

A.H. Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, Translated Texts for Historians 50 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008). Pp. x + 217. Paperback.

**GRIGORY KESSEL, PHILIPPS UNIVERSITÄT,
FACHGEBIET KIRCHENGESCHICHTE**

The book under review is a significant contribution to the study of the East Syriac tradition in general and of the School of Nisibis in particular, for it provides for the first time the English translation of the primary and some of the most important sources that one has to deal with while pursuing research on the Medieval Syriac school movement.

The volume of translations constitutes something of a supplement to the author's monograph published a few years ago¹. Both the present book and the monograph stem from Becker's thesis of 2004,² though, as with to the monograph, the volume of translations has been considerably enlarged and recast.

The core text of this volume is the 'Cause of the Foundation of the Schools,' and the four other texts included complement the picture it paints. Of course, the selection of texts does not exhaust the entire dossier for the School of Nisibis, which includes texts from different genres in Syriac, Greek, Armenian and Arabic³. What the collection of texts does show, however, is that students of the School of Nisibis has to seek for relevant material in all kinds of Syriac literature, and not limit themselves, for example, to exclusively historical sources. As the selection of the texts provided in the volume demonstrates, notable data can be found also in texts representing polemical and poetical genres. Thus, the volume includes the following texts:

¹ A.H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). Cf. its review by I. Ramelli in Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies 10 (2007).

² A.H. Becker, *Devotional Study: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, Ph.D. thesis (Princeton: Princeton University, 2004), UMI Number 3110224.

³ For their presentation and analysis of the data they provide see Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom...*, 41–97.

The 'Letter' of Simeon of Bēt Arsham, the Syrian Orthodox bishop of Bēt Arsham (end of 5th – beginning of the 6th c.) on the 'Nestorianization' of Persia (p. 25–39) is one of the earliest sources for the school in Edessa and the establishment of the School in Nisibis. The text provides a polemical picture of the origin and of history of the diophysite tradition seen as a heresy (in that sense Becker, following the wording of the 'Letter', made use of the notorious term 'Nestorianism' - syr. *nestōryanūtā*) that descended from Hannah and Caiphas. The 'Letter' certainly served as West Syrian propaganda (common to that period) against spreading diophysitism and for that reason can be used with utmost caution for reconstruction of the history of the School.

Although only the relevant section of the 'Ecclesiastical History' of Barḥadbshabbā (late 6th c.) (p. 47–85) appears in English translation (histories of Narsai and Abraham, both heads of the School of Nisibis in 5th and 6th c. respectively), Becker provides a summary of the 'Ecclesiastical History' that allows one to get the clear idea of the context of the translated part. The text of the 'Ecclesiastical History' has an apparent hagiographical tone and Becker does well to warn the reader not 'to attribute historical value to the claims made by the text' (p. 45).

The most important text in the volume is no doubt Barḥadbshabbā's (late 6th c.) 'Cause of the Foundation of the Schools' (p. 94–160). This text was most likely composed as a speech addressed to the incoming class at the School of Nisibis, and it presents the entire world history as a long chain of schools. The translation of the 'Cause' has been considerably revised in comparison with the version that can be found in Becker's thesis⁴. To facilitate the reading of the text Becker conveniently provides a summary of the whole and briefly discusses its literary character. Becker argues that the 'Cause' is a specimen of the so-called 'cause' genre that was developed in the School of Nisibis; another major influence on the 'Cause' revealed by Becker is Greek philosophical thought represented by translations of Evagrius of Pontus, Aristotle's logical works and the later Neoplatonic commentaries of Porphyry.

The 'Mingana fragment' (p. 161–162) is a short passage first published by Alphonse Mingana that was treated with distrust by

⁴ Becker, *Devotional Study...*, 366–418.

later scholars (A. Scher, J.B. Chabot, J.-M. Fiey) except Arthur Vööbus, who accepted the material therein as historically authentic. Mingana's purpose in publishing the material was to challenge Labourt's and Chabot's interpretations of the history of the Church of East and of the School of Nisibis, though Becker acknowledges that in neither case he was able to find 'what points... would be challenged by this new material' (p. 170).

Becker's discussion of the text portion from the Mēmrā 'On the Holy Fathers' of Rabban Surin (p. 163–164) requires a little further clarification. The fragment published by Addai Scher is an insert written by Rabban Ya'qob, who is usually believed to be an exegete at the School of Nisibis in the 7th c. Its text was added to the Mēmrā 'On the Holy Fathers, Mar Narsai, Mar Abraham, Mar John' (viz. three heads of the School of Nisibis) of Rabban Surin (also an exegete at the School of Nisibis in the 7th c.), whose disciple, reportedly, was Rabban Ya'qob⁵. Contrary to the assumption of Becker, Macomber provides the evidence that the text of the Mēmrā is not to be found elsewhere except for the Diyarbakir/Scher 70⁶, whereas ms Sachau 174, 175, 176, argued by Becker to be related to the Diyarbakir codex, actually reproduce the contents and order of Notre-Dame des Sémences/Vosté 160, which could well be the model of the Sachau ms⁷.

The translations are based upon the standard (although not always perfect) editions of the texts: J.S. Assemanus, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* I (Rome, 1719), 346–58 for the 'Letters'; F. Nau, *La seconde partie de l'histoire de Barhadbēšabba 'Arbaïa*, PO IX,5 (Paris, 1913), 503–631 for the 'Ecclesiastical History' [here 588–630; Becker's translation covers about a third part of the entire text]; A. Scher, *Mar Barhadbēšabba 'Arbaya, Cause de la fondation des écoles*, PO IV,4 (Paris, 1908) p. 327–397 and 399–402 for the 'Cause' and a portion from Mēmrā; A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina*, I (Mosul, 1905), 32–39 for a dubious 'Mingana fragment'. Furthermore, taking into consideration the uncritical

⁵ A. Scher, *Mar Barhadbēšabba 'Arbaya, Cause de la fondation des écoles*, PO IV,4 (Paris, 1908), 399, W. Macomber, "The manuscripts of the metrical homilies of Narsai" (OCP 39 [1973]) 275–306 [here p. 282 note 1].

⁶ W. Macomber, "The manuscripts of the metrical homilies of Narsai" (OCP 39 [1973]) 275–306 [here p. 306].

⁷ Ibid. [here p. 285].

character of Assemani's edition of the 'Letter' of Simeon of Bēt Arsham, Becker had recourse to the unique manuscript containing the text (Vatican syr. 135) and thanks to that he was able to produce a more accurate and precise translation.

Three appendixes follow the translations.

Appendix I, 'On the Manuscript Tradition of the Cause of the Foundation of the Schools' (p. 165–171), provides a good presentation of the manuscript evidence of the 'Cause' (the oldest manuscript was written in the 16th c.) with updated information concerning the fate of the manuscripts in question. In the case of the collection formerly preserved in the Monastery of Notre-Dame des Sémences that was eventually moved to the Chaldean Monastery in Baghdad, it is now possible to give the latest update, for the collection was recently transferred again (mostly for safety reasons) to its former location at the monastery of Notre-Dame des Sémences.⁸ Since the manuscript Sharfeh Rahmani 80 was accessible to the present reviewer, it is worthwhile offering some details about it. Rahmani 80 is a collection of various works that was written in the beginning of the 20th.⁹ It is hardly possible to agree with Becker's assumption that Rahmani 80 might have been copied from Vatican syr. 507 (p. 167, 168) because of the apparent differences in contents between them. Whereas Vatican syr. 507 contains the 'Cause' only, Rahmani 80 has much more extensive contents, thus making it an unlikely exemplar for the Sharfeh codex. The author is introduced in the Rahmani 80 not as—according to Becker's premise—'Mār Barḥadbeshabbā Abāyā, Bishop of Ḥalwan' (p. 167), but 'Mar Ḥadbeshabba 'Arbāyā' (Rahmani 80, p. 24). If one supplements that point by the fact that Rahmani 80 supports the readings of Siirt 109, then we can see the Sharfeh codex as representing the text form of the 'Cause' preserved in the lost Siirt 109 (there are some other points in common between two manuscripts). One witness to the 'Cause' was overlooked by Becker. It is Mardin/Scher 82 (AD 1890) which, according to the statement of Scher, contains the text of the

⁸ I am indebted to Prof. Herman Teule (Nijmegen) for that communication.

⁹ More about that manuscript see in G. Kessel, N. Sims-Williams, "The 'Profitable Counsels' of Šem ōn d-Ṭaibūtēh: the Syriac original and its Sogdian version," *Le Muséon* 124 (forthcoming).

'Cause' copied from the Siirt 109. It is not only the relationship to the lost Siirt codex attaches to this witness importance but also the fact that it is still extant and, therefore, can not be neglect in further study of the 'Cause' and its transmission history.

Appendix II, 'The Tree of Porphyry in the Cause of the Foundation of the School' (p. 172–180), contains a curious analysis of a passage from the 'Cause' that helps to reveal the importance of the study of Aristotle's logical works as interpreted by the later Neoplatonic commentary tradition in the School of Nisibis. Becker demonstrates evident dependence in the 'Cause' upon the 'Isagoge' of Porphyry of Tyre and, more precisely, upon the concept of the 'Tree of Porphyry'. Some elements of the Tree of Porphyry as found in the 'Cause' (e.g. more developed use of the soul, sensation of the soul, division of rational into spiritual and psychic) suggest to the author that they were supplemented already in the East Syriac milieu. Becker strongly maintains that the 'East-Syrian use of Aristotle and the Neoplatonic commentary tradition on his logical works should not be mistaken for philosophy' for 'the East-Syrian appropriation of philosophical terms and concepts consisted of a pragmatical selection of what would ultimately be useful only to issues of theological and devotional concern' (p. 180).

The relationship between the 'Ecclesiastical History' and the 'Cause' are studied in Appendix III, 'Literary Dependence of the Cause of the Foundation of the Schools on the Ecclesiastical History' (p. 181–191). Becker provides a synoptic comparison of the overlapping parts that help to distinguish the similarities between the two sources. Being reluctant to attribute two texts to one and the same author, Becker can not help but state that the 'two texts are clearly related to one another, but it is not certain whether this is through dependence on a third text' (p. 181).

The volume is concluded by useful Glossary of Selected Terms (p. 192–193), Two Maps (p. 194–195), Bibliography (p. 196–202) Indexes of Biblical References (p. 203–205), of Proper Names (p. 206–210) and of Subjects (p. 211–217).

The text sample that was compared against the original Syriac proves the author's aim 'to be as literal as possible without making the English too awkward for the reader' (p. 17), nevertheless it is worth noting that translation indeed tends to follow the Syriac and at times presupposes the knowledge of Syriac on the side of a reader.

All translations are densely annotated with relevant historical, philological, literary, philosophical and theological information that will undoubtedly be of assistance to the reader in comprehending these (sometimes obscure) texts, while being aware of their peculiarities and context.

The intended aims, as well as the reliability and the problematic issues that underlie the sources provided here in English translation were masterfully studied by the author in his monograph and it is to that work the reader should consult for a more elaborate analysis of the texts and their evidence.

A couple of recently published articles closely follow some issues discussed by Becker: G.J. Reinink, "Tradition and the Formation of the 'Nestorian' Identity in Sixth- to Seventh-Century Iraq" (Church History and Religious Culture 89 [2009]), 217–250; M. Debié, "Writing History as 'Histories': The Biographical Dimension of East Syriac Historiography," in Writing "True Stories". Historians and Hagiographers in the Late Antique and Medieval Near East, CELAMA 9, ed. M. Debié, A. Papaconstantinou, H. Kennedy (Brepols, 2010), 43–75; F. Briquel-Chatonnet, "La religion comme enseignement: les écoles dans la tradition historique et culturelle de l'église syro-orientale" (Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres [2010]), p. 59–76. Moreover, the author himself made one more important contribution in the field: A.H. Becker, "The Comparative Study of "Scholasticism" in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians" (AJS Review 34 [2010]), 91–113.

The author is to be commended for making a reliable English translation of some of the main sources for the history of the School of Nisibis, as well as for his successful endeavors to provide solid grounds for a source critical analysis of texts that are quite often used for reconstruction of the School's history without paying any attention to the agenda and purposes that lie behind the narration.

A few inaccuracies and misprints are to be pointed out: p. 3 note 7: *Barauma* for *Barsauma*; p. 36 note 109 [about Māruthā]: *d. c. 520* for *d. c. 420*; p. 39: *Mari of Tabāl* for *Mari of Taḥāl*, transliterated Syriac names sometimes lack hyphenation: p. 12 (Barḥ / adbeshabbā), p. 13 (Ḥ / enānā). However, the most serious typographical error is the misleading abbreviation of the title on its spine and back cover ("Sources for the Study of Nisibis").