

PHILOXENE DE MABBOUG
HOMELIES
INTRODUCTION, TRADUCTION
ET NOTES PAR EUGENE LEMOINE
Nouvelle édition
revue par René Lavenant, S.J.
Sources Chrétiennes No. 44 bis
Paris: les Éditions du Cerf, 2007,
pp. 576, € 78.00

ROBERT A. KITCHEN

KNOX-METROPOLITAN UNITED CHURCH
REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN

The venerable French language series of early Christian writings, *Sources Chrétiennes*, has surpassed the 530 volume mark and is not stopping. Most of the volumes are Greek or Latin texts with the original language and translation on facing pages. Notably, the very first Syriac text was published in 1956, *Philoxène de Mabboug. Homélies*, translated and introduced by Eugène Lemoine.¹ Since then there have been translations of Ephrem,² John the Solitary of

¹ Philoxène de Mabboug: *Homélies*. Introduction, Trad. et Notes par Eugène Lemoine, Sources Chrétiennes 44 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1956). (Abbreviation: Lem)

² Éphrem de Nisibe: *Hymnes sur le Paradis*, tr. F. Graffin, R. Lavenant, Sources Chrétiennes 137 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968); Éphrem de

Apamea,³ Aphrahat,⁴ the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch,⁵ and two Armenian texts have been published.⁶ Regrettably, the Syriac texts themselves have not been included in these volumes. Perhaps in time there will be editions of important Coptic, Ge'ez (Ethiopic), Georgian, and Christian Arabic works, as well as many more Syriac texts.

Fifty years can be a long time for a translation and Lemoine's herculean effort to provide a French version from E. W. Budge's critical edition and English translation⁷ has been a significant resource, but not without its problems. The length (625 pages in Budge's Syriac text) and complexity of Philoxenos' thirteen *mēmre* on the spiritual and monastic life present a formidable challenge to any scholar. Lemoine's introduction and translation was the first significant scholarly attempt to analyze Philoxenos' most popular work, but his efforts drew significant criticism. Through my own work on producing a new English translation of *The Discourses* for Cistercian Publications, I have become aware of the many contentious issues that can be involved in such an important, but lengthy text.

Lemoine, recognizing the evident structure of an introductory *mēmra* followed by six pairs of *mēmre*, each on a single broad theme,

Nisibe: *Homélies sur la Nativité*, ed. F. Cassingena-Trévedy, F. Graffin, Sources Chrétiennes 459 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2001); Éphrem de Nisibe: *Homélies pascales*, ed. F. Cassingena-Trévedy, Sources Chrétiennes 502 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2006).

³ Jean d'Apamée: *Dialogues et Traités*, traduction seule par R. Lavenant, Sources Chrétiennes 311 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1984).

⁴ Aphraate le Sage persan: *Exposés*, t. I, ed. M.-J. Pierre, Sources Chrétiennes 349 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1988); t. II, Sources Chrétiennes 359 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1988).

⁵ *Apocalypse syriaque de Baruch*, intr. et trad., t. I, par P. Bogaert, Sources Chrétiennes 144 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969); Commentaire et tables, t. II, Sources Chrétiennes 145 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969).

⁶ Grégoire de Narek: *Le Livre de prières*, ed. J. Kéchichian, traduction seule, Sources Chrétiennes 78 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961; 2000: reprint of first edition). Also, Nersès Šnorhali, *Jésus, Fils unique du Père*, ed. I. Kéchichian, traduction seule, Sources Chrétiennes 203 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1973).

⁷ *Discourses of Philoxenus, Bishop of Mabbôgh*, 2 vols, ed. E.A.W. Budge (London, 1894).

worked hard to squeeze a pattern out of Philoxenos' long discourses. At first read, it sounded plausible: Philoxenos wrote one *mēmṛā* on a particular theme from a moralistic perspective, and then after an undetermined interval wrote the second corresponding *mēmṛā* from a different, mystical approach. This pattern unraveled quickly for two interrelated reasons: first, Lemoine was not able to define "moralistic" and "mystical" adequately to distinguish their separate approaches; and second, as a consequence, Lemoine immediately began to reverse the order of the *mēmṛē* from their supposed sequence. His exceptions proved that there was no rule. Irenée Hausherr wasted no time in challenging and dismissing this theoretical construct.⁸ Lemoine was correct in wondering about the thematic pairs of *mēmṛē*, but since his attempt no one has ventured such an all-encompassing explanation of Philoxenos' homiletical strategy.

The dust had barely settled on this introductory issue when Taeke Jansma published a short, but detailed review article, focusing on the nature of the translation itself.⁹ Jansma recognized the magnitude of the task Lemoine faced and while appreciative of the difficulty of avoiding problems in such a long text, he did not hesitate to enumerate the problems in detailed lists of passages. He referred the reader to Hausherr's comments and even Lemoine's own article¹⁰ to dispense with the moralistic/mystical scheme. Jansma then focused on the many omissions of text, the occasional rearrangement of the narrative, certain mis-translations, as well as Lemoine's running arguments with Philoxenos over monastic spirituality—which Jansma did not consider an appropriate activity for a translator.

Deficiencies notwithstanding, Lemoine's translation has served as a valuable resource for half a century, making a major Syriac text accessible to scholars and religious communities in a way that Budge's original edition was never able to do. As the *Sources Chrétiennes* corpus has grown, the editorial staff has in recent years ventured to look back at some of its earlier texts and

⁸ Irenée Hausherr, "Spiritualité Syrienne: Philoxène de Mabboug en version française" (*Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 23 [1957]), 171–85.

⁹ T. Jansma (*Vigiliae Christianae*, XII, 4 [December 1958]), 233–8.

¹⁰ Eugène Lemoine, "La spiritualité de Philoxène de Mabboug" (*L'Orient Syrien*, 2 [1957]), 351–66.

produced new revised versions. René Lavenant assumed the responsibility of producing “une nouvelle édition avec révision de la traduction, additions et corrections”—a volume with the same title, but enumerated SC 44 bis (for the sake of clarity, references below to the Lemoine and Lavenant editions will be abbreviated Lem and Lav respectively).¹¹

Lavenant’s “avant-propos” (Lav 7–8) succinctly sets out his strategy which appears to be to respectfully make numerous corrections and amendments to a lengthy text without appearing obtrusive, a delicate assignment he accomplishes exceedingly well, both in maintaining the character and felicity of Lemoine’s translation and introduction, and in providing a more accurate text. Lavenant notes that his revision is based upon three critical sources in the wake of the original edition. First, is André de Halleux’s magisterial 1963 dissertation on Philoxenos that remains the starting point for all subsequent Philoxenian research.¹² Second and third are the previously mentioned articles by Hausherr and Jansma. Lavenant has had to take Jansma’s check-lists seriously and observes that he has adopted “quasiment” all of Jansma’s corrections and ameliorations (Lav 7).

Lavenant, however, is careful to insist that his revision is not a rewriting of Lemoine’s work, noting that he leaves roughly 80% of the original remains as is (Lav 8). Indeed, a reader has to look closely to find the 20%. Lavenant outlines four specific areas in which he has made amendments (Lav 8). (1) Numerous terms and expressions were inadvertently not translated and are now restored for the integrity and completeness of the translation. Most of these omissions do not affect the meaning or flow of the text; (2) Lavenant straightforwardly states that he has excised the theses of Lemoine concerning the schema of the two homilies on the same subject; (3) Lemoine omitted noting 18 cases where the copyist’s faults oblige one to amend the Syriac text. The majority of these occur in Discourses 9, 10, 11, and 13; (4) In Discourse 9

¹¹ Philoxène de Mabboug: *Homélies*. Introduction, Traduction et Notes par Eugène Lemoine. Nouvelle édition revue par René Lavenant, s.j., Sources Chrétiennes 44 bis (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007). (Abbreviation: Lav).

¹² André de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabbog. Sa vie, ses écrits, sa théologie* (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1963).

(Syriac page 338), Lemoine reorders the paragraphs to render a better flow of ideas, but Lavenant has reinstated the original order. In general, Lavenant has not tampered with the basic structure of Lemoine's volume. Beginning with a general introduction, Lavenant follows the original layout of slightly shorter introductions for each pair of *mēmṛē*, treating Lemoine's contribution with respect. Lavenant essentially retains the original text, though in places he subtly edits his predecessor's narrative by excising certain elements of the earlier edition. It is worthwhile to mention some of these subtleties.

Lemoine employed the full title of Philoxenos' introductory *mēmṛā* to indicate the grand goals and strategy of Philoxenos' collection. Lavenant's hand is seen readily in a more detailed definition and explanation of the root **d-b-r* in the word frequently used by Philoxenos, *dūbbārē*—"ways of life, customs," which Lemoine/Lavenant usually translate, "règles/rules." Lavenant deletes several observations by Rubens Duval cited by Lemoine (Lem 11, 13), perhaps because Duval's 1907 *Histoire de littérature syriaque*¹³ is no longer considered a modern reference. Both translators agree that the literary genre of *mēmṛā* here is "la lecture spirituelle," a unique genre utilized almost solely in religious communities, so that Philoxenos wrote these *mēmṛē* in order to read them himself before monks (Lem 13/Lav 12).

Further witness to an academic generation gap are the sources used by the two translators when they offer a brief summary of the life and affairs of Philoxenos. Lemoine relies on an article written by Cardinal Tisserant,¹⁴ while Lavenant refers to De Halleux's master work.¹⁵

One of the more important scholarly legacies derives from Lemoine's simple statement that there is no trace of monophysitism in these *Homélie*s, implying that the monastic milieu and content of these discourses were free of the Christological

¹³ Rubens Duval, *Histoire de littérature syriaque* (Paris: Gabalda, 1907), 219–21.

¹⁴ E. Tisserant, "Philoxène de Mabboug," in *Dictionnaire de Théologie catholique*, t. 12 (1935), col. 1509–16.

¹⁵ De Halleux, *Philoxène*, 3–105.

controversies for which Philoxenos was infamous.¹⁶ This has remained comfortably as the scholarly consensus. Lavenant, however, follows De Halleux in noting that there are a few phrases scattered throughout the work witnessing to the presence of a miaphysite perspective.¹⁷ The recent dissertation of David Michelson has shown that, indeed, the characteristic elements of Philoxenos' controversial theology are imbedded in the *Discourses* as well.¹⁸

What Lavenant deletes from Lemoine without comment does nevertheless make a certain editorial comment. A lengthy section in which Lemoine discusses Philoxenos' reputed disdain for bishops who do not possess the integrity and holiness of the desert fathers and monks had tried to extract a little more out of the *Discourses* than seems legitimate or even relevant (Lem 16).

When Lavenant does reach the issue of the organization of the pairs of *mēmre* he does not ignore the problem, but along with De Halleux and Hausherr agrees that for the time being any attempt to systematize the structure and content of the thirteen discourses is best avoided (Lav 19). As a further instance, Lavenant summarizes De Halleux's suggestion that a possible tripartite plan of Philoxenos along the lines of Evagrius Ponticus was not realized: *mēmre* 2–7 were considered “the degree of the body,” and 8–13 were counted as “the degree of the soul.” However, Philoxenos did not carry through with the necessary *mēmre* on “the degree of the spirit.” Lavenant refers to De Halleux's discussion about the existence of 9th–11th century florilegia that include extracts of *mēmre* 9 and 13, along with other Philoxenian fragments on humility, penance and prayer—fragments conjectured by De Halleux to be from that lost section on “the degree of the spirit.”¹⁹

¹⁶ “Il n’y a aucune trace de monophysisme dans les homélies,” Lemoine, 15.

¹⁷ De Halleux, 283; Lavenant, 15.

¹⁸ David A. Michelson, *Practice Leads to Theory: Orthodoxy and the Spiritual Struggle in the World of Philoxenos of Mabbug (470–523)*, Ph.D dissertation (Princeton University, 2007).

¹⁹ De Halleux, 285–6. Cf. discussion in the article included in this edition of *Hugoye*, R.A. Kitchen, “The Lust of the Belly Is the Beginning of All Sin.”

Lavenant concludes his general introduction by emphasizing Philoxenos' debt to the Syriac tradition before him, especially to Aphrahat and Ephrem, but also to John the Solitary of Apamea and Evagrius. As well, the *Liber Graduum/Book of Steps* had bequeathed to Philoxenos the dichotomy of the Upright and Perfect ones, along with a Messalian "current of thought" (Lav 20–22).

Lavenant next moves on to the separate introductions to the thematic pairs, generally producing a slightly shorter version than Lemoine's. The introduction to the first two *mēmre* on Faith is simply a summary of the main arguments of Philoxenos in serial order. The second pair, 4 & 5 on Simplicity, is again a summary of the argument, though in comparison one can see that Lavenant has subtly reworked Lemoine's descriptions to render them more concise.

Lavenant does edit Lemoine's section discussing the virtue of "spiritual purity" required for the simplicity of monastic life (Lem 92) which Lavenant renders as "spiritual serenity." The key word and concept frequently employed by Philoxenos is *šapyūtā/šapyā* which he observes others translate as "transparency/limpidity," or "integrity." Lavenant offers an eloquent image of the concept—"Ils [terms *šapyūtā/šapyā*] impliquent l'idée de quelque chose, comme une surface dont la transparence n'est pas ternie par la moindre tache" (Lav 89).

In the introduction to the 6th & 7th *mēmre* on the Fear of God, Lavenant scarcely changes a word from Lemoine's introduction until he arrives at the final paragraph. Halfway through this concluding paragraph, Lavenant concludes his introduction, for Lemoine had returned to the matter of the moralistic/mystical *mēmre* (Lem 163). This is one of the pairs in which Lemoine proposed to switch the order, identifying the 7th as moralistic, so written first, and the 6th mystical *mēmre* being written at a later date, a conjectural revision now viewed as moot.

In the introduction to the 8th & 9th *mēmre* on the Renunciation of the World, Lavenant contributes a brief observation regarding the levels of the Upright and the Perfect. Along with Gribomont and Hausherr, he sees the distinction between these levels emerging out of the Messalian current of thought, though not out of the infamous sect itself. However, he notes that Philoxenos

avoided falling totally into “the excesses of Messalian pneumatism” (Lav 218).

The important imagery used by Philoxenos of the fetus leaving the womb to enter the world as an analogy of a monk departing from the world to enter the new life of the monastery is rewritten by Lavenant, yet agreeing still with Lemoine’s description (Lem 217–218/Lav 220–221). Lavenant notes that the Syrians have had a penchant for the biological and medical sciences, though this does not mean that Philoxenos himself practiced medicine (Lav 221).²⁰ Lavenant also considerably edits down the comments of Lemoine regarding Philoxenos’ perception of the distinction between Uprightness and Perfection (Lem 218–220), another instance in which Lemoine indulged in a debate with Philoxenos, along with a homiletical reflection on those who have practiced and still do practice the “justice of the law.”

The beginning of the introduction by Lemoine to the 10th and 11th *mēmre* on Gluttony and Abstinence is retained by Lavenant who concurs that Philoxenos does not speak with the same tone or voice in the two *mēmre* (Lem 313/Lav 321). The 10th is “un gros orage,” while the 11th is “toute serein.” Lavenant does delete a short paragraph in which Lemoine disagrees with Philoxenos’ view that a person experiences autonomy only in the desert or monastery—and not also in the church and in the world (Lem 316).

Finally, the introduction to the 12th and 13th *mēmre* on Fornication is Lemoine’s longest (Lem 429–440), but also the one from which Lavenant has excised and edited the most material (Lav 437–445). For example, Lavenant deletes several lengthy sections: Lemoine mentions Philoxenos referring to the “preceding homily (on the lust of the belly),” and attempts to make the reference another piece of evidence regarding the existence of a conscious two-tier scheme of *mēmre* (Lem 429). Several paragraphs later Lemoine indulges in a minor excursus on Adam and Eve’s discovery of their nudity “when their eyes were opened,” then a long paragraph debating the place and necessity of marriage versus celibacy in which Philoxenos almost fades out of the discussion (Lem 435–6). Lavenant edits five of the last six paragraphs down to

²⁰ Cf. E. Lemoine, “Physionomie d’un moine syrien: Philoxène de Mabboug” (L’Orient Syrien, 3 [1958]), 91–102.

one, omitting as well an excursus on Philoxenos' misreading of Paul (Lem 438–440).

Lavenant's strategy is to keep the introductory material spare and accurate regarding what one can say about this particular text. It is not that Lavenant passively allows the text to "speak for itself", rather Lavenant does not attempt to speak for or against the text and its author. There are arguably several different ways in which to present the translation of such a significant text, but Lavenant has focused his efforts on providing an accurate text, and while providing guidance in the introductions, has deferred to future scholars the theological analysis of the text.

Most of this volume, therefore, is the venue in which Lavenant enables Philoxenos to be encountered by a new generation. This reviewer will not attempt the scrutiny that Jansma exerted on Lemoine's original edition, but after working extensively with both versions, there is no doubt that Lavenant has provided us with a more reliable and complete translation. Jansma did recognize the readability of Lemoine's translation, and as Lavenant declared at the first, 80% or so of the original version is retained. Lavenant's touch is marked by restraint over much of the text. As he outlined in his avant-propos, one of his primary tasks has been to restore the numerous inadvertent omissions of the Syriac text by Lemoine that sometimes were a source of criticism. Lavenant's footnotes are more detailed, noting the occasions where the printed edition needs to be amended and no variant is offered. It would have been helpful to have noted the many instances in which Lemoine or Lavenant have adopted a variant reading, but considering the length of the text that would be asking a great deal. Most importantly, there are a number of passages where Philoxenos' complexity of thought and expression leads to confusion and misunderstanding, and Lavenant consistently addresses such passages with a comprehension of the Syriac language few have approached.

With 625 pages of text to be negotiated it would be naive to say that there remain no problems or alternative translations for this revised version of Philoxenos' longest and most revered work, yet Lavenant's edition is certainly evidence that a standard worthy of the goals of the *Sources Chrétiennes* series has been renewed.