New documents on Philoxenus of Hierapolis and on the Philoxenian version of the bible

Philoxenus of Mabbug (c. AD 440–523)

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NEW DOCUMENTS ON PHILOXENUS OF HIERAPOLIS, AND ON THE PHILOXENIAN VERSION OF THE BIBLE.

I. Foreword. "Any person who expects to solve the problem of the diversity of the New Testament text in the second century, without employing in the solution the old Syriac and associated versions, and the closely connected Diatessaron of Tatian, is, no doubt, victim of a delusion." 1 In fact, no Church can claim to have studied the Scriptures more, carefully, and to have applied all the scientific resources of the early ages of Christianity to biblical criticism more steadily than the Syrian community. From the second century till the first quarter of the seventh, eight different versions of the New Testament were produced by genuine researches of the Aramaean population, spreading from the Mediterranean shores to the East of Persia, and from the massif of the Taurus to the Arabian peninsula. Numerous conversions to the Gospel from Mazdaism, and, in later generations, the conquest by evangelical missionaries of a huge population from India, Mongolia, Persia, Samarkand and neighbouring districts, nay, even from China, made the Syriac a sacred and liturgical language to hundreds of nations different in ethnology and often hostile to one another by previous tribal raids and sanguinary battles.

On the other hand, the writers of the Gospels, being from an Aramaic-speaking population, while writing in Greek were generally thinking in Syriac, and the Aramaic stamp |150 of their phrases is sometimes so strong that without a knowledge of this language and the reading of the versions which are written in it, the real thought of the sacred author will perhaps be misunderstood. Before we begin a study of the Syriac Version called Pshitta by means of some fresh and unedited hagiographic pieces, we wish to make known in an English translation some other new and not less important documents dealing with the

life and the biblical version of the famous Philoxenus of Hierapolis, who proved himself the strongest champion in the Christological movement of the fifth and the first quarter of the sixth century. His real name was Akhsnaya (Xenaïas), and it is by this name that he is generally known in the books written by oriental historians.

In spite of Philoxenus' greatness and of the strong and durable influence that he exercised on the highly placed patriarchs and bishops of his time, no complete life of him is extant to-day. The list, too, of his works, given by Eastern and Western writers of later generations, is very imperfect, even the precise date of his well-known version of the Bible being still very obscure. Students of Church History and critics of the Old and New Testaments will perhaps be pleased to have at hand genuine and unique documents which will throw great rays of light upon these questions, and prepare the way to a better understanding of the bitter religious schism which tore up the single Christian community into so many acephalous and autocephalous bodies that we find even in our days scattered all over the land of pre-classic empires. The original Syriac manuscript (probably of the fourteenth century) which contains the life and works of Philoxenus, printed in this article, is preserved at Bassibrina, in Tur 'Abdin, near Mardin. I translate if from a faithful copy kindly given to me when I was travelling in that country by |151 the Rev. E. Barsom, of the monastery of Deiruz-Za'farân. Its title is: "Victory (= life) of Mar Akhsnaya, who is Philoxenus, bishop of the town of Mabbūg" (Hierapolis). I give first a literal translation of this narrative, then some other corroborative documents with a few words of general criticism. We will place, too, in the footnotes a critical apparatus as accurate as can be done in the present state of our knowledge, comparing our text with some other general and fresh data found in the works of writers recently published by the editors of the Patrologia Orientalis and of the Corpus Scriptorum Christ. Orientalium, etc.

II. Translation. This Mar Akhsnaya, who is Philoxenus of Mabbūg, city of priests, was in his terrestrial origin from the province of Beith Garmay,2 in the East, and from the village of Tahl. His brother, called Addai, was teacher in his village. It happened that one day his parents, with all his family, left their country and came to live in Tur 'Abdin,3 in the mountain of Beith Réshé. They dwelt in the possession of the great tower of Haitam, their precise residence being a small plot of ground near Beith Sabrina, northwards between this village and Beith Zriza of 'Arabân. They built houses for themselves in this ground and lived in them. When the little Akhsnaya grew up and knew how to read, he began to study the sacred books and learned to distinguish |152 between good and evil. Under the impulse of the divine grace Mar Akhsnaya parted from his relations to the distance of one mile, built for himself a shed of stones, and lived in it for a certain time in peace and in the service of God.

When several monks from the monasteries of the mountains of Kardu 4 passed close to him, on their journey to the monastery of Kartamin founded by angels,5 he was much pleased, received them with joy and entertained them in his divine faith. He accompanied them afterwards to the monastery of Kartamin. All of them prayed there and were blessed by the

saints (of the monastery). Mar Akhsnaya wished to enter this monastery, and he learned there perfectly all divine science, in Syriac and in Greek. He succeeded so well that he became teacher in the school of the monastery and of the neighbouring districts. For a short interval of time he was called Magister Doctorum, and was praised by the professors of all countries on account of his application and his science in the divine books of both Testaments. From thence he went to Western countries, travelled to convents and monasteries, and reached the monastery of ʾTel'eda, which was richer in professors, students and exegetes than all other monasteries of the East and the West.6

There he perfected himself in the Greek and in the Syriac languages, and he translated both Testaments, the Old and the New, the Old (Testament) according to the Septuagint,7which he compared with the Syriac Version (= Pshitta ?). | 153 Jacob of Edessa 8 says: "He made an excellent version which has no equal in the Church." He translated, too, several books of the Fathers in a solid manner with great care and much diligence. His fame spread all over the Church and he was honoured by all the bishops because of his science. For this reason he was elected to be the bishop of the holy town of Mabbūg,9which, on account of the great number of priests and doctors that it produced, was called city of priests (Hierapolis). The town of Mabbūg was pleased with him, and prouder of his teaching than all the other towns of other countries.

He opened in this town an immense treasure of doctrine, and filled it with spiritual riches. He composed, first of all, excellent homilies on the commemorative feasts of our Lord, and on all the Dispensation of Christ. He wrote five other books of discourses which enlighten, by means of the Holy Spirit, all those who read them. He wrote six books against the heresy of Nestorius and of Barsauma of Nisibis,10and disclosed all the falsehood of the Nestorians by proving that they were "new Jews" and "ancient Pagans." He wrote thirteen books against the heretic Chalcedonians, and unveiled to the orthodox all their craftiness. He wrote an instruction to the monks, and ten books saturated with spiritual thoughts. He wrote twenty-two books of epistles addressed to all classes of people. The number of all the books that he wrote in the course of his life amounts to one hundred and seventy volumes 11 of divine doctrine, which | 154 illuminated all Christendom with the orthodox people of all countries.

In one of his letters addressed to John Saʿara, metropolitan of Amid,12 he writes as follows: "I love thee and I am thy colleague of the holy monastery of Kartamin 13; I am weak (in science), but thy holiness is strong. In a time like this it was necessary to have a man like thee in God's Church, thee whose education has been made in the monastery of my spiritual Fathers, wherefrom thou hast been called. All the ancient doctors were brought up in this angelic monastery.14 It is there that I have been myself brought up, though I was unhappily not perfected by its teaching in a complete manner.15 It is true that, in body, I am now far from my spiritual and perfect and holy Fathers, but in spirit I am nearer to them." Many sentences like these were written by him and sent to remote countries, especially to Gurzanites and to the people of the interior of Persia. In his letters to Abu Hafar16of

Hira of Nu'mân, and in those written to the Himyarites and to the inhabitants of Nijran, in which he speaks of the |155 error of the heretics and confirms the orthodox in their faith.

He had caused the inhabitants of Antioeh to follow the order 17 of Zeno, the faithful king (and he caused them also) to vote for the nomination of Mar Severus to the Patriarchate of Antioch and all Syria as far as India. When, then, Mar Severus was elected and arrived, Mar Philoxenus, with eleven other bishops, ordained him in the big town of Tyre,18 which is at the seashore and which had been built by King Hiram. Afterwards (Mar Severus) entered Antioch and occupied his see during six years and a half. Then the Chalcedonians persecuted cruelly the orthodox people, and Mar Severus escaped from them by going to Egypt. Mar Akhsnaya was seized by the perverse Greeks, who incarcerated him during five years and made him suffer all sorts of torments. He covered them every day with shame, and they were not converted, but they inflicted on him tribulation, pain, anguish and ill-treatment, which he endured with the courage of martyrs and true confessors. After these five years, he was conducted to the town of Gangra, and there imprisoned in a high house above the oven of a bath. All the openings of the house were closed in order that he might be asphyxiated. He migrated to his Lord with the crown of victory.19 May his prayer be with us. |156 Amen. Mar Akhsnaya was crowned on the tenth of December.20

Now his nephew was with him from the beginning of the persecution directed against him. He bribed the persecuting Greeks by means of much money; he stole and brought the treasure of the body of Mar Akhsnaya, his uncle, to the town of Mabbūg. It was laid in an urn of marble and placed in the church that Philoxenus himself had erected. The nephew instituted three feasts for him, the first for the day of his death, the second for the day of his sepulture, and the third for his episcopal coronation.21 After a time his nephew was nominated to the see of his uncle, and lived in his diocese in great persecution and |157 migrated to his Lord.22 May their prayers be with us. After a long time, the town of Mabbūg was destroyed in the wars between Greek and Arab kings. When the Arabs owned the seashore, the members of Mar Akhsnaya's family took the head (the body?) of the saint, and arrived at Tur 'Abdin. They built a church in a village called Mediad, and there they laid the body of Mar Akhsnaya. This village of Mediad 23 is near the monastery of Mar Habel the Stylite, who, at the time when Mar Akhsnaya was going to the Western countries for the purpose of studying and enlightening himself, caused the top of the column of stones on which he was living to bend to the ground. On that occasion both saints gave each other a mutual greeting. This was a great miracle for their glorious life.

When Mar Habel died a good death, he was buried and placed in his monastery in the castra of Mediad. After a short time, the body of St. Abraham,24 the master of Barsaumas,25 the head of the Anchorets (Abîlé) was also brought to the monastery of Mar Habel. A big sanctuary has been erected to him, below the small one. The sanctuary of Mar Habel became then a Beith Kaddishe,26 and a baptistery, and that of Mar Abraham became the real sanctuary. The monastery has been called, and is also called in our days: Monastery of Mar Abraham, belonging to the family of Mar Gabriel of Kartamin. The head of Mar Akhsnaya

is down to our time in the church of the village of Mediad. ...27 |158 III. General Criticism. Without resorting to a rigid criticism in discussing the value of this document, we may be allowed to state that when we compare it, in its historical points, with some other sources of information, it has some claim to a preponderating authority. The annotations which accompany our translation, dispense us from occupying ourselves with details; it forms a part of the group of lives of saints written in Tur 'Abdin, good instances of which are found in E. Rahmani's Studia Syriaca (pp. 33, 34, 35. 37).

Some dark points in the life of the hero known through other valuable documents are utterly missing in this notice, So, 1° if the famous archimandrite Babai the Great (589-623) deserves credit,—and so far we have no sufficient reasons to believe the contrary—Philoxenus was driven out of his country by Nestorian bishops about 485. 2°, Simon of Beith Arsham, surnamed the Persian Sophist (sixth century), tells us that our hero spent some time in the school of Edessa; and this same historian wants us to believe that he did not study exclusively in the monastery of Kartamin and Tel'eda. A complete and convincing harmony of events is almost impossible in the present state of our knowledge. But there is a point in this notice which deserves more than a simple reference, and this point is the precise year in which the well-known Phiioxenian Version of the Old and New Testaments saw the light. We were told by a colophon of some manuscripts printed by Assemani (Bibl. Orient. ii. 23) |159 that this Version was elaborated in 508 under the auspices of Philoxenus by a certain Polycarpus. A second document published by E. Rahmani (ibid. pp. 5, 54) informs us that it was already finished in 505. Our author seems to state that it was prepared by Philoxenus himself in the monastery of Tel'eda before his elevation to the see of Hierapolis. This opinion of an anonymous writer, confirmed by a quotation from Jacob of Edessa, may perhaps claim a certain reliance:

A. We are not to be easily convinced that a version called Philoxenian would ever have been exclusively known by this name if Philoxenus were only its promoter, and the Chor-episcopus Polycarpus its sole translator, as the document edited by Assemani would have us to believe. More probably, therefore, Philoxenus had prepared it long before his episcopal ordination, in the monastery of Tel'eda, having possibly handed his work to Polycarpus for the purpose of a simple revision in 505-508. B. That the Philoxenian Version of the New Testament was prepared even before 505 is suggested also by the following document: In the town of Mediad there is a manuscript (probably of the eleventh century) belonging to Mr. Emmanuel, head of the Protestant community of the country ; the colophon of this manuscript being as follows 28: "This is the book of the Gospels containing the four Gospels with the Acts and all the Epistles. It has been translated from Greek into Syriac, with great accuracy and with great solidity, at the first time in the town of Mabbūg in the year 809 of Alexander the Macedonian (498 a.d.) in the days of the just man and confessor Philoxenus, bishop of the town ..."

This colophon is found in some other manuscripts of the |160 public libraries of Europe, but with this difference, that several of them exhibit the same date as that printed by Assemani, i.e. 819 of the Greeks 29 (608 A.D.). We leave it to more skilled minds to decide which

manuscript has got the right date ; ours seems to be more in harmony with the history of Philoxenus and with the general course of events. Alphonse MINGANA. [Footnotes renumbered and moved to the end] 1. Dr. Rendel Harris in the Expository Times, May 1914. 2. This province, known in Roman and Greek geographers under the name of Garamaea, is situated on the left side of the Tigris, and the Great Zab. Trajan conquered it in 116 A.D., but at the time of Philoxenus it formed a part of the Persian Empire. 3. Hilly country between Mardin and the Tigris; this name, which means "mountain of holy men," has been given to it on account of the numerous monasteries which made it for a long time a second desert of Scété.

4. Mountains of South-Western Armenia, commonly identified with. Ararat, on which a well-known legend relates that the ark of Noah floated and rested. 5. Allusion to an old legend which attributed the foundation of this very ancient monastery to an angel who showed the site where it should be built. See H. Pognon's Inscriptions Sémitiques, 1907, p. 39 sqq. 6. About this famous monastery see Pognon, ibid. p. 52. 7. Cf. the end of this article. 8. A well-known Syriac writer (633-5 June 708). Cf. R. Duval, Littérature Syriaque, 3me édit. pp. 374-377. 9. He was nominated bishop of Hierapolis by Peter the Fuller, patriarch of Antioch, in 485, see Corp. Script. Christ. Orient., vol iv. p. 188. 10. The greatest pillar of Nestorianism (fifth century). See J. Labourt, Le Christianisme dans l'Empire Perse, pp. 130-152. 11. The author means doubtless by the word "Penkitha" a long discourse on different subjects. For the books of Philoxenus extant in our days, see Duval, ibid. p. 355.

12. This John was elected Bishop of Amid in 484 and died in 502. He was really brought up in the monastery of Kartamin. Cf. Chronica Minora, ibid, p, 165. 13. This quotation proves convincingly that Philoxenus had in fact made his studies in this monastery. This information is corroborated by his office found in the Syrian breviary. We may, therefore, safely infer that our hero did not spend much time in the school of Edessa, as we are told by other writers. His study in the capital of Osrhoene could not then have taken place long before the year 457, in which the death of the famous Ibas is placed. 14. This letter seems to have been written in 485, i.e. in the very year of the nomination of Philoxenus to the see of Hierapolis. 15. We are tempted to conclude from this sentence that Philoxenus did not finish his studies at Kartamin.

16. This name is written Abu Nafir in the text edited by L. Martin, Gram. ling. Syr. p. 71. The reasons alleged to deny the authenticity of this letter do not seem to be very probable. Cf. contra, Tixeront, Revue de l'Orient Chrétien, viii. 623, and A. Vaschalde, Three Letters of Philoxenus 1902, p. 30. 17. Allusion to the "Henoticon" which promulgated in 482, at the instigation of Acacius of Constantinople, favoured enormously the Monophysite party. 18. The accession of Athanasius to the throne, in 491, reinforced the hopes of the Monophysites even more than that of Zeno. We know that under his reign Philoxenus succeeded, in 512, with the help of Sotericus, bishop of Cesaraea of Cappadocia, in exiling Flavianus the Chalcedonian Patriarch of Antioch. In this very year, and always under the influence

and presidency of Philoxenus, twelve bishops elected Severus for this predominant see, and they conducted him from the monastery of Theodora (Chron. Minora, pp. 166, 189).

19. According to the Syrian breviary, Philoxenus underwent another exile at a period which is unhappily not clearly fixed. Unless we go back to the time of Leo (457-474), i.e. to a time in which Philoxenus was not yet a bishop, this information can hardly be in accordance with the general course of history, since before Justin the politic of Zeno and Anastasius was, roughly speaking, very favourable to Monophysism. 20. We know that the election of Severus of Antioch took place in 512 and that according to our document, corroborated by general history (Chron. Min. p. 169) he governed the see of this celebrated metropolis during six years and a half, i.e. till 519. We have seen, too, that Philoxenus was after this date in detention during five years, i.e. till 524. The death of our hero must, therefore, be fixed at 10 Dec. 524. We think that this date ought to be adopted as the only true one, since it is made more than possible by the following new document. In the monastery of St. Lazarus, near the village of Haboanas, in Tur 'Abdin, we read in an old liturgical manuscript the following sentence at the beginning of the liturgy written by Philoxenus : "St. Philoxenus lived at the time of the great Severus and of Anastasius, the faithful king. He was asphyxiated by the Greeks with the smoke of a bath-house, in the town of Gangra, in the year 835 of the Greeks. His body was transferred to the monastery of Kartamin and his head to the town of Mediad." The year 835 of the Seleucides corresponds exactly, according to Eastern computation, to 524 a.d. On the other hand, if the date of his episcopal ordination be surely 485, as we are told by some reliable ancient historians, he would have governed the see of Mabbūg during 39 years. (Cf. the following footnote.)

21. The ancient calendars of thy Monophysite church mention clearly three feasts for Philoxenus. The first is fixed at Dec. 10, the second at Feb. 18, and the third at Aug. 18. Some parishes in Tur 'Abdin keep this third one even in our days. If these calendars may claim a good historical value, tho episcopal ordination of Philoxenus ought to be fixed at Aug. 18 of the year already mentioned. 22. Barhebraeus tolls us in his Chron. Eccles. that this bishop, Philoxenus nephew, surnamed the "junior" Philoxenus, joined the Chalcedonian party, and for this reason he was elected to the bishopric of Cyprus. 23. This village gave its name to the actual Ottoman district of Mediad. We are, in fact, shown westwards the debris of a church under the title of Mar Philoxenus. 24. This illustrious monk has a monastery extant in our day. 25. A well-known Monophysite monk who propagated his doctrine even in the central provinces of the Persian Empire.

26. A place where ecclesiastical prelates were inhumed. 27. There are short lines here describing the invasion of the country by the Mongol hordes. The interest of these lines, however great, is local, and would not advance theological studies. 28. See A. Mingana's Narsai Homiliae et Carmina, 1905, vol. i. pp. 5, 6. 29. Cf. Assemani, B.O.I, p. 351 sqq„ and F. Nau, Notice inédite sur Phioxène de Mabbug in "Revue de l'orient Chrétien," 1903, p. 630 sqq. 30. I translate it from a copy made for the Rev. A. N. Andrus, veteran American missionary at Mardin. 31. See W. Wright's and S. A. Cook's A Catalogue of the Syriac

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Manuscripts preserved in the library of the Univer. of Cambridge, 1901, vol. i., pp. 7-8. cod. 1700. This text was transcribed by Roger Pearse, 2006. All material on this page is in the public domain - copy freely. Greek text is rendered using unicode.

Early Church Fathers - Additional Texts

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.