

## IN MEMORIAM

# TAEKE JANSMA (1919–2007)

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[1] Professor Taeke Jansma died on May 30, 2007 in Voorschoten, near Leiden, The Netherlands, at the age of 87. Present-day Syriac scholars will not have seen new publications by Professor Jansma in the last thirty years or so, but several of his Syriac publications that appeared between 1949 and the mid-seventies have proven to be of such lasting significance that there is reason, in a journal devoted to Syriac studies, to reflect briefly on the work of this eminent scholar.<sup>1</sup>

[2] Taeke Jansma was born in Almelo, in the province of Overijssel, in the east of The Netherlands, in 1919. In 1938, he went to Leiden to study theology and Semitics. Under the supervision of Professor P.A.H. de Boer (d. 1989) he wrote his dissertation, *Inquiry into the Hebrew Text and the Ancient Versions of Zechariah IX–XIV* (no. 1), with which he earned his Ph.D. in 1949. Chapters are devoted to the Targum, the Peshitta, and the Septuagint, while Syriac readings are used and referred to throughout the dissertation. Moreover, several of the additional theses, short statements that in the Dutch tradition accompany the dissertation, deal with Syriac. Already during his student years, therefore, Syriac must have been emerging as an important focus of his scholarly interests. Jansma acquired additional expertise in the Aramaic languages of Late Antiquity including Syriac, Jewish Aramaic, and Samaritan Aramaic during a period of study spent in Leeds and Oxford in 1949–50.

[3] In 1950, Leiden University appointed him full professor of “Hebrew language and literature, Israelite Antiquities, and Aramaic,” thus putting on his shoulder a heavy teaching load,

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<sup>1</sup> The precious help of Heleen Murre-van den Berg, Bas ter Haar Romeny, and Joel Marcus is gratefully acknowledged.

which seemed to leave only a little room for Syriac. For nearly a quarter of a century Jansma's teaching covered the whole field that had been entrusted to him. Syllabi and student notes that continued to circulate in Leiden even many years after his retirement are a clear indication of the effect his teaching had on students. He was a powerful teacher, who was always extremely well prepared and who was able to capture the attention and stimulate the imagination of students.

- [4] When in the late fifties the Peshitta project of the "International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament" was set up in Leiden, under the direction of Professor de Boer, Jansma took upon himself the preparation of the edition of Genesis (which appeared in 1977—no. 6). There can be no doubt that he was well-equipped to carry out this task, but he saw his work as much more than that of a text-critic. As he wrote in his dissertation "... text-critical work only goes part of the way. It may find its completion by an exegetical study," for "judging and weighing is the work of exegesis." (p. 59). This must have been the background to his exploration, from the mid-fifties on, of Syriac interpretations of Genesis. This exploration led to a number of important publications that arose out of Jansma's reading of numerous published and unpublished Syriac commentaries, treatises, and homilies.

- [5] In 1958, Jansma published a paper of monograph length: "Investigations into the Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis. An Approach to the Exegesis of the Nestorian Church and to the Comparison of Nestorian and Jewish Exegesis," (no. 8). This is a remarkable and still very useful survey of relevant Syriac texts, with comments on the characteristics of each text, on its sources, and on parallel passages drawn from Greek-Christian as well as from Jewish writings. This study laid the groundwork for much of the later scholarship in the field of East-Syriac biblical interpretation. Along with the work of Professor Van den Eynde in Louvain (d. 1991), who also in the fifties started his exemplary edition and annotated translation of Isho'dad of Merv's Old Testament commentaries, Jansma's studies opened the field, identified the main texts, and formulated interesting research questions. Subsequent students and scholars owe a very great debt of gratitude to these two scholars, Jansma and Van den Eynde. They worked on the same texts, sometimes came to the same

conclusions, and admired each other's work. They also had in common, however, that they shunned public events and felt very uncomfortable with personal attention—which helps explain why they never met.

- [6] Other important publications that emerged from Jansma's work in the field of Syriac exegesis include his edition and study of Syriac fragments from Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on Genesis (no. 16), his study of interpretations of the Creation and Paradise story in Jacob of Serug (no. 9) and Narsai (nos. 20, 23, 26, and 27), and his work on Ephrem's Commentary on Genesis (nos. 28, 33, 38). Text-criticism and the history of interpretation are clearly interwoven in Jansma's study of specific Genesis readings in the Syro-Hexapla (no. 25), Bardaisan (no. 24), Ephrem (no. 35), and Barhebraeus (no. 32). His study of a number of anonymous homilies (in particular nos. 11 and 12) should be mentioned under this rubric as well. Jansma's critical notes on the published texts and translations of Ephrem's Commentaries on Genesis and Exodus (nos. 28, 31, 33, and 38) as well as on Narsai's Homilies on Creation (no. 26) remain indispensable for those who study these texts today.

- [7] In addition to the biblical text and its interpretation, the figure of Bardaisan and his legacy became an important theme in Jansma's work. What was initially intended as a review of H.J.W. Drijvers' monograph *Bardaisan of Edessa* (1966) grew into a full monograph, which was published in Dutch in 1969: *Natuur, lot en vrijheid. Bardesanes, de filosoof der Arameeërs en zijn images* (no. 5). The most significant word of the title is the last one, "images." Jansma strongly argued that the different sources providing information on Bardaisan and his teaching cannot be brought together into one coherent picture. We can hardly go beyond the different "images" which each of the sources create and construct. Present-day students, therefore, are like visitors in a gallery of paintings spanning nearly 18 centuries of history. We see, one after the other, portraits of Bardaisan, positive or negative, painted by such skilled artists as his disciple Filippus, Sextus Julius Africanus, Ephrem, ... and in recent times, among others, by Schaefer, Levi della Vida, and Drijvers. Jansma himself clearly did not want to be one of these artists. With remarkable sharpness he tried to read each of the ancient sources in its own right, trying to understand what it was doing in its own context, and painfully aware (and "filled with

unspeakable bitterness,” as the final sentence of the book has it) that the real Bardaisan escapes from us, that we know neither his writings nor his thoughts, and that we have not been able to glimpse his face.

[8] Jansma’s book on Bardaisan happened to be the very first monograph on a Syriac topic that I read as a beginning student of Syriac. The author’s erudition, which normally would be intimidating for an inexperienced reader, is balanced with a very accessible and truly beautiful language and style. Moreover, the book is only very lightly footnoted. The reader is skillfully guided through the world of Edessene and Syriac Christian culture, and important lessons in literary and historical criticism are taught.

[9] A very different period of history is the scene of another of Jansma’s monographs, published in 1959: *Oost-Westelijke verkenningen* (“East-West explorations”—no. 4). It is built on a parallel reading of two travelogues: the Latin report by William of Rubroeck of his journey to the Mongol court in 1253–1255, and the Syriac narrative of Barsauma’s travels to the Middle East and Europe at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Closely following the texts and explaining them to his readers in a lively fashion, Jansma delineates the ways in which the Flemish monk saw Mongolia and the East-Syrian prelate from the Beijing region saw Europe. The skills of the literary critic and of the historian, which would become so prominent in the Bardaisan book ten years later, are already to be found here. At the same time, this book shows the versatility of the author, who felt at home with any Syriac text between Bardaisan and Barhebraeus.

[10] In 1973, the Leiden chair of Hebrew and Aramaic was split up. Jansma decided to leave the Hebrew part to a newly appointed colleague, and to become the first incumbent of the new Aramaic position himself. This could have been the beginning of a new phase in his career, one entirely devoted to teaching and research in the field of Aramaic and Syriac. Unfortunately, soon thereafter his health no longer allowed him to continue his work. He retired early, in his mid-fifties. Although he recovered to some extent, he did not resume academic work and chose not to participate in university life, in spite of his close physical proximity to it. This was a source of great sadness for his students and colleagues, who had to find consolation in their memories and in Jansma’s written work. His passing away now, more than thirty years later, at an advanced age, accentuates the pain of his early departure and long absence.

However, in view of the rich diversity of his scholarship and its remarkable depth, our feelings should in the first place be ones of admiration and profound gratitude. May he rest in peace!

## APPENDIX: A LIST OF T. JANSMA'S PUBLICATIONS

### Books and Independent Publications

1. *Inquiry into the Hebrew Text and the Ancient Versions of Zechariah IX–XIV* (Leiden: Brill, 1949); also published in *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 7 (1950), 1–142.
2. *Twee Haggada's uit de Palestijnse Targum van de Pentateuch. Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van Hoogleraar aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Leiden op 20 oktober 1950* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1950).
3. *A Selection from the Acts of Judas Thomas* (Semitic Study Series. New Series, 1; Leiden: Brill, 1952).
4. *Oost-Westelijke verkenningen in de dertiende eeuw. De reizen van de Franciscan Willem van Rubroek naar Mongolië in de jaren 1253–1255 en van de Nestoriaanse prelaat Barsauma naar Europa in de jaren 1287–1288* (Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap “Ex Oriente Lux.” Mededelingen en Verhandelingen, 13; Leiden: Brill, 1959).
5. *Natuur, lot en vrijheid. Bardesanes, de filosoof der Arameeërs en zijn images* (Cahiers bij het Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift, 6; Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1969).
6. *Genesis. Based on Material Collected and Studied by T. Jansma. Prepared by the Peshitta Institute* (The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version, I,1. *Preface. Genesis – Exodus*; Leiden: Brill, 1977).

### Articles

7. “Vijf teksten in de Tora met een dubieuze constructie,” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 12 (1957–1958), 161–179.
8. “Investigations into the Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis. An Approach to the Exegesis of the Nestorian Church and to the Comparison of Nestorian and Jewish Exegesis,” *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 12 (1958), 69–181.
9. “L’Hexaméron de Jacques de Sarûg,” *L’Orient syrien* 4 (1959), 3–42, 129–162, 253–284.

10. "The Credo of Jacob of Sērūgh : A Return to Nicaea and Constantinople," *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 44 (1960), 18–36.
11. "Une homélie anonyme sur la chute d'Adam," *L'Orient syrien* 5 (1960), 159–182, 253–293.
12. "Une homélie anonyme sur la création du monde," *L'Orient syrien* 5 (1960), 385–400.
13. "Une homélie anonyme sur les plaies d'Égypte," *L'Orient syrien* 6 (1961), 3–24.
14. "Une homélie anonyme sur l'effusion du Saint-Esprit," *L'Orient syrien* 6 (1961), 157–178.
15. "Une homélie anonyme sur le jeûne," *L'Orient syrien* 6 (1961), 413–440.
16. "Théodore de Mopsueste, Interprétation du Livre de la Genèse. Fragments de la version syriaque (B.M. Add. 17,189, fol. 17–21)," *Le Muséon* 75 (1962), 63–92.
17. "Projet d'édition du « K'tâbâ d'erêš mellê » de Jean bar Penkayé," *L'Orient syrien* 8 (1963), 87–106.
18. "Encore le Credo de Jacques de Saroug. Nouvelles recherches sur l'argument historique concernant son orthodoxie," *L'Orient syrien* 10 (1965), 75–88, 193–236, 331–370, 475–510.
19. "Die Christologie Jakobs von Serugh und ihre Abhängigkeit von der alexandrinischen Theologie und der Frömmigkeit Ephraems des Syrers," *Le Muséon* 78 (1965), 5–46.
20. "Étude sur la pensée de Narsai : L'homélie n° XXXIV: Essai d'interprétation," *L'Orient syrien* 11 (1966), 147–168, 265–290, 393–429.
21. "La notice de Barhadbešabba sur l'hérésie des Daišanites," in *Mémorial Mgr Gabriel Khouri-Sarkis (1898–1968)* (Louvain: Imprimerie orientale, 1969), 91–106.
22. "Bardesanes van Edessa en Hermogenes van Carthago," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 24 (1969/70), 256–259.
23. "Narsai and Ephraem. Some Observations on Narsai's Homilies on Creation and Ephraem's Hymns on Faith," *Parole de l'Orient* 1 (1970), 49–68.
24. "The Book of the Laws of Countries and the Peshitta Text of Genesis IX,6," *Parole de l'Orient* 1 (1970), 409–414.

25. "«And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters ». Some Remarks on the Syro-Hexaplaric Reading of Gen. I,2," *Vetus Testamentum* 20 (1970), 16–24.
26. "Narsai's Homilies on Creation. Remarks on a Recent Edition," *Le Muséon* 83 (1970), 209–235.
27. "Narsai's dubbele erfenis. Enkele opmerkingen over de invloed van Theodorus van Mopsueste en van Efraïm de Syriër," *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, NS, 51 (1970), 1–15.
28. "Ephraems Beschreibung des ersten Tages der Schöpfung. Bemerkungen über den Charakter seines Kommentars zur Genesis," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 37 (1971), 295–316.
29. "A Note on Dislocated Extracts from the Book of Genesis in the Syriac Massoretic Manuscripts (= Peshitta Institute Communications, 10)," *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971), 127–129.
30. "The Provenance of the Last Sections in the Roman Edition of Ephraem's Commentary on Exodus," *Le Muséon* 85 (1972), 155–169.
31. "Ephraem's Commentary on Exodus: Some Remarks on the Syriac Text and the Latin Translation," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 17 (1972), 203–212.
32. "Barhebraeus' Scholion on the Words 'Let there be Light' (Gen. I,3) as Presented in his 'Storehouse of Mysteries.' Some Observations on the Vicissitudes of the Exposition of a Biblical Passage," *Abr Nabrain* 13 (1972), 100–114.
33. "Beiträge zur Berichtigung einzelner Stellen in Ephraems Genesiskommentar," *Oriens Christianus* 56 (1972), 59–79.
34. "Ephraem on Exodus II,5: Reflections on the Interplay of Human Freewill and Divine Providence," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973), 5–28.
35. "Ephraem on Genesis XLIX,10. An Inquiry into the Syriac Text Forms as Presented in his Commentary on Genesis," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973), 247–256.
36. "Aphraates' Demonstration VII.18 and 20. Some Observations on the Discourse on Penance," *Parole de l'Orient* 5 (1974), 21–48.
37. "Philoxenus' Letter to Abraham and Orestes concerning Stephen bar Sudaili. Some Proposals with regard to the

- Correction of the Syriac Text and the English Translation,” *Le Muséon* 87 (1974), 79–86.
38. “Weitere Beiträge zur Berichtigung einzelner Stellen in Ephraems Kommentare zu Genesis und Exodus,” *Oriens Christianus* 58 (1974), 121–131.
  39. “Neue Schriften des Johannes von Apameia. Bemerkungen zu einer Edition,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 31 (1974), 42–52.
  40. “«Maar Mefibosjet zelf zal niet aan mijn tafel eten als een van ’s konings eigen zoons.» Enkele opmerkingen over 2 Sam. IX, 11B,” in *Travels in the World of the Old Testament. Studies Presented to Professor M. A. Beek on the Occasion of his 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, edd. M.S.H.G. Heerma van Voss, Ph.H.J. Houwink ten Cate, N.A. van Uchelen (*Studia Semitica Neerlandica* 16; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), 119–131.
  41. “The Establishment of the Four Quarters of the Universe in the Symbol of the Cross: A Trace of an Ephraemic Conception in the Nestorian Inscription of Hsi-an fu?,” in *Papers Presented to the Sixth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 1971*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (*Studia Patristica*, 13 [= *Texte und Untersuchungen*, 116]; Berlin, 1975), 204–209.