

## THE 'SONG OF LIGHT'.

THE 'Song of Light' is a Syriac hymn used by all East Syrian Christians on Sunday mornings, and also by the Maronites. The special point of interest about it is its authorship, whether it is by St Ephraim or by Theodore of Mopsuestia.

The first strophe of this hymn runs as follows<sup>1</sup>:—

Light that hath shone forth to the righteous : and gladness to them that are true of heart.<sup>2</sup>

ⲁ. Jesus our Lord the Messiah : hath shone forth for us from the bosom of his Father : he hath come and taken us out of darkness : and hath enlightened us with his glorious light.

Ⲃ. The day hath shone forth on the sons of men : and the power of darkness hath fled : a light hath shone forth to us from his light : and hath enlightened our darkened eyes.

ⲃ. His glory he hath caused to shine forth in the world : and hath enlightened the lowest abysses : death is extinguished and darkness hath fled : and the doors of Sheol are broken.

Ⲅ. And he hath enlightened all creatures : who of old were darkened : and the dead who lay in the dust arose : and gave glory that salvation had come to them.

ⲅ. He effected salvation and gave us life : and was exalted to his Father on high : and again he cometh in his great glory : and enlighteneth the eyes of all who have waited for him.

There is a second strophe, each stanza beginning with the letters of *M sh ē kh ā* (i. e. 'Christ'), just as each stanza of the first strophe began with *I' sh ō'* (i. e. 'Jesus', but in an abnormal spelling). The Syriac is unmetrical.

It will be seen that the hymn is as innocuous of any particular heresy as C. Wesley's 'Christ, whose glory fills the skies', and therefore can hardly be fixed in authorship or date on that head. The second strophe is of similar character. The only Biblical allusion is that to the 'doors of Sheol', where the hymn has ܕܘܪܝܢ ܡܫܝܚܐ in substantial agreement with the Peshitta and the Curetonian, both of which have ܕܘܪܝܢ ܕܫܥܘܠ in Matt. xvi 18.<sup>3</sup> Ephraim, on the other hand, has more than

<sup>1</sup> I give with a few changes Bp M<sup>c</sup>Lean's translation in *Rituale Armenorum* 382.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm xcvi (xcvii) 11, as in the Peshitta. The intrusive relative pronoun is omitted in B.M. Add. 17219, in *CUL* 1966, and the Chaldee Breviary.

<sup>3</sup> The Sinai Palimpsest has here lost a leaf. It should be noted that the two oldest MSS of the Peshitta (Gwilliam's 15 and 18) also have ܕܘܪܝܢ.

once **ܕܘܪܝܢ ܡܠܟܐܢ** 'the gate-bars of Sheol', a phrase which may be conjectured to have stood in the Diatessaron (*Overbeck* 352, *Lamy* iv 673, 687). Had the 'Song of Light' been written by St Ephraim we should therefore have expected 'gate-bars' rather than 'doors'.

The conclusions to be gathered from the external form are less clear. The hymn is unmetrical, as unmetrical as the Psalms of David, which in the case of a Syriac hymn usually is a sign that it is a translation from the Greek. On the other hand it is called an acrostic, which makes a translation unlikely. This is the reason, and it is the only reason, advanced by Bickell (*Conspectus* p. 94) and by Sachau (*Theod. Mops.* p. iv) against Theodore's authorship.<sup>1</sup> But was the hymn originally acrostic? As sung to-day by the East Syrians the ten stanzas begin with **ܕܝܫܘܥ ܕܥܠܡ**, but 'Jesus' is never spelt **ܝܫܘܥ** in any language. Moreover, as printed in the Roman ed. of Ephraim (ii 330) from a Maronite source (which I have failed to find in print) it is not acrostic at all, the stanzas being otherwise divided and several words different, while the whole hymn (after the Psalm-verse) begins with *Māran Jeshu'*, not *Jeshu' Māran*.<sup>2</sup> The obvious deduction is that the East Syrian acrostic form is a later rearrangement, and the argument that the 'Song of Light' must be a Syriac original because it is an acrostic falls to the ground.

Turning now to the question of authorship, the present-day East Syrians and the Maronites (according to J. S. Assemani) ascribe the 'Song of Light' to St Ephraim. This is supported by the following Psalters:—

B.M. Add.	7156	<i>saec.</i>	xvii <sup>3</sup>
B. Nat.	24	„	xvii
Camb. U.L.	1966	„	xix
„	2036	„	xviii
„	2037	„	xix.

On the other hand it is ascribed to Theodore of Mopsuestia in

B.M. Add.	14675	<i>saec.</i>	xiii
„	14677	„	xiii
„	17219	„	xiii.

These tables alone would create a strong presumption that the 'Song' is really by Theodore, which is not at all removed by the fact

<sup>1</sup> Dr Swete *DCB* iv 943 accepts their authority.

<sup>2</sup> Through the kindness of my friend Dom R. Bede Camm I have heard from the Maronite Patriarchate at Alexandria that the Maronites do use the Song of Light 'dans leur office du matin'; that it begins **ܕܥܠܡ ܕܝܫܘܥ**, i. e. as printed in the Roman ed. of Ephraim; and further that they do not recognize it as an acrostic.

<sup>3</sup> This MS describes another hymn of Theodore's (viz. his adaptation of the *Gloria in excelsis*) as being by 'Saint So-and-so, the Interpreter'.

that it has been printed as Ephraim's in the Roman edition (*Opp. Syr.-Lat.* ii 320). There it has been simply taken out of some Maronite Office-Book, for it is not in *Cod. Vat. Syr.* cxi (A.D. 522), from which the three preceding hymns in five-syllable metre were taken.<sup>1</sup> But this is not all. J. S. Assemani (*B. O.* i p. 60) tells us that the Jacobites also regarded Theodore as the author of the 'Song of Light', and for that reason reproached the Maronites for singing it instead of 'The Heavens are telling'. The Jacobites said: 'Theodore, Nestorius's sister's son,<sup>2</sup> whose Hymn to-day the Maronites sing in their services, beginning "Light that hath shone forth", and they have abolished the proper Hymn, which is "The Heavens are telling".' And similarly a marginal note in B.M. Add. 14675 has been added opposite the hymn: 'Beware of what comes from Nestorians, lest we make some one err thereby in word' (Wright *CBM* i 130). It is surely clear from all this that the ascription of the *Song of Light* to 'Mar Ephraim the Doctor' is nothing more than a late mediaeval attempt to clear a popular and inoffensive hymn from heretical ancestry. So far as I can see, there is no evidence that any one in East or West ascribed the hymn to Ephraim before the fifteenth century.

What part Theodore of Mopsuestia had in it is naturally more doubtful. It may have been ascribed to him by the Nestorians merely because it was not metrical. But he may have composed a hymn of two strophes which was translated into Syriac, a later revision of which was made into an imperfect acrostic in the East, while in the West it retained its non-acrostic form. At least those who deny it to be Theodore's and a translation or adaptation from a Greek original should take account of the fact that the recension known to and used by the Maronites is not an acrostic at all.

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<sup>1</sup> The three hymns are printed as one 'Sermo Exegeticus', vol. ii pp. 327-329. In my list of the sources of the Roman ed. of Ephraim (*St Ephraim's Quotations* pp. 6, 7) a separate entry should have been given for the Song of Light on p. 6, v 330 A, and on p. 7 there should be the reference 'B. O. vol. i p. 60 (*Maronite Breviary*)'.

<sup>2</sup> There is, of course, no historical foundation for this!