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St. Basil the Great and the Syrian Christian Tradition

St. Basil the Great, the fourth century¹ bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (modern Kayseri, Turkey) is universally recognized as a great Doctor of the Church whose writings on the Holy Spirit and against the heretic Eunomius made a significant contribution to the Church's defeat of Arianism and Semi-Arianism which so nearly swept orthodoxy aside. As a monastic legislator he is personally responsible for the rules of life followed today in most monasteries and convents of the Byzantine Orthodox churches, and his guiding influence is freely admitted by the great western legislator, St. Benedict, in the introduction to his own rule. His epistles and other writings reveal a man of the deepest spirituality, and contemporaries and later historians describe him as a diocesan bishop of extraordinary ability and dedication. All of this is well known and can be found in any of the standard textbooks and primers of church dogmatics, but, as I am sure everyone in this room is only too well aware, these works, with very few exceptions, entirely ignore the Christian Orient. As a result one is left with the strong impression that although St. Basil was a Doctor of the Church, he was essentially a Doctor of the western, Greek and Latin speaking, church. It is my case, however that his popularity and authority within Syrian christianity should not be underestimated and, indeed, that any exposition of the development of Syrian theology which fails to consider at least the possibility of his influence cannot be regarded as truly comprehensive.

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1. A. D. 330-379.

Before describing the nature and extent of the Basilian writings preserved in Syriac I wish to begin by recounting a popular legend which describes the meeting in Caesarea between St. Basil and his contemporary St. Ephraim. This account is found in both Greek and Syriac sources, the texts concerned being the Pseudo-Amphilochian life of Basil, an encomium of Basil attributed (incorrectly) to St. Ephraim, the Syriac acts of Ephraim, and an encomium of St. Ephraim said to have been written by St. Gregory of Nyssa, Basil's brother². The outline of the story is as follows: St. Ephraim, alone in his desert solitude, burned with the desire to meet St. Basil and so he prayed that God might show him what kind of a person St. Basil was. Immediately there appeared to him a great column of fire whose summit reached to heaven, and he heard a divine voice saying, 'Ephraim, just as this column of fire which you have seen, so is Basil'. No longer able to remain in the desert Ephraim found a translator and set out at once for Caesarea. He arrived on the feast of the Epiphany and made his way to the main church where he hid himself in the crowd that was gathering for the service. When St. Basil entered the church in procession, robed in magnificent vestments and surrounded by deacons and acolytes Ephraim was dismayed and wondered whether this could truly be the saint whose wisdom and humility were renowned throughout Christendom. When Basil began to expound the Holy Scriptures, however, Ephraim saw the Holy Spirit speaking through his mouth in the form of a tongue of fire (or, according to other versions, as a dove) and Ephraim's enthusiasm reached such a pitch that when the congregation periodically expressed its appreciation by crying 'aha!' he could not restrain himself from crying it out aloud twice, 'aha! aha!'. Afterwards Basil perceived, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that St. Ephraim was present in the crowd and despatched a deacon who, after several attempts, persuaded the holy man to meet the archbishop in private. When St. Ephraim entered the room St. Basil is said to have greeted him with the kiss of peace and then to have prostrated himself at his feet, and only then to have given him communion. The two saints talked together for some time by means of the translator and then Ephraim asked Basil to intercede for him with God that he might be

2. These sources have been thoroughly examined by O. Rousseau in *L'Orient Syrien* vols. 2,3, (Paris, 1957-58).

enabled to speak Greek. In reply Basil insisted that Ephraim should receive the order of the diaconate, and sure enough when Basil placed his hands upon him and recited the prayer of ordination Ephraim replied in Greek. By means of this divine blessing the two saints were able to talk further of theology and the church, and only afterwards did St. Ephraim return home. As a coda to the account of this meeting it is also reported that a noblewoman of Caesarea who had repented of her sins wrote out her confession on a piece of paper, sealed it, and took it to St. Basil, asking him to intercede with God on her behalf. After he had prayed for a night they opened the paper and discovered that all but one of the sins, the most serious, had disappeared. Basil then instructed her to travel to Ephraim in Edessa for he alone would be able to seek God's forgiveness for such a sin. She eventually traced the Syrian saint but he denied having any such power of intercession and sent her back to Basil. She returned however, only to encounter Basil's funeral procession for he had died during her absence. In total despair the poor woman threw herself down on the ground and bemoaned her lot, but one of the clergy, who was curious to discover the nature of her great sin, broke the seal of her document and discovered (presumably with some frustration) that it too had now vanished. So, the narrator concludes, 'by the prayers of Basil and of Ephraim, and by the woman's faith and perseverance, all of her sins were blasted out.'

Despite the many legendary accretions to these stories, the inconsistencies and the clear contradictions of known historical facts (the last story, for example, must necessarily be fictitious since Ephraim died in A. D. 373, six years before Basil) I would still like to believe that they contain a kernel of truth, that Ephraim and Basil may actually have met, whatever the circumstances. I am afraid however that there really is no historical support for this. Not least, one simply cannot ignore the total silence on the matter of both supposed participants. But this lack of historical credibility does not mean that the stories are left without any scholarly value. We are still left asking why the stories were written, and what significance they had for their Greek and Syriac speaking audiences. At the mundane level one supposes that the stories originally arose because of the widespread knowledge that the two saints were contemporary opponents of heresy in approximately the same geographical

region. This initial presumption can only have been strengthened by Basil's mention in the *De Spiritu Sancto* [XXIX.74] of 'a certain Mesopotamian, a man at once well skilled in the language and of unperverted opinion', and again in the *Hexaemeron* [II.6] of 'a Syrian who was as ignorant in the wisdom of this world as he was versed in the knowledge of the Truth'. As early as 528 when Severus of Antioch wrote his treatise against John the Grammarian we find this Mesopotamian being identified as Ephraim, and in the Syriac acts of Ephraim these references have been developed into full blown episodes in Ephraim's life. (It may be of some interest to note that in the thirteenth century Bar Hebraeus discussed this passage at some length but eventually decided against such an identification). If these were the origins of the story's basic framework it is nonetheless clear that a number of other motives have been at play in its further development. Rousseau in his useful study of the sources³ suggests that it has been expanded into an account almost of the canonisation of Ephraim by St. Basil, perhaps by Greek speaking Syrians who wished to demonstrate to their Greek neighbours and coreligionists the value of their heritage and the orthodoxy of their forebears. This argument has much to commend it, but we must not forget that not only were these stories translated and circulated within Syriac speaking communities but they were expanded yet further. I would be fascinated to know therefore what these Syrian circles considered to be the underlying message of the account, for they surely can have had no doubts concerning the 'legitimacy' or 'orthodoxy, of the greatest of their Church Fathers. The key issue has to be the relationship between Basil and Ephraim, but here we find a number of confusing indicators. On the one hand it is Ephraim, who longs to see Basil, and who through him receives the diaconate and that (apparently) greatest of divine gifts, the knowledge of Greek. On the other hand it is Basil who prostrates himself before Ephraim, and it appears to be Ephraim who is able to induce God's forgiveness of the female penitent's great sin. One might argue that for the Syriac speaking community the association of Ephraim with Basil increased the former's prestige and standing, but if so this implies that they themselves had an extremely high regard for St. Basil. If, however, they considered St. Ephraim to

3. op. cit.

be the greatest of the pair, which on balance seems more likely, then their acceptance of a story in which he receives his diaconate through Basil clearly also provides us with an interesting insight into their evaluation of the Cappadocian father. Nothing is certain, but I think that we can say with some conviction that whatever the Syrian analysis of this relationship the work itself gained wide circulation because through this story the phil-hellenic West Syrian scholars of the sixth and seventh centuries were able to affirm that they too were the heir of the pre-Chalcedonian Greek fathers, Basil being regarded as pre-eminent amongst these, and that they thus had every right to study and expound his theology as they saw fit.

At this point in my paper you may be glad to hear that an estimation of St. Basil's significance and influence within the Syrian Christian tradition does not depend solely upon the rather speculative analysis of bilingual legendary material, for it is clear that many of his writings were available in Syriac soon after, perhaps even during, his own lifetime and they were widely studied.

The Basilian texts which have survived in Syriac are as follows: The *Ascetica* the *Hexaemeron* (an account of the creation), the *De Spiritu Sancto*, the *Contra Eunomium*, the homilies, many of his epistles (more are preserved in Syriac than in any other version, and these are supplemented by a number of pseudonymous letters), and finally a number of liturgical texts. [The best and most recent bibliography of these writings was produced by Paul Fedwick in 1981⁴]. Quite incredibly none of these Syriac translations (with the exception of some of the liturgical texts) have ever been published, and so our knowledge of their precise contents is extremely limited. There has been some movement. I have myself just completed an edition of the *De Spiritu Sancto* and am in the process of translating it and I believe that a North American scholar has begun work on the *Hexaemeron* Gribomont edited, and subjected to rigorous study, a few small passages of the *Ascetica* in his '*Histoire du texte des Ascétiques de s. Basile*'⁵, and Sebastian Brock wrote an article⁶ on the Syriac manuscript

4. P. J. Fedwick 'Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic', (Toronto, 1981).

5. Loivain. 1953.

6. S. P. Brock, 'Basil's Homily on Deut xv 9: Some remarks on the Syriac manuscript tradition. *Texte Untersuchungen*, Bd. 133, (Berlin, 1987).

tradition of Basil's homily on Deuteronomy XV.9 (an article whose importance extends far beyond its immediate subject matter) as well as several others outlining the development of Syriac translation technique.

St. Basil's writings were not only preserved and studied within the Syrian Orthodox Church, but also within the Church of the East, as we are told by the eastern scholar Iso 'denah writing in Arabic in 1036: 'Basil left us, amongst other works, a book on the Hexameron, an explanation of certain remarkable psalms of the prophet David, several treatises on fasting and prayer, a work on the monastic rule of life, and letters and polemics with Eunomius.' (Mar 'Abd Yesu' wrote similarly in 1298, though he was far less specific).

This would appear to support the claims of both Baumstark⁷ and Ortiz de Urbina⁸ in their respective surveys of Syriac literature that the translations of the fourth century Greek fathers antedate the christological divisions of the mid-fifth century. (After this time of course, the mutual hostility of the various churches would have made their dissemination virtually impossible). Several of the Syriac manuscripts are themselves very old. One⁹ has been dated by the great British scholar Wright to the fifth century, and another¹⁰ is dated in a colophon to AD 509. Furthermore it is quite clear that neither is the autograph copy of the original translation for a number of scribal errors have appeared in the text, particularly omissions of phrases and lines due to the scribe misreading his exemplar. The great age of the translation is further confirmed by a variety of archaic linguistic features and by the nature of its biblical citations. An extensive examination of these citations has led me to the firm belief that the Gospel text being used was Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Deviations from the Old Syriac text are nearly always supported by a number of the known Diatessaric witnesses and there are many harmo-

7. A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluss der christlich-palastinensischen Texte*, (Bonn, 1958).

8. I. Ortiz de Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca*, (Rom., 1922).

9. B. M. Add. 17143.

10. B. M. Add. 14542.

11. B. M. Add. 12150.

nistic readings. Whenever these quotations overlap those in the translations of the works of Clement, Titus of Bostra, and Eusebius which are preserved in a manuscript dated to AD 411 they appear to correspond closely. The citations of the Pauline epistles conform to the other Old Syriac fragments of this text and both the *Hexaemeron* and the *De Spiritu Sancto* cite Acts 5:29 in an interrogative form, "Who is it appropriate to obey? God or men?", a reading found only in the so called 'Western' text tradition of Acts, a pre-Pesīta text, and thus indicative of an early date.

One final piece of evidence for the date of the Syriac translations was produced by Gribomont in his study of the *Ascetica*. He discovered that the Syriac text agreed in many details with the Latin versions translated by Rufinus in 396, and that they were both witness to an early Greek text which has since been lost. It appears that this relatively short work was further developed by Basil at a later date and that this 'revised edition' then superseded the earlier edition in Greek speaking communities. Rather reluctantly Gribomont concluded that "it is not impossible that the translation dates back to a period close to Basil's own lifetime".¹² Paul Fedwick went further, saying that the work "was taken to Syria probably during Basil's lifetime".¹³ We know for certain though that when John bar Aphthonia visited a series of Syrian monasteries at the end of the fifth century he found the *Ascetica* in common usage.

It is not intrinsically improbable that Basil's works were translated at such an early date for from his own epistles we know that he was in correspondence with Christians and church leaders living in Serug, Haleb, Haran, Qenneshrin Edessa. He travelled widely in Mesopotamia rallying support for the orthodox cause. Sozomen wrote in his *Church History* (XXI): "Arianism met with similar opposition at the same period in Osroene and Cappadocia. Basil, bishop of Caesarea, and Gregory, bishop of Nazianzen, were held in high esteem and admiration throughout these regions". (Osroene was of course the province entered on Edessa). It is thus possible that these translations were produced at the famous school in Edessa which was also responsible for the translations

12. op. cit., p. 147.

13. op. cit., p. 455.

of Eusebius of Caesarea, Titus of Bostra and Theodore of Mop-suestia. Such was its reputation that Rabbula, the bishop of Edessa at the beginning of the fifth century, tells us that he was sent the writings of Cyril of Alexandria by the author himself that he might have them translated into Syriac.

It is important for us to realise, however that Basil's popularity was not merely an early and short lived phenomenon. I have already mentioned that at the end of the fifth (or possibly early sixth) century John bar Aphlonia discovered wide usage of the Ascetica. Their influence, and that of the other Basilian writings can also be seen in a remarkable sixth century letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to an Edessene monk named Patricius¹⁴ Philoxenus was clearly imbued with the principles of Basilian asceticism, and the whole letter focuses on one of the most important of these, that every Christian should obey all of the divine commandments, without exception. Philoxenus' replies to Patricius' questions also make it clear that in Edessa at that period Basil was being claimed as a supporter of both the coenobitic and the eremitic forms of monasticism. (He manages to reconcile the two views by arguing that the community life was preferable for the majority of monks, but that those who were particularly advanced, or who needed to combat powerful passions, could gain great advantage from the solitary life).

In the next, the seventh century enthusiasm for Basil's writings was still at such a peak that a number were retranslated into Syriac from the Greek. This is certainly the case for the homilies the contra euromium and the De Spiritu Sancto, and possibly also for the Hexaemeron. Whereas the earlier translation was very free in its treatment of the Greek original, often paraphrasing and expanding, the second translation was much more precise, closely following the Greek. In this it finds many parallels with the translation techniques of such scholars as Paul of Tella, Thomas of Harquel, and Jacob of Edessa, and so we must presume that the translators of the Basilian texts came from similar circles.

14. *Patrologia Orientalis* XXX

A ninth century manuscript of this later translation of Basil's homilies is kept today in the library of Cambridge university.¹⁵ Paul Fedwick commented on this volume that "one cannot help noticing that his works were not just 'sitting there on the shelves', but that they were also read and assiduously studied" for the Cambridge manuscript "contains many marginal notes made by the readers who tried to either correct or improve the already quite literal translation".

I now want to bring forward one last piece of evidence for the status and popularity of St. Basil amongst Syrian Christians. One evening whilst reading William Wright's great catalogue of the British Library's collection of Syriac manuscripts¹⁶ I began out of curiosity to count the number of volumes containing the works, or excerpts from the works, of various church fathers. I realise that this hardly counts as scientific evidence for by far the majority of the manuscripts were obtained from a single Syrian Orthodox monastery, St. Mary Deipara, in Egypt's Nitrian desert. Furthermore my arithmetic is not always reliable. Nevertheless I was quite surprised by the pattern that emerged. I counted one hundred volumes for St. Ephraim, fifty-eight for Philoxenus of Mabbug, and sixty-four for St. Basil, a much higher figure than I had expected. The only Syriac writer other than Ephraim to surpass Basil's total was Jacob of Serug, and of the Greek writers only John Chrysostom and Severus of Antioch.

So much remains to be done within the field of Syriac studies that it seems presumptuous to advance yet another subject as deserving of especial attention. But if I have established anything of my case that the works of this man (who was widely accredited with the ordination of St. Ephraim) were translated at the earliest of dates and that they were studied, and retranslated and that they continued to exercise great influence for more than a thousand years, then I hope that other scholars will begin to edit and publish the Syriac versions of St. Basil's writings. How can we hope to gain a complete understanding of Syrian monasticism without an edition of the Syriac Ascetica, or to discuss the popular Syriac genre of hexaemeral literature without having access to what was perhaps the earliest and

best known exemplar? Above all else, however, I hope that I have shown that St. Basil cannot simply be categorised as a Byzantine or Catholic saint but that he is, and always was, just as much a saint of the Syrian churches, both Eastern and Western, Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian. He is a church father common to us all, and thus truly, in the words of a Syrian writer, ܠܗܘܐ ܩܘܪܕܢܘܘܢ ܥܘܢ ܥܝܢܐܘܢ "the light of everything (and one might add 'everyone') under heaven."



THE GRATEST OF ALL GLORYING IS IN THE CROSS

"EVERY deed of Christ is a cause of glorying to the Catholic Church, but her greatest of all glorying is in the Cross; and knowing this, Paul says, *But God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of Christ.* For wondrous indeed it was, that one who was blind from his birth should receive sight in Siloam! but what is this compared with the blind of the whole world? A great thing it was, and passing nature, for Lazarus to rise again on the fourth day; but the grace extended to him alone, and what was it compared with the dead in sins throughout the world? Marvellous it was, that five loaves should pour forth food for the five thousand; but what is that to those who are famishing in ignorance though all the world? It was marvellous that she should have been loosed who had been bound by Satan eighteen years: yet what is this to all us, who were fast bound in the chains of our sins? But the glory of the Cross led those who were blind through ignorance into light, loosed all who were held fast by sin, and ransomed the whole world of mankind."

Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures.*

15. U. L. 3175.

16. W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum acquired since the year 1838.* (3 vols., London, 1870-72).