

## BOOK REVIEWS

Martin Heimgartner, *Timotheos I., Ostsyrischer Patriarch: Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi, Textedition* (CSCO 631, Scriptorum Syri 244), Louvain, Peeters 2011, XX-165 pp; €70.00.

Martin Heimgartner, *Timotheos I., Ostsyrischer Patriarch: Disputation mit dem Kalifen al-Mahdi, Einleitung, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen* (CSCO 632, Scriptorum Syri 245), Louvain, Peeters 2011. LXVI-123 pp; €65.00.

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The book under review presents the edition and translation of one of the most significant literary works of the Christian-Islamic dialogue genre preserved in Syriac: the famous dispute between the East-Syrian patriarch Timothy I (780-823) and the caliph Al-Mahdī, written by the former and handed down with the collection of his letters. This text was also published in 1928 by A. Mingana in the second volume of his Woodbrooke Studies.

Mingana based his edition on apographs copied in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century from a single East-Syrian testimony from the year 1299, conserved at present in Baghdad (Ms. Syr. Baghdad 509), as did all others who dealt with Timothy's letters (from Labourt, Braun, Bidawid to contemporary scholars).

The edition and translation by Martin Heimgartner, however, for the first time is based directly on Syr. Baghdad 509 from which, thanks to the mediation of the Swiss ambassador Mr. Martin Aeschbacher and his wife Mrs. Elisabeth Horem Aeschbacher, photos were made and brought to Switzerland in 2003. By means of this dangerous operation—carried out soon after the last Iraq war—the section of the manuscript containing the Dialogue with Al-Mahdī was copied.

Heimgartner reconstructs in his introduction to the translation of the Dialogue firstly the precise history of this Iraqi manuscript which contains the text of the Dialogue. Syr. Baghdad 509 is a copy of a canon compilation from the period of patriarch Elias I (1028-1049). This clearly stratified canon collection contains—among many other texts—two works by Timothy I: the “Law Book,” composed by the same patriarch around 804 CE, and his collection of 59 letters, written between 780 and 804. These letters are the

surviving private correspondence between Timothy and Mar Sergius, Timothy's old school companion. These epistles were composed partly in the period when Sergius was headmaster of Mar Gabriel and Mar Abraham in Mosul, and partly in the period after he had been consecrated and had become metropolitan of Elam.

Contained in this epistolary collection is Timothy's Dialogue with Al-Mahdī, which, according to the Bidawid numbering, is usually referred to as letter number 59. Heimgartner also recounts the subsequent history of the manuscript of the synodical collection of patriarch Elias I, and how it probably was transferred to the rich library of the Rabban Hormizd monastery, near Alqōš, during the Christian persecutions in the Mongolian period, when the patriarchy had settled in this monastery. The book remained there until 1857/58, when the monastic community, along with the entire library, moved to the monastery of Dair as-Sayyida, where an impressive tradition of copying ancient manuscripts developed toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Heimgartner's reconstruction gives account of the numerous copies of the entire synodical collection that were made at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of which ended up in the West, as well as of the various other copies of Timothy's letters that were made independently.

In both cases, when Elias' entire collection was transcribed, as well as when only the single section with Timothy's letters was copied, the epistolary collection of the patriarch often remained incomplete. Heimgartner also furnishes us with an account of the complex Arab reception of the Dialogue with Al-Mahdī and lists six different translations dating from the 11th to the 19th century. He also reports the use of Timothy's text in the Arab Dialogue of Abraham of Tiberias with Abdarraḥman al-Ḥašimī and by Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī. The introduction carries on with the presentation of a stemma of all known manuscripts of Timothy's letters, followed by a list of editions and translations of the Dialogue (both in Syriac and Arabic).

A shorter second section of the introduction deals with the dating of the text. Heimgartner dates the composition of the Dialogue, by means, among several arguments, of a convincing linguistic analysis, to 782-783; that is after the future caliph Harun was nominated second heir to the throne by his father and before the departure of Al-Mahdī for Ġurgān.

Heimgartner sets out an analysis of the text structure, both from a literary point of view (a theological treatise in the form of a dialogue, divided into two days and fit in a gaunt epistolary frame) and from an inner structural point of view. The two most interesting aspects of his discussion are the comparison of Timothy's Dialogue with the Dialogue between Justin and Trypho, and the highlighting of a complex thematic articulation, structured in a mirror-like way, along the two parts of the discussion (first day and second day). Even if we could discover a precise internal order, so that we could suppose a desk construction, the evident disproportion that can be found in the way the themes are debated during the first and the second day suggests that the origin of the symmetric thematic order is more likely the expression of a precise outline followed during the encounter between the Patriarch and the Caliph. Heimgartner indeed excludes, against the slightly too cynical opinion of his predecessors, that the Dialogue is fictitious, mainly because of these two important aspects: Al-Mahdī becomes an experienced interlocutor during the second day to the point that in some passages Timothy seems to be giving rather unconvincing answers; and a development in Timothy's mind, which at first disposes of Muhammad's authority in an extremely direct way, whereas on the second day he seems to modify his strategy by praising Muhammad as someone who "has walked on the road of the Prophets" and who, at the same time, gives an esoteric Trinitarian doctrine. An internal evolution in Timothy's mind would therefore be perceptible within the text of the Dialogue. All of these elements make the editor believe that the outline along which the text has been drawn up in Syriac was an authentic expression of a confrontation that really took place.

Given the exceptionality of the Baghdad manuscript—the sole antique manuscript that contains Timothy's letters on which all other transcriptions depend, and on which this edition of the Dialogue is based—Heimgartner decided to reproduce the original page layout. In fact, the lacunae mostly occur in the last couple of letters of the lines and can often easily be filled in by comparison with other transcriptions from times when the manuscript was in better condition. Preserving the original layout of the manuscript will allow future scholars a faster verification. Heimgartner further supplies a critical apparatus that considers the three most interesting modern transcriptions: London, British Library,

Oriental 9361, Vaticanus Borg. Syr. 81, and University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, Mingana 17.

Heimgartner's volume represents a powerful step forward. In fact, the English translation by Mingana was extraordinarily free in comparison with this edition; often repetitions were not translated by Mingana, interrogative and affirmative modes were interchanged, and entire passages were not translated at all.

At last we have a reliable and linguistically sensitive translation. The stylistic considerations are fascinating (of which Timothy's style of using *man* and *den* in Syriac are just an example). This edition is a fundamental contribution to the Christian-Islamic dialogue as it gives us security about the text and a precise translation. Through this work we can undertake further studies to understand the character of Timothy's writing, both in his use of Aristotelian logic, and in his attempt to sketch out a sort of a Christian theological (and not heresiological) interpretation of the Muhammadan revelation.