SYRIAC LITERATURE

The literature of Syria, as known to us at the present day, is, with the exception of translations from the Greek and some other languages, a Christian literature. The writings of the Syrian heathens, such as the so-called Sābians (see Sabians) of Harrān, which were extant, at least in part, even in the 13th century,@@1 seem to have now wholly disappeared. The beginnings of this literature are lost in the darkness of the earliest ages of Christianity. It was at its best from the 4th to the 8th century, and then gradually died away, though it kept up a flickering exist­ence till the 14th century or even later. We must own —and it is well to make the confession at the outset— that the literature of Syria is, on the whole, not an attract­ive one. As Renan said long ago,@@2 the characteristic of the Syrians is a certain mediocrity. They shone neither in war, nor in the arts, nor in science. They altogether lacked the poetic fire of the older—we purposely emphasize the word—the older Hebrews and of the Arabs. But they were apt enough as pupils of the Greeks ; they assimilated and reproduced, adding little or nothing of their own. There was no Al-Fārābī, no Ibn Sīnā, no Ibn Rushd, in the cloisters of Edessa, Ken-neshrē, or Nisibis. Yet to the Syrians belongs the merit of having passed on the lore of ancient Greece to the Arabs, and therefore, as a matter of history, their literature must always possess a certain amount of interest in the eyes of the modern student. The Syrian Church never produced men who rose to the level of a Eusebius, a Gregory Nazianzen, a Basil, and a Chrysostom ; but we may still be thankful to the plodding diligence which has preserved for us in fairly good trans­lations many valuable works of Greek fathers which would otherwise have been lost. And even Syria’s humble chroni­clers, such as John of Ephesus, Dionysius of Tell-Mahrē, and Bar-Hebræus, deserve their meed of praise, seeing that, without their guidance, we should have known far less than we now know about the history of two important branches of the Eastern Church, besides losing much in­teresting information as to the political events of the periods with which their annals are occupied.

As Syriac literature commences with the Bible, we first briefly enumerate the different versions of Holy Scripture.

The most important of these is the so-called Pĕshīttā *(mappaktā pĕshīttā),* “the simple” or “plain version," the Syriac vulgate. This name is in use as early as the 9th or 10th century.@@3 As to the Old Testament, neither the exact time nor place of its transla­tion is known ; indeed, from certain differences of style and manner in its several parts, we may rather suppose it to be the work of different hands, extending over a considerable period of time. It would seem, however, as a whole, to have been a product of the 2d century, and not improbably a monument of the learning and zeal of the Christians of Edessa. Possibly Jewish converts, or even Jews, took a part in it, for some books (such as the Pentateuch and Job) are very literally rendered, whereas the coincidences with the LXX. (which are particularly numerous in the prophetical books) show the hand of Christian translators or revisers. That Jews should have had at any rate a consultative share in this work need not surprise us, when we remember that Syrian fathers, such as Aphraates, in the middle of the 4th century, and Jacob of Edessa, in the latter half of the 7th, had frequent recourse, like Jerome, to the scholars of the synagogue. To what extent subsequent revision may have been carried it is not easy to say ; but it seems tolerably certain that alterations were made from time to time with a view to harmonizing the Syriac text with that of the LXX. Such an opportunity may, for instance, have been afforded on a consider­able scale by the adoption of Lucian’s text of the LXX. at Antioch in the beginning of the 4th century (see Septuagint, vol. xxi. p. 669). On all these points, however, we know nothing for

certain, and may well repeat the words of Theodore of Mopsuestia in his commentary on Zephaniah i. 6@@4: *ηρμηveυτaι Sè ταΰτα* eis *μev την Σύρων παρ’ 0τoυ δή πoτe' ουδέ yàp tyvωστaι μjlχpi τηs τi∣μepov oστιs πoτl ovros iστιv.*

The canonical books of the Old Testament according to the Pĕshīttā are substantially those of the Hebrew Bible. In the' Massoretic MSS. (see below), whether Nestorian or Jacobite, the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah are passed over, and in the Nestorian the book of Esther also. But, on the other hand, it must be noticed that all these books are cited by Aphraates, and that they all appear in the *Codex Ambrosianus.* Of the Chronicles there is a MS. of the 6th century in the British Museum, Add. 17104. Esther appears in a volume of equal age (Add. 14652) as one of the constituent parts of the “Book of Women,” the others being Ruth, Susanna, Judith, and the history of Thecla, the dis­ciple of St Paul, which last is excluded from Biblical MSS. The oldest dated MS. of any portion of the Old Testament at present known to us is Add. 14425 in the British Museum (Gen., Exod., Num., Deut.), transcribed at Āmid by a deacon named John in 464. The deutero-canonical books or apocrypha, translated by differ­ent hands from the Greek,@@5 are nearly the same as in the LXX.@@6 The *Codex Ambrosianus,@@*7 for example, contains Wisdom, the Epistle of Jeremiah, and two Epistles of Baruch ; the Song of the Three Children, Bel and the Dragon, and Susanna ; Judith, Siracides or Ecclesiasticus ; the Apocalypse of Baruch ; the fourth book of Esdras ; and five books of the Maccabees, the fourth being the history of Samona and her sons, and the fifth *Josephi de Bello Judaico lib. vi*.@@8 To these must be added from other MSS. the first or third book of Esdras, the book of Tobit, and the prayer of Manasses. Of the first book of the Maccabees two recensions are extant, as far as chap. xiv. 24. The book of Tobit presents the text of the LXX. as far as chap. vii. 11.@@9

The canonical books of the New Testament are the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles (to which are annexed the three catholic epistles, viz., James, 1 Peter, and 1 John), and the fourteen epistles of St Paul. The shorter apostolic epistles, viz., 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, and Jude, and the Apocalypse of St John, were rejected by the early Syrian Church.@@10

As to the Pĕshīttā version of the Gospels (P), a variety of critical questions arise when we consider it in connexion with two other works, the *Dia-tessarδn* of Tatian (T) and the *Curetonian Gospels* (Sc).@@11 Tatian, the friend of Justin Martyr, afterwards counted a heretic, composed out of the four Gospels a work which received the title of Τό *δt,a τεσσάρων eυayyl∖ιοv,* in Syriac more briefly *Dia-lcssaron,* or *Evangelion da-Mĕḥallĕṭē,* “the Gospel of the Mixed.” It is a subject of controversy whether Tatian wrote this work in Greek or in Syriac, and whether he compiled it from the Greek Gospels or from a previous Syriac version. According to Zahn@@12 and Baethgen,@@13 the author’s language was Syriac, his sources Greek. They hold that this was the only Gospel in use in the Syrian Church for nearly a century, but that about the year 250, under the influence of Western MSS. of the Greek

@@@1 Bar-Hebræus, *Chron. Syr.,* ed. Bruns and Kirsch, p. 176 ; Chwol­sohn, *Ssabier und Ssabismus,* i. 177.

@@@2 *De Philosophia Peripatetica apud Syros,* 1852, p. 3.

@@@3 See the passage of Moses bar Kēphā, who died in 903, cited by the Abbé Martin in his *Introduction à la Critique Textuelle du Nouveau Testament,* p. 101, note.

@@@4 Mai, *Patrum Nova Bibliotheca,* vol. vii. 252.

@@@5 Some scholars, such as P. de Lagarde and Bickell, think that Ecclesiasticus was translated from the lost Hebrew text.

@@@6 See Ceriani, *Monumenta Sacra et Profana,* vol. i. fascc. 1,2; vol. V. fascc. 1, 2 ; P. de Lagarde, *Libri Vet. Test. Apocryphi Syriace.*

@@@7 Splendidly reproduced at Milan by the process of photo-lithography under the direction of the Rev. Dr A. M. Ceriani, 5 parts, 1876 foil.

@@@8 See *Das 6te Buch d. Bellum Judaicum übersetzt «. kritisch bearbeitet,* by Dr H. Kottek, Berlin, 1886 ; only capp. 1 and 2.

@@@9 See the Syriac note on p. xii. of De Lagarde’s edition.

@@@10 The principal editions of the Pĕshīttā are contained in the Paris polyglott of Le Jay and the London polyglott of Walton, to which latter is attached the immortal *Lexicon Heptaglotton* of Edmund Castell. The Old Testament (without the apocrypha) was edited by S. Lee in 1823 for the Bible Society, and is frequently bound up with the New Testament of 1826. The first edition of the New Testament was that of J. A. Widmanstad, with the help of Moses of Mārdīn (Vienna, 1555). Those of Tremellius (1569), Trost (1621), Gutbir (1664), and Leusden and Schaaf (1708, 1717) are well known. To the last named belongs Schaaf’s admirable *Lexicon Syriacum Concordantiale.* The American missionaries at Urūmiyah have published both the Old and New Testaments in ancient and modern Syriac, the former in 1852, the latter in 1846.

@@@11 *Remains of a very Antient Recension of the Four Gospels in Syriac, hitherto unknown in Europe, discovered, edited, and translated by W*. *Cureton, D.D., F.R.S.,* 1858.

@@@12 *Forschungen zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons, &c.,* 1 *Theil : Tatian’s Diatessaron,* pp. 98, 99.

@@@13 *Evangelienfragmente. Der griechische Text des Cureton’schen Syrers wiederhergestellt,* 1885.