. 110, colophon: ms. copied by the deacon Hormizd bar Cyriacus bar Ascar from Mosul, AnGraec 2013 (= 1702 AD)	(f. 77 ^v) Names of the nations that arose after the Confusion of Tongues
	(ff. 77 ^v -81) Extracts regarding Nebuchadnezzar from a discourse of John Chrysostom
	f. 81, colophon: ms. copied by the priest Homo bar Daniel from Alqosh, AnGraec 2020 (1709 AD)
	(ff. 81 ^v -157 ^v) <i>The Book of the Bee</i> of Solomon of Basra
	f. 157 ^v , second colophon by the same scribe
	(ff. 159-232) <i>Chronicon</i> by Simeon Shanklawi
	f. 232, third colophon by the same scribe
	(ff. 232 ^v -253) The History of Shalitā
	(ff. 253-258 ^v) The Martyrdom of Mamas
	(ff. 258 ^v -361) The History of Alexander the Great
	f. 361, fourth colophon by the same scribe

The two manuscripts contain the same texts in the same order, except that the Vatican manuscript contains two additional elements before a first colophon. Its scribe later resumed his work of copying in three stages, probably using a different manuscript as model each time, at the request of and on behalf of different people (one of whom is mentioned in the second colophon). The manuscripts were copied just a few years apart, in Iraq, in the same East-Syrian script. This could mean that they copied the same exemplar, but the variant readings in the titles of the different pieces as well as the slight differences regarding *Testimonies* point to two different ancestors. This

indicates, in turn, that these texts were thought interesting enough to deserve several copies.

The material that precedes *Testimonies* was not copied at random but seems to have been gathered on purpose. The content of the manuscripts shows, on the one hand, a clear interest in a theology of history and a preoccupation with the chronology of world history and the End of Time, as in the *Cave of Treasures*³ and the *Apocalypse of Ezra*⁴ (with, in this particular case, a further interest in the coming of the Arabs). On the other hand, the *Questions of Simeon Cephas* show a concern for matters concerning the Christian sacraments. We find all these themes in *Testimonies* as well.

Testimonies

Introduction

Under the guise of a random collection of prophecies, the text is a kind of *vademeccum* of what is to be known about the Dispensation of Christ and about the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. It is addressed to an anonymous reader whom the author invites to consider ‘the mysteries and allegories which took place in every generation until the coming of our Lord, who accomplished them in the body of his Humanity and the strength of his Divinity and beloved Humanity’ (Test. 1).

Testimonies from the Old Testament represent types of New Testament realities. J. Rendel Harris postulated the existence of entire collections of such testimonies—whether oral or written—as sources for anti-Jewish Christian literature in Greek and Syriac.⁵ What we have in *Testimonies* is not in fact a raw collection, but rather an elaborate compilation of traditional material. It has a

³ See Su-Min Ri, ed. and trans., *La Caverne des trésors: les deux recensions syriaques* (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 486-487 = syr. 207-208), Louvain, 1987; with commentary in idem, *Commentaire de la Caverne des trésors: étude sur l’histoire du texte et de ses sources* (GSCO 581 = subs. 103), Louvain, 2000.

⁴ See J.-B. Chabot, ‘L’Apocalypse d’Esdras touchant le royaume des Arabes’, *Revue Sémitique* 2, 1894, pp. 242-346.

⁵ J. Rendel Harris and V. Burch, *Testimonies*, 2 vols, Cambridge, 1916-20. See a collection of biblical testimonies and their interpretation in an eighth-century treatise in A.P. Hayman, ed., *Disputation of Sergius the Stylite against a Jew* (CSCO 338-339 = syr. 152-153), Louvain, 1973.

strong anti-Jewish flavour. The very first prophecy (taken from the *Cave of Treasures*) shows Adam foreseeing the crucifixion of Christ at the hands of the Jews (Test. 1). Later on, the text speaks of the 'stubborn Jews who sacrificed Christ' (Test. 6). Elsewhere, the Jews are said to be impure (Test. 8), ungrateful (Test. 22) and wicked (Test. 23). The text aims at showing that the Christians are the new elected people, the Jews having been divested of the Promise since they did not listen to the prophets and did not receive Christ: David himself announced the baptism given to the holy nation elected from among all other nations, the nation of the Christians believing in Christ (Test. 7).

Testimonies relies heavily upon the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*,⁶ which it cites as one of its sources: Pseudo-Methodius is mentioned twice under the name of Te'edos (Test. 33 and 35). From the *Apocalypse*, *Testimonies* borrowed the idea that divine election passed to the nation of the Syrian Christians who possess the true Hope, which is the Cross. Using Pseudo-Methodius, *Testimonies* provides its Syrian readers with material to prove that they are the true children and heirs of Abraham. This argument is in fact directed as much to the Arabs as it is to the Jews.⁷ Drawing from Pseudo-Methodius, the text says:

If the wicked Jews or the Arabs say to you, 'Abraham is the father of the Jews, and the heathens' father is Ishmael, son of Abraham. And you, Syrian Christians, who is your father?' Answer [them]: 'We, Christians, are the elected people, the sacerdotal tribe for the heavenly Kingdom according to what the Prophets announced.' (Test. 27)

The figure of Melchizedek

To support the view that Christians are the elect people, stated clearly in Test. 27, other elements had appeared previously in the text. First, there is an emphasis on Melchizedek, for whom twelve kings had built a city he called Jerusalem (Test. 11). The number

⁶ G.J. Reinink, ed. and trans., *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (CSCO 540-541 = syr. 220-221), Louvain, 1983.

⁷ On the habit of Christian apologetic texts of the ninth century to characterize Islamic beliefs and practices as Jewish, see S.H. Griffith, 'Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century', *Jewish History* 3, 1988, pp. 65-94.

twelve, of course, refers to Christianity and the twelve apostles. At the same time, Melchizedek's offerings are a type of the Christian mysteries. Abraham himself is supposed to have partaken of these mysteries, thus becoming the first Christian (Test. 14). Melchizedek prophesies also regarding Rebecca's twins that the elder brother would become the servant of the younger, that is, that the Jews would be the servants of the Christians (Test. 12). Contrary to the traditional Christian interpretation of the priesthood of Melchizedek as a type of the eternal priesthood of Christ, here it is explained as a type of the union without separation of humanity and divinity in Christ (Test. 11).

The role of Jerusalem

The text uses Melchizedek on different levels: to announce the Christian mystery of the Eucharist, as a profession of faith about Christ's natures, and as a means to make a symbolic linkage between the Christians and the founding of Jerusalem. The *Cave of Treasures* is the main source here. In that text, as in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, Jerusalem plays a central role. It is said to be at the centre of the Earth where Adam was buried with offerings of gold, incense and myrrh (Test. 16). In *Testimonies*, however, God places the heavenly Jerusalem above the earthly one (Test. 18) because He created everything by pairs, such as the moon and the sun, night and day.... Human beings also are dual, with two hands, two ears, and so on. The text adds that even the divine mysteries ought to be celebrated, according to the apostles' instruction, by two members of the clergy: a deacon and a priest.

Jerusalem appears on another occasion, in the Testimony of Jeremiah (Test. 30): the Lord asks Jeremiah to sit on a rock for a year and a half without speaking or eating. After that time, He allows him to explain that this rock is Jerusalem, church of the nations; it is also Christ who will come at the end of time and place his church on the rock of Truth; and it is also the head of the twelve rivers that water the Creation, that is, the twelve disciples of the Lord, who are 'called *kiphā* ["stone"] by our Lord' (Test. 30). Jeremiah then announces the defeat of the Jews whose Jerusalem will be destroyed. Ostriches, monkeys and jackals will inhabit it, and the Jewish people will be dispersed.

This peculiar passage evidently aims at showing that Jerusalem is no longer the city of the Jews, but is now a Christian city. The

emphasis put on Jeremiah's rock may be a way of countering any claim that the Dome of the Rock—whose building deeply moved contemporary Christians and had an echo in Syriac apocalyptic tradition, notably in Pseudo-Methodius⁸—could be the heir of the Jewish Temple. Jerusalem will remain ruined after its destruction: 'the house of the Jews is empty, because the Holy Ghost left it at that time' (Test. 40). The destruction of Jerusalem is actually announced twice: the first prophecy, by Jeremiah, announces that Jerusalem will be laid waste and deserted by its inhabitants and refers to its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar (Test. 30); the second time, Daniel announces the coming of Christ and his Crucifixion 'after 500 years'. Jerusalem will then be destroyed and remain deserted (Test. 31). That destruction, if actual, is also symbolic; it means that the Temple will be torn down at that time and will remain so.

The End of Time

Testimonies offers no hope of a political change that would give the city of Jerusalem back to the Christians, as in other Syriac apocalypses. Instead, the text resorts to a *symbolic* appropriation of the city. The 'End of Time' is no longer at hand, as it was in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*. While the text reflects the traditional chronology of the six millennia, Christ's birth taking place in the sixth millennium, 5,500 years after the Creation (Test. 1, 31), no eschatological expectations are announced. *Testimonies* summarizes Pseudo-Methodius' account of Alexander the Great building the North Gates and the prophecy of the coming of the impure tribes of Gog and Magog 'at the End of Time' against the Land of Israel, as well as the prophecy that the Romans will hand over the Kingdom to God the Father 'at the End of Time' (Test. 33). There is, however, no *Endkaiser* in *Testimonies* and the kingdom is not a political one. *Testimonies* gives an interesting interpretation of kingship through the story of Nimrod (Test. 33). One day in his palace, he saw an image of a crown. He called his jeweller, Sisun, and asked him to make an actual crown similar to the image. Sisun did so and, as soon as he finished, the

⁸ See G.J. Reinink, 'Early Christian Reactions to the Building of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem', *Christianský Vostok* 2, 2000, pp. 227-41; B. Flusin, 'L'esplanade du Temple à l'arrivée des Arabes d'après deux récits byzantins', in J. Raby and J. Johns, eds, *Bayt al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, I, Oxford, 1992, pp. 22-6.

image embodied itself in the artefact. That is why (the text goes on) people say that the crown came from heaven. Since then it was upon the heads of the Persians until Alexander, and then upon the heads of the Romans, who will wear it forever because they believed in Christ (Test. 34). Based once more on Pseudo-Methodius, this account makes a key point: Roman kingship is divinely ordained—but this kingship is primarily spiritual and heavenly rather than political.

We are here in a situation different from that in Pseudo-Methodius or the Edessene apocalypse.⁹ The 'End of Time', which according to these apocalypses was supposed to witness the victory of the Last Emperor, is interpreted in *Testimonies* in a symbolic way: it in fact refers to the time of Christ's birth from the race of David, from the Virgin Mary. The Messiah reveals himself at the 'End of Time' whereas the Son of Perdition will manifest himself 'at the end of this world'. Eschatology is radically 'realized' in *Testimonies* by splitting off the 'End of Time'—which already took place when Christ was born (Test. 4, 27, 42)—from the 'End of this World' when the Antichrist will appear (Test. 4, 8).¹⁰ Neither a political change nor particular eschatological events are expected. The defence of Christianity will not come from a Last Emperor, but from Christians living within the Islamic empire equipped with arguments such as those provided in *Testimonies*.

The prophecies are intended to rebuke the Muslims as much as the Jews. Christians had trained for anti-Jewish controversies for centuries, but in the early Islamic period had not yet built arguments to respond to attacks from Muslims. With *Testimonies* we probably find ourselves in a period of transition, when Christian apologists found the weapons of anti-Jewish controversy at hand and used them to create, little by little, a new defence directed to the Muslims.

Indeed, in *Testimonies* we can see the construction of a range of anti-Muslim arguments in process. Thus, when the author needs to explain why Christ was riding a donkey when he entered Jerusalem, he says that it is not because he did not have a horse to ride but

⁹ See G.J. Reinink, 'Der edessenische 'Pseudo-Methodius'', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83, 1990, pp. 31-45; idem, 'Pseudo-Ephraem's 'Rede über das Ende' und die syrische eschatologische Literatur des siebenten Jahrhunderts', *Aram* 5, 1993, pp. 437-63.

¹⁰ It is only when it relies upon Pseudo-Methodius that the text identifies the 'End of Time' and the 'End of this World' (Test. 33 and 34).

because 'he wanted to show that he is the Lord of all creatures, quiet and humble' (Test. 37). This sounds as if it could be a response to mockery from the Arabs who were fond of horses, especially in the battlefield.

Testimonies also asserts that the religion of the Syrian Christians is more excellent than any other since they pray facing the East, which is, according to the text, the way human beings originally prayed, from Adam until the confusion of tongues. Moses and Aaron also turned to the East, where the sun rises, where Paradise lies and where the door of Heaven is placed—as well as God's throne and Jacob's ladder (Test. 17). We may have here the very beginnings of controversy with Islam about the direction for prayer, something that would become an important topic in ninth-century texts.¹¹ Toward the end of *Testimonies*, a warning to Christians not to 'abandon the path of Justice' lest God abandon them (Test. 38) may be directed against conversion to Islam.

In order to comfort Christians and convince them that they do possess the true religion, the text uses the argument of miracles (Test. 27, 40), but in a less elaborated way than in ninth-century literature.¹² The argument comes once again from anti-Jewish literature, but is now obviously aimed at Muslims: the miracles accomplished by Moses and those coming after Christ's resurrection are proof of the Jews' blindness and of Christianity's superiority. Most of all, the emphasis on Christ being the only and true Messiah sounds like a refutation of the prophetic status of Muhammad: 'There is no other Messiah in truth than Christ who can give strength and power to human beings' (Test. 40). In the same way, the heavy insistence upon the Jews having crucified Jesus Christ could be an answer to the Muslims' denial of the crucifixion as much as an anti-Jewish argument.

¹¹ See already the eighth-century *Dispute of the Monk of Bêt Hâlê* and the ninth-century *Treatise* of Nonnus of Nisibis (d. c. 870); S.H. Griffith, 'Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bêt Hâlê and a Muslim Emir', *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3, 1, January 2000, pp. 1-19.

¹² See S.H. Griffith, 'Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians', *Proceedings of the PNR Conference*, 1979, pp. 63-87.

Date and place of composition

The above examples lead me to consider *Testimonies* as a witness to the very beginnings of Christian discussion with Islam, a laboratory in which new arguments are being developed out of the existing anti-Jewish polemical literature. The only firm ground for determining a *terminus a quo* for the composition of the text is its use of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, which implies a date after 691-692 AD.¹³ As indicated above, with *Testimonies* we are no longer in a period of political hardships for Christians such as those brought about by 'Abd al-Malik's tax reforms and the Second Civil War, nor in a time of expectation of a military victory by a Christian empire or of the coming of the End of Time as in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*.¹⁴ The expected victory is a super-worldly one, at a time when the worldly power of the Arabs seemed unrivalled. The elements of anti-Muslim controversy, as well as the warning against conversion point to a period when the new religion was becoming known to Christians and was well installed. The early decades of the eighth century fit this picture, perhaps the decade between 720 and 730, before the development of controversies with Islam in the form of dialogues, Questions and Answers, and letters.¹⁵ The text does not actually name the Muslims as such but refers to them as 'heathens' or 'Arabs' and does not, at any time, claim openly to be a disputation with them.

As we saw earlier, *Testimonies* is intended for Syrian Christians, in all probability East-Syrian ones. The last paragraph of the text is an appeal to remember the fast of the Ninivites¹⁶ observed particularly in the Church of the East: 'We... Christians, fast on these days... to represent the Prophet Jonah, type of our Lord and Saviour Jesus

¹³ See G.J. Reinink, 'Pseudo-Methodius: A Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam', in A. Cameron L.I. Conrad and G.R.D. King, eds, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, I: Problems in the Literary Source Material (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 1)*, Princeton, 1992, pp. 149-87; Reinink, *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius (GSCO 541 = syr. 221)*, pp. XII-XIII.

¹⁴ See G.J. Reinink, 'Pseudo-Methodius: A Concept of History'.

¹⁵ See S.H. Griffith, 'Disputing with Islam in Syriac'.

¹⁶ Sabrishō, the metropolitan of Karkā, is supposed to have introduced this fast to the liturgical calendar of the Church of the East in the sixth century. See J.-M. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, III (*Recherches ILOB, Série III: Orient Chrétien* 42), Beirut, 1968, pp. 20-2.

Christ's burial. Let us keep the memory of them [the Ninivites] as a testimony of the Dispensation of our Lord' (Test. 44). This statement is at one and the same time an explanation of a Christian practice and a call to hold to it, perhaps against the background of conversions to Islam.

Other clues point to an East-Syrian origin as well. The author identifies the biblical town of Baflel, near the place where the great fish spat out the prophet Jonah, with the city of Balad (Eski Mosul)—a piece of information a West-Syrian would probably not know or at least not bother to mention. Persia occupies a central place in the text: the offerings of gold, incense and myrrh are brought back to the East by Nebuchadnezzar after the fall of Jerusalem and were then kept 'in the Treasury of Persia' (Test. 31). Twelve Persian kings brought them to Christ in Bethlehem,¹⁷ converted, returned home with the blessings of the Virgin Mary and started to spread the Good News (Test. 31-32). This story became very popular in the East-Syrian Church and became an accepted tradition, as the correspondence of Patriarch Timothy shows.¹⁸

Last but not least, *Testimonies* lays stress on the inhabitation of the second Person (*ⲡⲟⲣϥⲟⲡⲁ*) of the Trinity (Test. 4). The vocabulary used in the text does not reflect the evolution and elaboration worked out after the ecumenical councils of the fifth and sixth centuries, which is not surprising considering the isolation of the Church of the East.¹⁹ Moreover, anti-Theopaschite elements²⁰ point to the same East-Syrian stock.

¹⁷ This passage comes from the *Cave of Treasures*, although there the number of kings is three.

¹⁸ See O. Braun, 'Der Katholikos Timotheos I und seine Briefe', *Oriens Christianus* 1, 1901, pp. 142-50 (Latin translation: pp. 96-102); F. Briquel-Chatonnat et al., 'Lettre du patriarche Timothée à Maranzekha évêque de Ninive', *Journal Asiatique* 288, 2000, p. 10.

¹⁹ For general introduction to the Christology of the Church of the East, see S. Brock, 'L'Église de l'Orient dans l'empire sassanide jusqu'au VI^e siècle et son absence aux conciles de l'empire romain', *Istina* 40, 1995, pp. 25-43; idem, 'The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to the Early Seventh Centuries: Preliminary Considerations and Materials', in G. Dragas, ed., *Aksum-Thyateira: A Festschrift for Archbishop Methodios*, London, 1985, pp. 125-42 (reprinted in S. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature and Theology (Variorum Collected Studies Series CS357)*, Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington VT, 1992, XII).

²⁰ 'The human death of our Lord' (Test. 3); 'By offering his humanity that the Jews have crucified on the Cross' (Test. 6); 'He stayed in his divinity that does not suffer' (Test. 40).

Conclusion

The gathered prophecies of *Testimonies* look like a compendium of arguments designed for East-Syrian Christians as a defence of their religious and liturgical practices and beliefs in the guise of an anti-Jewish controversy, but actually directed against Muslims. The text gives answers to specific challenges, but is far from advancing any idea of political relief or eschatological liberation in some immanent future. It seems an attempt to cope with the historical situation at the beginning of the eighth century and represents a transitional phase in the literature, coming later than the vivid eschatological expectations reflected in the older Syriac apocalypses, but earlier than the more technical treatises of controversy from the late eighth and early ninth centuries. The atypical literary form of the text probably reflects this situation. It is not an apocalypse, despite what the word 'Revelations' in the title would seem to imply and despite its heavy borrowings from the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*. But if not an apocalypse, neither is it an actual text of controversy with Islam.²¹

²¹ I am particularly grateful to Dr. Arietta Papaconstantinou for her help in weeding out errors in my English text. Of course, all the blame for remaining defects should be mine.