

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON WOMEN IN THE SYRIAC TRADITION

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- [1] 1998 marked the 1500th anniversary of the death of the Empress Theodora, wife of the Byzantine emperor Justinian the Great. Theodora has held a place of special veneration and honor amongst the Syriac Orthodox from the beginning of the remarkable reign over which she and her husband presided. It was during those early decades of the sixth century that persecutions began in earnest against Christians dissenting against the Christological definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451), a situation that would lead, inexorably, to the formation of separate ecclesiastical hierarchies for the Eastern (Chalcedonian) Orthodox and the Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox churches. During those grim years, Theodora's steadfast support for the persecuted dissenters, her tireless sponsorship of their leaders and missionaries, and her own stalwart faith in their teachings all stood in active opposition to the religious policies of Justinian. In the eyes of their contemporary historians as well as later scholars, the competing religious loyalties of the imperial couple presented a distressing conundrum. But for the emerging Syriac Orthodox church, Theodora's earnest witness on behalf of their faith garnered their enduring loyalty to her memory. His Holiness Patriarch Mor Ignatios Zakka I expressed the devotion of many

Syriac Orthodox when he called for special commemoration of the 1500th anniversary of Theodora's passing.

- [2] Theodora is one of the "Great Women" of church history remembered in Syriac tradition. Yet she was not the only woman whose service to the church contributed to the rich heritage of that tradition. To offer our own acknowledgement of Theodora's commemoration, the Editors of *Hugoye* decided to dedicate an issue to the topic of "Women in Syriac Tradition," in an effort to situate Theodora's memory within a better understanding of the role women have played and the contributions they have made to the long history of Syriac tradition. The topic remains an understudied one, although important strides have been made in recent years.

- [3] The present issue offers four articles covering a broad expanse in time and geographical setting, each taking up a different aspect of women's history in the Christianity of the Syrian Orient. The first two consider the general place of women in early Syriac Christianity by treating two important bodies of evidence. Michael Penn, in "Bold and Having No Shame: Ambiguous Widows, Controlling Clergy, and Early Syrian Communities," takes up the complicated evidence of the early church rule, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, to demonstrate that in the third and fourth centuries widowed women held positions of significant prominence and honor in the Christian communities of the eastern Roman provinces, to the point where church officials deemed it necessary to exert controls over the authority and activities associated with the office of "widow." That women held such importance in the early Syrian regions has sometimes been obscured by the notoriety scholars have accorded to one particular passage in the fourth century *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat the Persian Sage, *Dem.* 6.3, in which the noteworthy Syriac author offers a summary of human history by listing the disasters for which women have been responsible, beginning with Eve. Adam Lehto's article, "Women in Aphrahat: Some Observations," provides a careful reassessment of Aphrahat's presentation of women—both in history and in the church of his day—arguing for a substantially revised understanding of the Persian Sage's position.

- [4] The second two articles look at two prominent women from widely differing times and places, whose roles in the history of Syrian Christianity broadly speaking deserve special attention. In my article, "Theodora the 'Believing Queen': A Study in Syriac

Historiographical Tradition,” I look at the particular historiographical process by which Syriac chroniclers cultivated their memory of Theodora over the centuries. The culmination of this process came in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries with the emergence of the legends that claim Theodora as a native Syriac Orthodox, daughter of a faithful priest who served her people despite her marriage to the persecuting emperor Justinian. The development of Theodora’s legend carried with it important re-shapings not only of Theodora’s reputation, but further of the Syriac Orthodox view of their own history. Avril Makhoul’s article, “Hindiyya Anne ‘Ajaymi and Her Spiritual Journey: the Essential Lightness of Being,” takes up the longer trajectory of Syrian history by studying this important yet little-known (to western scholars at least) Syro-Lebanese nun of the eighteenth century. Hindiyya struggled to pursue her spiritual vocation in circumstances hostile to her calling. In the course of her long life, she produced a huge body of mystical and contemplative writings, works that draw profoundly on both the dominant spiritual themes of her contemporary Maronite context and on the distinctive themes of the longer Syriac tradition going back to the writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian. In Hindiyya’s work we are given a striking example of how women through the centuries have found within the treasure store of Syrian traditions the resources necessary to fulfill their religious vocations. She is a reminder both of the longevity of that pattern, and of the social suspicions and institutional obstacles that have hindered women’s efforts from the early centuries of Christianity in the Syrian Orient.

- [5] Bibliographies of relevant studies on women in Syriac Christianity may be found in Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, with new preface and updated bibliography). More recent citations are found in S.A. Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 105–31. The present issue of *Hugoye* marks a further contribution to this area of study. It is our hope that the articles here will provide fresh material through which to consider the issues of women in Syriac tradition, and indeed, spark the desire for continued research and discussion.