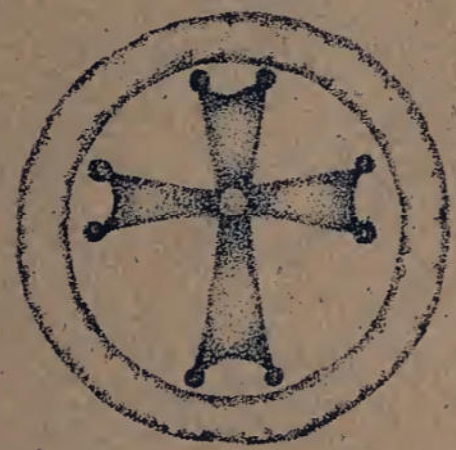

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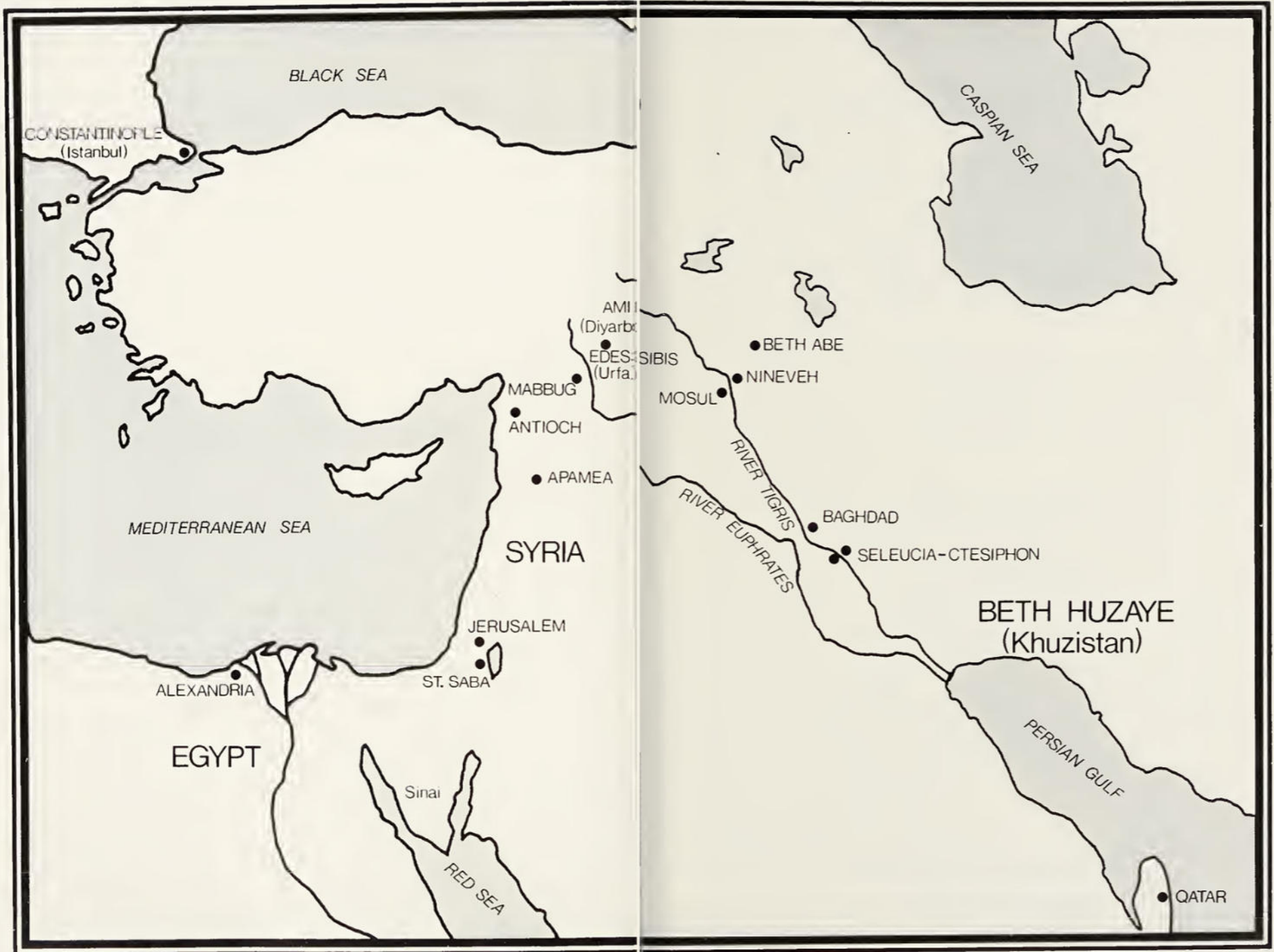


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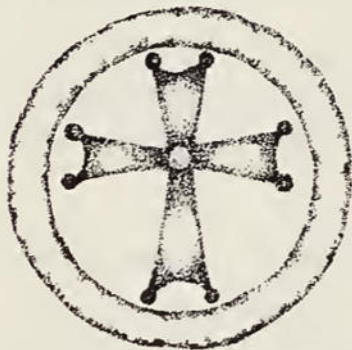
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The
Syriac Fathers
ON
Prayer
and the
Spiritual Life

Introduced
and
Translated
by

Sebastian Brock



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Kalamazoo, Michigan

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KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN 49008

*The work of Cistercian Publications is made possible in part by
support from Western Michigan University*

*This book has been published with aid from
the Koch Foundation of Clearwater, Florida*

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

The Syriac fathers on prayer and the spiritual life.

(Cistercian studies series; 101)
'Selection of excerpts translated from Syriac
writers'—Pref.

Bibliography: p. xliii
Includes index.

1. Prayer. 2. Spiritual life. 3. Fathers of the
church, Syriac. I. Brock, Sebastian P. II. Series:
Cistercian studies series; no. 101.

BV209.S9 1987 248.3'2' 09015 87-6369

ISBN 0-87907-601-1

ISBN 0-87907-901-0 (lib. bdg.)

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Abbreviations

CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (Louvain)
<i>DSpir</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de Spiritualité</i> (Paris)
OCA	<i>Orientalia Christiana Analecta</i> (Rome)
OCP	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i> (Rome)
PG	Patrologia Graeca (Paris)
<i>Philokalia</i>	G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, K. Ware, edd., <i>The Philokalia</i> , I (London, 1979).
PO	Patrologia Orientalis (Paris/Turnhout)
RAM	<i>Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique</i> (Toulouse)

Preface

THE AIM of this selection of excerpts translated from Syriac writers, mainly on the topic of prayer, is to introduce this little known tradition of Eastern Christian spirituality to a wider audience. Many of the texts have never previously been translated into English (or sometimes indeed into any European language); in a few cases the translation has been made from works whose original Syriac text has not yet even been published (thus the opportunity has been taken to include some newly discovered works by Isaac the Syrian, or Isaac of Nineveh). For the reader who is unfamiliar with this tradition the General Introduction is intended to provide a brief orientation. Some supplementary information on the individual authors will be found in the introductions to each chapter.

Those wishing to explore this territory further will find some guidance in the Bibliographies (where details of the sources from which the translations were made are also located). The section numbers in the translations are those introduced by the editors of the Syriac originals (or, in rare cases, by the authors).

I take the opportunity to thank Sister Martha Reeves, not only for her help with typing many of the translations, but also for the encouragement she has given in the later stages of preparing this book.

S.P.B.

General Introduction

ORIENTAL CHRISTIANITY: A FORGOTTEN TRADITION

ACCORDING TO A PATTERN familiar from many standard handbooks, Christian tradition is to be divided historically into the Latin West and the Greek East; *tertium non datur*. Such a dichotomy is both unfortunate and inadequate, for it completely overlooks the existence of the oriental Christian Churches which constitute an important third stream of Christian tradition, quite distinct from the other two familiar streams. Among the oriental Christian Churches those within the Syriac liturgical tradition may be said to hold pride of place, since they are representatives of, and to some degree direct heirs to, the Semitic world out of which Christianity sprang. It is a matter of pride for them still today that they employ as their liturgical language Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, the very language of Jesus. The form of the Lord's Prayer used in the Syriac Churches today is indeed not all that much different from the words that Jesus himself must have uttered in first-century Galilean Aramaic: Syriac (the local Aramaic dialect of Edessa, the traditional birthplace of Syriac Christianity) and Galilean Aramaic would certainly have been mutually comprehensible.

Although Syriac Christianity, like Latin Christianity, soon came under the very strong influence of Greek-speaking Christianity, its earliest literature is usually expressed in a manner much more characteristic of the Se-

mitic—and biblical—world out of which it grew. In the writings of the greatest representative of this early form of Syriac Christianity, St Ephrem of Nisibis (c. 306–373), poetry not prose holds primacy of place as the vehicle for theology, and his profound theological vision, expressed in poetry by means of paradox and symbol, rather than by analysis and definition in prose, is one that retains its value, *mutatis mutandis*, even today. Furthermore, as the sole representative of a Semitic Christianity which was for the most part still unhellenized—in other words, uneuropanized, and unwesternized—early Syriac Christianity takes on a new relevance in the modern world where the Churches of Asia, Africa, and South America are rightly seeking to shake off the European cultural baggage from the Christianity which they have usually received through the mediary of European or North American missionaries: here, in the early Syriac tradition, we encounter a form of Christianity whose theological expression is as yet uninfluenced by the Greek philosophical tradition, but which employs thought forms that are far more conducive to these Churches' own cultural backgrounds.

From this point of view it is the earliest Syriac writers—and above all the theologian-poet Ephrem—who are of most importance, for from the fifth century onwards the Syriac tradition came to be increasingly influenced by Greek thought—forms and modes of expression. This hellenophile process reached its climax in the seventh century; by that time it has often become very difficult to tell whether a particular Syriac text was composed in that language or whether it is in fact a literal translation from Greek. Ironically it was at precisely this point in history that the Arab invasions effectively cut the Syriac Churches off from the Byzantine world to which they had for the most part belonged. In the ensuing centuries the theologians of the Syriac Churches systematized the scholastic theology that they had inherited from the Greek world in

the course of the sixth and early seventh centuries (Porphyry's *Eisagōgē*, or introduction to Aristotelian logic, had been translated into Syriac at about the same time that Boethius translated it into Latin). More or less contemporary with St Thomas Aquinas, the great Syrian Orthodox scholar Barhebraeus compiled his own *summa theologica*, equally based on the Aristotelian tradition.

Syriac Christianity thus comprises two quite distinct poles, which we can for convenience term the Semitic and the Hellenic. Between these two poles there is, of course, a continuum, and even a writer like Ephrem, one of our main witnesses to the Semitic pole, is certainly not free from the influence of Greek thought, but this influence affects, as it were, only the surface, and never the deep structures, of his thought patterns and mode of expression.

THE SYRIAC CHURCHES

One reason for the neglect of oriental Christian tradition in many standard works on Church history and the history of doctrine lies in the fact that many of these Churches became separated from the 'mainstream' Church of the Graeco-Latin world during the fifth and sixth centuries as a result of the christological controversies of the time. The doctrinal formulation put forward by the Council of Chalcedon (451), in particular, proved a stumbling block, for the statement that the incarnate Christ was one hypostasis 'in two natures' seemed to many, not only a logical impossibility (given their understanding of the technical terms), but also dangerously heretical, in that it appeared to them to deny the full reality of the incarnation. In the heat of the ensuing controversies, the various parties were not willing to step back and consider whether or not their verbally conflicting definitions might just be due to the use of different conceptual models and a different understanding of the key terms in the debate. The lamentable result of all this was the emergence in the

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Sebastian Brock is a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, and University Lecturer in Aramaic and Syriac.

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ISBN (hc) 0 87907 601 1
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Cover and book design by Alice Duthie-Clark