

THE EARLIER HOME OF THE SINAITIC
PALIMPSEST.

It will be a surprise to some of the readers of the EXPOSITOR, as indeed it has been to myself, to learn that anything fresh can now be said about that remarkable manuscript which I had the good fortune to discover, eight years ago, in the library of the Convent of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. That manuscript contains, in its under script, the earliest Syriac version of the Four Gospels; and this has not only taxed the best energies of three very able Cambridge scholars to decipher, but has, by the purity of its text, and the felicity of many of its readings, awakened a world-wide interest amongst Biblical critics and students.

Whence came this almost unique specimen of the Gospels? Was it copied from an older manuscript in obedience to the decree of Rabbula Bishop of Edessa, when, in the fifth century, he ordained that the separate Gospels were to be read in the churches in place of Tatian's *Diatessaron*? Did it spring from a nest of Ebionite heresy? or does its curious reading of Matthew i. 16 represent some approach to the original illogical form of our Lord's, or rather of Joseph's, genealogy? No oracle will answer this question unless, perhaps, some chemical shall be discovered which will coax the second column on f. 139 v. to yield up its secret.

But though we are not in a position to solve this mystery, we can trace one more step of its descent to us through the ages, for we can now state with confidence where was its home before it was carried to Sinai.

The manuscript, it will be remembered, is a palimpsest. The upper script is chiefly the biographies of women saints, and forms a continuous book from end to end, the title of

which is *Select Narratives*. These were compiled, or rather translated, from the Greek by a certain John the Recluse, of Beth-Mari-Ḳaddisha. So the introductory rubric tells us. And we learn further, from the final colophon, that this was done in the year one thousand and nine, or one thousand and nine[ty], after Alexander, *i.e.* in A.D. 697 or A.D. 778.

It is thus evident that John of Beth-Mari-Ḳaddisha was the person who took the old Syriac codex of the Gospels to pieces, and used it up simply as writing material, mixing its pages so that the texts of Matthew, of Mark, of Luke, and of John, are mingled in what cannot exactly be called a harmony. Nor did the Gospel codex satisfy his wants, for he used up likewise portions of three other manuscripts. But that is beside our point to-day.

It will readily be perceived that, if we can get some light on this man's history, or his place of abode, and especially on the monastery in which he wrote, we shall be in a better position to speculate as to where he got his old vellum—I beg my readers' pardon, where he found a very ancient and valuable copy of the Four Gospels.

But how may we get this light? The Gospel part of the codex was carefully deciphered in 1893 by the late lamented Prof. Bensly, Dr. Rendel Harris, and Mr. Burkitt, and what they left unread was mostly gleaned by the present writer in 1895. It was completely photographed by me at the time of its discovery. The photographs have been in my hands, and have been studied by several scholars, for the last seven years. How should anything further remain to be told?

Truth is stranger than fiction. I have long purposed giving the *Select Narratives* to the world; and as the last sheet of these was passing through the press, I took it up on Good Friday morning, A.D. 1900, and began to compare it with my photograph of the penultimate page. I must

explain that the six lines which compose the final colophon of these *Select Narratives* are at the very top of the last page of the manuscript (f. 161b), and those lines were read by me, all but a few words, on my first visit to Sinai in 1892. They were examined by Dr. Rendel Harris in 1893, and I believe also by Dr. Bensly, though of this we have unfortunately no record. Four words in the line were read in 1895 only when they appeared on a lantern slide. But the nine lines at the foot of f. 161a appeared hopeless. During my last three visits to Sinai—in 1893, 1895, and 1897—I washed it over with the re-agent; but the effect was so slight that I thought myself quite justified in leaving it unread. Judge of my amazement then, on Good Friday morning, when, as I was studying my 1892 photograph, with the view of picking up only a few scattered letters to print at the foot of my page, I suddenly read the word *Antiochia!* It flashed on me that the five lines at the top of f. 161b, which had been already published, were only the latter part of the final colophon, and that here was its beginning. So, with the help of a magnifying glass, and by placing the photographs of 1892 and 1895 side by side, I made out about thirty-eight words. After these had been verified by my sister, I sent the photographs to Dr. Nestle, of Maulbronn, and he managed to decipher eight words more.

I do not give the Syriac text of these in this place, because some time must elapse before all that is visible in my photographs will be read; and I hope to have it less imperfect when it appears in No. ix. of *Studia Sinaitica*. But the sense, in English, is briefly this:

“*I, the mean one, and the sinner, John the Stylite of Beth-Mari-Qanūn (Conon?), the monastery of the cave to the left of the city of Kaukab of Antioch, by the [mercy] of God, I have written this book for the profit of myself, of my brethren, and of those who are neighbours to it; but because of the [love]*”

of the Christ, I would persuade all those who [read] in it to pray for me the more [earnestly]. . . . But whenever thou meetest with this [book] . . . concerning the sinner thy prayer."

This leaves us in no doubt as to where the editor of the *Select Narratives* lived. He calls himself "John of Beth-Mari-Kaddisha" in the introductory section; but "Kaddisha" is probably only a title of the monastery, whose distinctive name was "Beth-Mari-Qanūn."

And where was Kaukab of Antioch? It must have been in the valley of the Orontes, the home of St. Symeon, the Stylite, and of his followers, of whom John the Recluse was one.

We may therefore conclude, with some show of certainty, that the Palimpsest of the Four Gospels was put into its present form in Antioch, the splendid metropolis of the East; *Orientis apex pulcher* as it was called by Ammianus Marcellinus (xxii. 9, 14); the place where the word "Christian" was first uttered; the home of Ignatius, Chrysostom, Libanius, and Evagrius.

Antioch was, in the earliest centuries of our faith, not only the seat of a bishopric which might have disputed with the see of Rome its claim to priority, but the home of a Christian community second to none in its zeal for sacred learning. If we may believe Chrysostom, one-half of its 200,000 inhabitants were, in the fourth century, Christians, and the Syriac-speaking rustics in the district around it were remarkable for the tranquil, modest, and venerable character of their lives. They delighted not in horse races, nor in meretricious women, nor in the tumult of cities, but they found a school of virtue and modesty in the cultivation of the soil, pursuing the art which God introduced into our life before all others (vol. ii. p. 222).

Chrysostom bore testimony also to the fervent piety of the citizens, to their zeal for hearing the Word of God, for

nightly vigils, and for penitence (vol. ii. p. 856). If the statues were thrown down in a riot, this was the work of strangers, and not of the inhabitants themselves (vol. ii. p. 43). Some of this earnest piety ran into asceticism, which, in the fifth century, produced an abnormal growth in the person of St. Symeon Stylites and his followers. Antioch was his birthplace; and there, on the precipitous cliffs of Monte Casio, overlooking the beautiful lake, the *λίμνη κατ' ἐξοχήν*, was the little monastery of his sect, and a column cut into the living rock, perchance the very column on whose summit he lived for thirty years. Wonderful indeed is it that followers and imitators of such a man should have been found three centuries later, near the same spot, at the time when the *Select Narratives* of our palimpsest were written; and fain would our imagination send a ray of light through the mist that envelops those distant ages, to ascertain whether John really lived upon a pillar, and only came down from his chill perch in the rainy winter, mayhap, to chronicle the sufferings and endurance of those weak women whose heroism he would fain have imitated.

A more important question remains unsolved. Where did he find the Old Syriac codex of the Gospels? and why was it valued by him simply as writing material to be rescraped for the sake of the women's life-story? Seventeen of its leaves had doubtless been lost before it came into his hands; and those who think that it had been condemned as heretical are entitled to their hypothesis; but by far the most obvious reason is simply this: that the Peshitta version of the Scriptures having been authoritatively adopted by the Syriac Church, and efforts having been made to bring it more and more into harmony with some of the Greek codices, all others were looked upon as obsolete and well-nigh useless. This we can the more readily understand when we reflect how a very little more felicity of diction

on the part of the Revisers of our English New Testament would have consigned not thousands, but millions of copies of our once highly-prized Authorized Version to limbo; and how not impossibly even Luther's version, of which our German cousins are so justly proud, may at no distant day be superseded by Kautsch's. Some copies of the old book will be treasured as heirlooms; but in the less enlightened eighth century even monks wished to be abreast of the times, or they submitted with too great alacrity to the ordinances of their bishops. We may wonder less at this Sinaitic, or, as we should rather call it now, this Antiochene codex having been palimpsested than at the Curetonian manuscript having been mercifully spared to us in its original condition.

It is a far cry from Antioch to Mount Sinai, from the grassy banks of the rushing torrent which has been so aptly named by the Arabs *el-Hassy*, "the rebel," and the thousand rills of purest water, to the barren bosom of the Wady ed-Deir. Yet in the latter it has certainly found a more secure home. The Convent of St. Catherine has more than once stood the stress of war, but its fortress walls, built by Justinian in the sixth century, are still intact, while the Deir Beth-Mari-Qanūn and Kaukab are to us little more than names. The monastery of Kaukab is mentioned in two of the colophons to codex A of the Palestinian Syriac Lectionary (the *Evangeliarium Hierosolymitanum* of the Vatican Library), its other name being Deir Mari Elia.

Of Deir Beth-Mari-Qanūn we have (guided by a reference in the *Thes. Syr.*) found only the record by Assemani in his *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, vol. i. p. 304, where, according to Jacob Bishop of Serug, it is included in a list of eight monasteries whence some Edessene monks were expelled because they refused to accept the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon.¹ We may therefore conclude that it was built

before the middle of the fifth century, and that John the Recluse, the Stylite, was quite orthodox as concerning the faith. His creed was certainly the one which he inserted betwixt the stories of Theodota and of Susan (see my *Introduction*, pp. viii.-xiv.), and the name of Beth-Mari-Qanūn has no connexion whatever with that of Conon the heresiarch. I shall be grateful for any further information about these localities.

But when was the Palimpsest carried to Sinai? Perhaps the Hegoumenos of St. Catherine's procured it at Antioch when in search of some good reading for his monks, and finding the *Select Narratives* to his taste, carried both it and the Arabic codex (numbered 588 in Mrs. Gibson's catalogue) to his desert home in a bundle of other books. The correspondence between the under script of these two palimpsests in the text of the apocryphal *Rest of the Virgin* was detected by Dr. Rendel Harris, and recorded in my *Introduction* to the *editio princeps* of the Syriac Gospels (1894). Or more probably, in a time of war and pestilence, of earthquake or of persecution, the owner of both fled from the turmoil of Antioch, and found refuge, as many have since done, with the ever-hospitable monks of the lonely Convent.

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¹ From S. Jacob of Serug, *Epistola ad Jacobum Abbatem* :—

Monasterium Naphesciatensis, seu de Anima meminit etiam Dionysius in Chronico ad annum Graecorum 837, fol. 95, ubi de Monachis Edessenis loquens, qui Aselepii Episcopi jussu e Monasteriis suis pulsi sunt, eò quod Sacrum Chalcedonense Concilium recipere detrectabant, hæc Monasteriorum nomina indicat: Monasterium Sancti Nicolai, Monasterium Sancti Cononis, etc.