

Dionysius bar Ṣalibi

DATE OF BIRTH First quarter of the 12th century

PLACE OF BIRTH Malatya (Melitene)

DATE OF DEATH 2 November 1171

PLACE OF DEATH Diyarbakir (Amidā)

BIOGRAPHY

There is no information about Bar Ṣalibi's early years or education (Dionysius was his episcopal name; he was baptised James). He embraced the monastic life, since he is incidentally called *aksnōyō* 'stranger', a term used to designate anchorites or monks living in a monastery. In 1153, as a deacon, he wrote against Bishop John of Mardin, who had argued that God had not ordained the fall of Edessa to 'Imād al-Dīn Zangī of Mosul in 1144, and stated that it was in fact divinely decreed. The conflict was brought before a synod, which decided in favor of Bar Ṣalibi. In 1154, he became Bishop of Mar'ash (Germaneia) and, one year later, also of Mabbug (Manbij). In 1155, he was carried off as a prisoner of war by the Armenians, who had attacked Mar'ash. In 1167, he was appointed Metropolitan of Amidā (Diyarbakir) by Michael the Syrian (q.v.), whose election as patriarch he had strongly supported during the elective synod of 1166. He was even invited to preach at Michael's installation as patriarch.

Bar Ṣalibi was a prolific author. He wrote homilies and letters on different theological and liturgical subjects and on the fall of Mar'ash (the latter not extant), liturgical commentaries and several anaphoras. He was also the author of one of the most complete Syriac biblical commentaries, of philosophical and theological treatises, sometimes of a polemical nature (among which is a treatise against the Muslims, see below), a universal history (lost) and commentaries on patristic texts (e.g. on Evagrius' *Kephalaia gnostica*), and he issued a number of juridical decisions. His penitential canons reflect the Islamic context of this period and deal with subjects such as intercourse and mixed marriages of Christians with Muslims, Turks and Arabs (Vööbus, *Kanonessammlungen*, pp. 406, 436).

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

- J.-B. Chabot, 'Discours de Jacques (Denys) Bar Salibî à l'intronisation du patriarche Michel le Syrien', *Journal Asiatique* 11 (1908) 87-103 (edition and French trans.)
- E. Renaudot, 'Canones Syrorum Jacobitarum poenitentiales a Dionysio Barsalibi ordinati', in H. Denzinger, *Ritus orientalium Coptorum, Syrorum et Armenorum in administrandis sacramentis*, Würzburg, 1863 (repr. Graz, 1961) i, 493-500 (Latin trans.)
- J.-B. Chabot (ed.), *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166-1199)*, Paris, 1899-1924, iii (French trans.) and iv (Syriac)
- J.-B. Chabot (ed.), *Anonymi Auctoris chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens* ii (CSCO 82), Louvain, 1953; French trans. A. Abouna (CSCO 354), Louvain, 1974 (one brief reference)
- J.-B. Abbeloos and T.J. Lamy (eds), *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, vol. ii, Paris, 1874, and iii, Paris, 1877

Secondary

- S.D. Ryan, *Dionysius bar Salibi's factual and spiritual commentary on Psalms 73-82*, Paris, 2004
- A. Weltecke, *Die 'Beschreibung der Zeiten' von Mōr Michael dem Grossen (1126-1199). Eine Studie zu ihrem historischen und historiographiegeschichtlichen Kontext* (CSCO 594), Louvain, 2003, pp. 249-55
- H. Teule, 'It is not right to call ourselves Orthodox and the others heretics. Ecumenical attitudes in the Jacobite Church in the time of the crusades', in K. Ciggaar and H. Teule (eds), *East and West in the crusader states*, Louvain, 1999, 13-27
- A. Vööbus, *Syrische Kanonensammlungen. Ein Beitrag zur Quellenkunde I. Westsyrische Originalurkunden* 1, B (CSCO 317), Louvain, 1970, pp. 405-39
- P. van der Aalst, 'Denys Bar Salibi, polémiste', *Proche Orient Chrétien* 9 (1959) 10-23
- A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur, mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte*, Bonn, 1922, pp. 295-98

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Oru'utō luqbal 'amō d-Arābōyē, 'Dispute against the nation of the Arabs', 'A response addressed to the Arabs'

DATE Unknown; before 1171

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Syriac

DESCRIPTION

The *Dispute against the Arabs* (designated as *Arabōyē*, *Ṭayyōyē*, *Mhaggrōyē*) belongs to a series of refutations which includes non-Jacobite Christian communities (Nestorians, Chalcedonians, Armenians), 'Idolaters', Phantasiasts, and the Jews, which originally may have formed one large heresiographical work. The tone of some of these refutations, especially of the Armenians and the Chalcedonians, is extremely polemical. In this respect, its refutation of the Muslims is more balanced and detached.

The *Dispute* is divided into three parts (*mēmṛē*): *memrō* I, 8 chapters; *memrō* II, 16 chapters; *memrō* III, 6 chapters.

Memrō I begins with a section on Muḥammad and the rise of Islam, comparable to the account given by Dionysius of Tell-Mahrē (q.v.). It is followed by an original description of the four main Muslim 'heresies' (Sunnīs, Shī'īs, Khārijīs and Mu'tazila) and a discussion of the different names given to each group, as well as of the Syriac translations of these Arabic appellations.

Next follows a discussion of God's Unity and Trinity on the basis of scriptural, natural and philosophical arguments and an analysis of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*, the concepts of sonship and fatherhood and a discussion of the (un)createdness of the Word of God.

Memrō II deals with issues related to the Incarnation of God the Word and formulates brief answers to various (standard) Muslim objections (e.g. How can God be limited by entering a womb? When God was among us, who governed the universe? Did the Virgin not give birth to three hypostases if the divinity is one?). The second theme of this *memrō* is Christ's death, discussed from the perspective of God's foreknowledge and the question of God being the cause of evil. Next follows a discussion of various subjects (Christ's divinity, the properties of the individual hypostases of Father, Son and Spirit). As a conclusion to these intellectual arguments, Dionysius gives the

testimonies of prophets and some pagan philosophers affirming the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son.

The next theme of this *memrō* is the prophethood of Muḥammad, which the author rejects with some classical arguments (there are no testimonies about his prophethood in the scriptures, the impossibility of Muḥammad being the Paraclete, the Qur'an contradicting the Torah and the Gospel) and original arguments such as an analysis of the terms *nbiyā* ('prophet') and *rasūl* ('messenger').

The last chapters of this *memrō* are devoted to a variety of subjects such as the direction of prayer, an explanation of why Christians gird their waists with a belt, the veneration of the bones of saints and of the (wood of the) cross, the reality of the crucifixion, the interpretation of the Old Testament 'camel and ass' (see Isaiah 21:7) understood as referring to Muḥammad and Jesus, the accusation of *tahrīf* of the Christian scriptures and contradictions in the Qur'an, the issue of circumcision, the interpretation of the terms Christians (Naṣrōyē, Nazarenes, the 'spiritually victorious') and Islam, the problem that Muḥammad did not perform miracles, and finally a comparison between the ascetic ideals of the Christians and the immorality of Muḥammad, as well as the materialistic description of paradise in the Qur'an.

Memrō III gives a substantial selection of qur'anic passages translated into Syriac, followed by a commentary/refutation in which certain themes dealt with in the first two *memrē* are taken up again. Bar Şalibi shows some familiarity with traditional Islamic exegetical interpretations and he refers to a work, the *Maghāzī*, on 'the actions and battles of Muḥammad', and to another called the *Mukhtāra*, which reports on the 'appearance' or 'figure', 'image' (*yuqneh*) of Muḥammad, presumably a reference to the *sīra* literature.

The qur'anic quotations given here are often at variance with the received text of the Qur'an. Mingana ascribes this to personal interpretations and interpolations by the Syriac translator, who, in his view, was not Dionysius bar Şalibi himself, as well as to the fact that the Syriac translation represents a redaction of the Qur'an predating the 10th century, when the standard text became generally disseminated. It is to be noted that *memrē* I and II also contain important qur'anic quotations the text of which is sometimes not identical with the same citation found in *memrō* III.

A study of the sources used by Dionysius and a systematic comparison with other refutation texts is still to be carried out. The intention

of the work is to provide the reader with clear-cut arguments against classical Muslim objections to Christian beliefs. The author's personal experience of debating with Muslims is reflected in his remark that it is only recommended to discuss with 'the intelligent and wise' among the Muslims and certainly not with the 'legalists', i.e. the Sunnīs, who, in his opinion, have the same view about Christ as Arius.

SIGNIFICANCE

Bar Şalibi's *Dispute against the Arabs* is the most comprehensive refutation of Islam written in Syriac. It discusses all traditional themes found in the Syriac and Christian Arabic refutation literature, often repeating the classical interpretation found in earlier works. In addition, it shows an unusual familiarity with internal Muslim divisions (*memrō* I, ch. 2), gives Syriac equivalents for Muslim technical terms and is the sole work to give large fragments of the Qur'an in a Syriac translation.

The work was not only read in the West Syrian tradition, but was also appreciated by the East Syrians.

MANUSCRIPTS

Most of these are listed by Amar in his edition and translation.

To his list should be added:

- a MS in the possession of Raban Eliyo Oztas of Mor Afrem Monastery, Glanerbrug, written in Damascus in 1754
 - a MS in the possession of Raban Said Cakici of Mor Afrem Monastery, Glanerbrug, copied in 1983 in Mezizah
 - a MS in the possession of Hori Gabriel Kaya, copied in 1997 in Hengelo by the owner
 - a MS in the possession of the Reverend Samuel Essen of Enschede (no date)
- (information from Gabriel Rabo, Göttingen).

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

J.P. Amar, *Dionysius bar Şalibī. A response to the Arabs* (CSCO 614-15), Louvain, 2005 (Syriac text and English trans.)

STUDIES

- R. Ebied, 'The Syriac polemical treatises of Dionysius Bar Salibi, Metropolitan of Amid (d. 1171 A.D.)', *Pd'O* 31 (2006) 57-61
- Amar, *Dionysius bar Şalibī*, trans., pp. V-XII
- S. Griffith, 'Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian texts. From Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)', in B. Lewis and F. Niewöhner (eds), *Religiongespräche im Mittelalter*, Wiesbaden, 1992, 251-73, pp. 268-69

- S. Griffith, 'Dionysius bar Şalibi on the Muslims', in H. Drijvers (ed.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, Rome, 1987, 353-65
- A. Mingana, 'An ancient Syriac translation of the Kur'ān exhibiting new verses and variants', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9 (1925) 188-235

Two mēm̄rē, Two metrical poems

DATE Between 1159 (when the event described in both *mēm̄rē* took place) and 1171

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Syriac

DESCRIPTION

Gregory Barhebraeus (*Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, ed. Abbeloos and Lamy, iii, pp. 347-52) mentions Dionysius as the author of two metrical compositions on the steadfastness of a Syrian Orthodox girl who resisted pressure by Muslim doctors from Mosul to convert to Islam, as well as on the attitude of a Maphrian (representative of the patriarch for the eastern territories of the Syrian Orthodox Church) put into prison by Muslims for his principled attitude in matters of religion. The same event was also the subject of a metrical composition by Michael the Syrian (q.v.).

SIGNIFICANCE

At the least, the poems attest to continuing resentment between Christians and Muslims, and to the difficulties Christians might easily encounter in Muslim company where religious differences could lead to discrimination or worse.

MANUSCRIPTS —

EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS —

STUDIES

Baumstark, *Geschichte*, p. 299

Herman G.B. Teule