Alison G. Salvesen

"Hebrew, Beloved of God": The Adamic Language in the Thought of Jacob, Bishop of Edessa (c. 633–708 CE)

1 Jacob's Biography

The Syrian Orthodox polymath Jacob of Edessa was born in a village near Antioch in Syria, probably sometime in the early 630s CE. From childhood onwards he would only have known a world in which Arab and Islamic rule prevailed. Certainly his own works and the account of his life that appears in medieval authors do not indicate that he was personally affected by any momentous historical events. However, there are hints in his works of the social effects of regime change on the Christians of Syria and Mesopotamia.[1]

No doubt an Aramaic speaker by birth, Jacob learned Greek and Syriac in an ecclesiastical context. Once he had taken monastic vows and had received academic training in the famously learned convent of Qenneshre, his biographers say that he went to Alexandria in Egypt for further study. Having returned to the city of Edessa in northern Mesopotamia, he was made bishop in 684.[2] However, he resigned his see after only four years in office, in reaction to what he perceived as the intolerable laxity of the local clergy and church hierarchy. He retreated to the monastery of Eusebona in Syria where he taught Greek for nine years, but he was then driven out by monks who were hostile to his promotion of Greek. He moved on to Tell 'Adda, a monastery near Aleppo, where he continued to write and teach. He died shortly after being reinstated as bishop of Edessa in 708 CE.[3]

1 Robert G. Hoyland, "Jacob and Early Islamic Edessa," in *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day*, ed. R.B. ter Haar Romeny (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 16–18.

2 Omert J. Schrier, "Chronological Problems Concerning the Lives of Severus Bar Mašqā, Athanasius of Balad, Julianus Romāyā, Yohannān Sābā, George of the Arabs and Jacob of Edessa," *Oriens Christianus* 75 (1991).

3 A biography of Jacob is preserved in the much later works of Michael the Syrian and Barhebraeus. For Michael, see Jean-Baptiste Chabot, ed., *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)*, 4 vols. (Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1963), 4:445–46 (Syriac text);

Note: The present study is dedicated to Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, Archbishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Aleppo, who hosted a symposium in the city in June 2008 to commemorate the 1300th anniversary of Jacob of Edessa's death in 708 CE. Mor Gregorios was kidnapped in April 2013 by unknown assailants. His fate remains unknown at the time of writing.

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2 Jacob and the "Adamic" Language

The question of which language was the one spoken by Adam arises in several Jewish, Christian and Muslim sources in Late Antiquity, including Jacob of Edessa. These sources have been surveyed and discussed by Milka Rubin,[4] Yonatan Moss,[5] and most recently by Sergey Minov in his book on the *Cave of Treasures*.[6] The present study is narrower, focusing specifically on Jacob's interest in Hebrew language and Jewish tradition in his particular historical context.

In contrast to several other Syriac writers,[7] Jacob espoused the theory that Hebrew was the first and universal language before the Tower of Babel. His correspondent John the Stylite of Litarba had asked him two questions: first, whether the Jews/Hebrews (*yūdāyē ʿebrāyē*) were really named after 'Eber (Gen. 10:21,25), and second, whether Hebrew was the original language (*qadmāyā d-lešānē*). Jacob's reponse is that the Hebrews were indeed named after 'Eber, an ancestor of Abraham. 'Eber's descendants had preserved the first, Adamic language when they dwelt in Ur.[8] The term "Hebrews" was *not* derived from the fact that Abraham crossed (*ʿĕbar*) the river Euphrates, a tradition created by an "absurd" (*ṣabārā*) person. Jacob ascribes this error to a misinterpretation of the word περάτης, which can mean either "emigrant," or "one who crosses over," used as an epithet

2:71–72 (French translation). The shorter version of Barhebraeus can be found in Joannes B. Abbeloos and Thomas J. Lamy, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, vol. 1 (Louvain: C. Peeters, 1872), 289–94. Schrier considers it unlikely that this Vita came from one of Jacob's students, arguing instead that it was written some generations later (Schrier, "Chronological problems," 72).

4 Milka Rubin, "The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity," *JJS* 49 (1998): 306–33.

5 Yonatan Moss, "The Language of Paradise: Hebrew or Syriac? Linguistic Speculations and Linguistic Realities in Late Antiquity," in *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views*, eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Guy Stroumsa, 120–37 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

6 Sergey Minov, *Memory and Identity in the Syriac Cave of Treasures: Rewriting the Bible in Sasanian Iran*. Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 26. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020, 272–83. Minov situates *Cave of Treasures* in Miaphysite (= Syrian Orthodox) circles in Northern Mesopotamia under Sasanian control, in the second half of the sixth century or early seventh century.

7 See references in Minov, *Memory and Identity,* 272–83.

8 See William Wright, "Two Epistles of Mar Jacob, Bishop of Edessa," *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* NS 10 (1867): 430–60 [pp. *k-k'*]. French translation by Francois Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse," *Revue de l'orient chrétien* 10 (1905): esp. 273–74. Earlier in the same letter (XIII), Jacob had explained to John that the descendants of 'Eber remained in Chaldea after the dispersion from the Tower of Babel, and that these people alone continued to speak the original Adamic language of Hebrew (Wright, "Two Epistles of Mar Jacob, Bishop of Edessa," p. *d*; Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse," 200–202.).

of Abraham in the Septuagint text (Gen. 14:13).[9] Given the "absurd" person's reliance on the LXX text, we can assume that he was a Greek writer:[10] we will return to the matter of his identity later.

John the Stylite's second question to Jacob concerns the status of Hebrew. Jacob replies that Hebrew is indeed the original language of all, and not Syriac/Aramaic "as many people erroneously suppose, even some great and illustrious ones." He says he has much evidence for the antiquity of Hebrew, but there is sufficient proof in the testimony of "Clement the disciple of the apostle Peter"[11] that the single language before the division of tongues was Hebrew, "beloved of God" (*raḥīm l-ʾalāhā*).[12] Jacob also cites a treatise of Eusebius of Emesa that relies on the names of men before the Flood, and especially the wordplay in Gen 2:23, to demonstrate that Adam's exclamation at the Creation must have been uttered in Hebrew.[13] For the pun *ʾîš/ʾiššâ* only works in Hebrew, and not in Syriac (contrast *gabrā/ʾaṯṯā*).[14] Bas Romeny suggests that this "proof" originates from a now lost comment by the fourth-century Syrian Greek bishop Eusebius of Emesa, itself derived from the work of Eusebius' teacher

9 The Hebrew and Syriac Bibles have the gentilics *hā'ivrî/ʿebrāyā* respectively at that point.

10 Many exegetes who used LXX understood the text in a similar way, that Abram was so called because he crossed either the Euphrates or Mesopotamia to enter Canaan: Philo, *Migr. Abr.* §20; Origen, *Selecta in Genesim fragmenta*, PG 12: 113; John Chrysostom, Homilies 35 and 40 (Greek text in *Homilies 1–67 on Genesis*, PG 53: 326, 364, and English translation by Robert C. Hill, *Homilies on Genesis 18–45*. Fathers of the Church 82. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2001, 312, 380). In both these sermons, Chrysostom is under the misapprehension that "Abram" means "crossing" in Hebrew and Syriac: no doubt he confused the name with 'Eber. There is similar confusion over the meaning of the names 'Eber and Abram in another homily attributed to John Chrysostom, where it is stated that "Abram" means "crossing" in Hebrew and Syriac, on the basis of the use of the epithet Περάτης (Καὶ γὰρ τὸ Ἄβραμ τῇ Σύρων φωνῇ τὸ πέραν λέγεται*: Sermons 1–9 on Gen*esis, PG 54: 624).

11 In fact a pseudonymous work, the *Recognitions* of Pseudo-Clement. See Bernhard Rehm, ed., *Die Pseudoklementinen. II, Rekognitionen: in Rufins Übersetzung* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1965), I.30.

12 See Minov, *Memory and Identity,* 274, and n. 93 for the Syriac form of the citation from the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*.

13 Though this work is no longer extant, a similar argument involving the Hebrew words for man and woman appears in an anonymous catena fragment (attested by frag. §314 in Françoise Petit, *La chaîne sur la Genèse. Édition intégrale 1.* Traditio Exegetica Graeca 1 [Leuven: Peeters, 1992]), and §100 in Françoise Petit, *Catenae Graecae in Genesim et in Exodum. 2, Collectio Coisliniana in Genesim.* CCSG 15 [Turnhout-Leuven: Peeters, 1986]). Both are given in R.B. ter Haar Romeny, *A Syrian in Greek Dress. The Use of Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac Biblical Texts in Eusebius of Emesa's Commentary on Genesis*. Traditio Exegetica Graeca 6 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 203–206.

14 Wright, "Two Epistles of Mar Jacob, Bishop of Edessa," p. *k'*.; Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse," 274.

and namesake Eusebius of Caesarea.[15] (The rabbinic work Bereshit Rabba (18:4) similarly uses Gen 2:23 as evidence for the originality of Hebrew.[16])

Milka Rubin states that apart from Jacob, almost all Syriac writers support the view that Syriac or Aramaic is the original language of Creation.[17] She argues that this could be due to the desire to promote a separate Syriac cultural identity from the Byzantine Greek church after the Council of Chalcedon in 451.[18] However, all the post-Chalcedonian, pre-medieval Syriac sources she cites come from the Church of the East, which was theologically opposed to Jacob of Edessa's Syrian Orthodox Church over the highly contested matter of whether Christ's human and divine natures were separate or united.[19] These Church of the East sources are the Anonymous Commentary in the Diyarbakir manuscript (early eighth century),[20] Theodore bar Koni (late eighth century), Isho'dad of Merv (ninth century), and the Anonymous Commentary in the Mingana collection (ninth to tenth century).[21]

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15 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 11.6.18 (PG 21: 857): ἡ δὲ γυνή, ἐπείπερ εἴρηται ἐκ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς εἰλῆφθαι, καὶ τὴν προσηγορίαν ἐπικοινωνεῖ τῷ ἀνδρί. ΕΣΣΑ γὰρ ἡ γυνὴ λέγεται παρ' αὐτοῖς, ὥσπερ ΕΙΣ ὁ ἀνήρ. ("As for the woman, since it was said that she was taken from the man, she also shares a name with man. For woman is called *essa* among them [i.e. the Jews], as man is called *heis*.") Ter Haar Romeny suggests that Eusebius of Emesa found the transliteration of the Hebrew in this passage from the bishop of Caesarea, or was given it by a (Jewish?) informant: actual knowledge of Hebrew on Eusebius' part is unlikely (*Syrian in Greek Dress,* 59). Eusebius of Caesarea also mentions in the same passage the name Heber (= 'Eber) "who passes over" in connection with the gentilic "Hebrew," "since both a passage and the one who passes over are called in the Hebrew language 'Heber.'" Eusebius presents the "Greek" opinion on the variety of language and its random development in *Praep.Evang* 1.7: Rubin understood the latter to be Eusebius' own view, but in fact it derives from Diodorus Siculus (1.8), as is suggested by the preceding paragraph in *Praep.Evang.* 1.6 ("Language of Creation," 320).

16 Rubin, "Language of Creation," 311.

17 See now the critique of the positions of Rubin and Moss by Minov (*Memory and Identity*, 275–77). Minov also expresses some doubt on the authenticity of the views ascribed to Theodore of Mopsuestia by later writers of the Church of the East (277).

18 Rubin, "The Language of Creation," 327, 33.

19 The label "Nestorian" was often used in the past. However, the doctrines of the Church of the East had nothing to do with Nestorius. The Church of the East distinguishes between the human and divine natures of Christ, and rejects the title "God-bearer" (Theotokos) used of Mary. The Syrian Orthodox Church, by contrast, stressed one incarnate nature in Christ (hence the modern use of the terms "monophysite" or "miaphysite"). Both the Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Church were regarded as heterodox by the (mainly western) churches that had embraced the Confession of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, that Christ was incarnate in two natures, but without mingling, confusion or division.

20 Lucas van Rompay, ed. *Le commentaire sur Genèse-Exode 9, 32 du manuscrit (Olim) Diyarbakir 22*, CSCO 483–84, SS 205–06 (Leuven: Peeters, 1986).

21 Abraham Levene, ed. *The Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis. From a Syriac Ms. On the Pentateuch in the Mingana Collection* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1951).

Furthermore, as Rubin notes, all but Theodore bar Koni explicitly attribute to the Greek theologian Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428 CE) the tradition that Syriac was the original language. Theodore's exegesis was revered above all others in the Church of the East, while his theology was rejected by both Chalcedonians and the Syrian Orthodox Church.

Isho'dad states that according to Theodore, Syriac, not Hebrew, was the first language, and that Hebrew was "a mixed language introduced by Abraham," who had spoken Aramaic in Babylon and in Harran. When Abraham crossed the Euphrates and settled in Canaan, his native Aramaic was mixed up with Canaanite. The blended language formed Hebrew, *ʿĕbrāyā*: the implication being that it was named after Abraham's crossing of the Euphrates.[22] Although the original Greek form of Theodore's comment is lost, his fellow Syrian Theodoret of Cyrrhus expresses himself in Greek in almost identical terms to those of Isho'dad's report. Since Theodoret was Theodore's pupil, it is very likely that Theodoret inherited his argument about the derivation of the term "Hebrew" directly from Theodore.[23]

What Jacob says in his reply to John the Stylite about the origin of the name "Hebrew" and the Hebrew language implicitly refutes the negative assessment of Hebrew by Theodore of Mopsuestia and his followers, both Greek and Syriac. So it is likely that Theodore is the "absurd" person that Jacob refers to in his letter to John, and that theological animosity forms an element in Jacob's assessment of the linguistic situation. Thus, although Jacob's view of Hebrew was inherited from earlier tradition (Eusebius of Caesarea, via Eusebius of Emesa), it was very far from being a default position, as Rubin rightly observes: it was deliberately chosen. Neither can its function be detached from Jacob's own religious and political situation. Though Rubin tackles questions of Syrian identity in relation to Byzantium and the Chalcedonian church, arguing that a pro-Syriac stance with

22 Jacques M. Vosté and Ceslas van den Eynde, eds., *Commentaire d'Išoʿdad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament. I. Genèse*, CSCO 126, SS 67 (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1950), 134, line 26–36, line 11.

23 Cf. Rubin, "Language of Creation," 321–22: she notes the pro-Syriac, anti-Hebrew views of Theodoret in *Quaest.Oct.* §§60–62, but not the likelihood that these were derived from Theodore. In *Quaest.Oct.* §62, Theodoret says that περάτης in Gen. 14:13 refers to Abraham's crossing of the Euphrates and corresponds to the "Syriac" word *hebra* and the Hebrew *hebrei* (Theodoret of Cyrus, *The Questions on the Octateuch*, Library of Early Christianity 1, trans. John F. Petruccione and Robert C. Hill [Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2007]). Moss, "Language of Paradise," 135–36, observes that Theodoret adds a sociolinguistic dimension to his teacher's view.

Theodoret is apparently more positive than Theodore on the subject of Hebrew. He deems it a sacred language (§61), even if not the most ancient, and he does not repeat the disparaging remarks ascribed to Theodore by Isho'dad about the Jewish people being too stubborn and lazy to receive the Scriptures in anything but their own tongue.

regard to the original language of mankind helped create a separate cultural identity for Syriac Christians to mark them out against the Byzantines,[24] she does not take into account the intercommunal aspect of relations between the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Church of the East, nor Jacob's situation in the early Islamic world. Even if the arguments and proofs that Jacob cites were not new, their use in his present context subtly altered their function and purpose. In short, it is likely that Jacob's pro-Hebrew stance was at least in part adopted not only in deference to his authorities "Clement," Eusebius of Emesa, and his favourite pseudepigraphical book, Jubilees, but also in order to oppose the Church of the East's promotion of Syriac/Aramaic as the primeval language under the influence of the "heretic" Theodore of Mopsuestia.[25]

Jacob's position on this question is an isolated one, however much it may have been shaped by the religious controversies of his day. Thus Rubin notes that the later Syrian Orthodox scholars Michael the Syrian and Barhebraeus favoured Syriac as the original language. Similarly, Moss cites the Syrian Orthodox writer Moses bar Kepha as reproducing the argument for Hebrew priority based on Gen. 2:33 in his work *On Paradise*, yet preferring the priority of Syriac (and so approximating the position of the Church of the East writers of his time).[26] However, Moses bar Kepha post-dates Jacob by nearly two centuries, and Michael the Syrian and Barhebraeus were active in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries respectively. Michael's discussion and rejection of Jacob's championing of Hebrew as the primordial language needs to be viewed in the context of the very different historical context of his own time. The lifetimes of all three figures, Moses, Michael and Barhebraeus, fell during the period when the status of Syriac among eastern Christians was threatened by the widespread use of Arabic, the language of heavenly revelation to the Prophet Muhammed. In contrast, the promotion of Arabic as the administrative language of the Caliphate began only a few years before Jacob's death.[27]

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24 Rubin, "Language of Creation," 327–28.

25 According to Minov's analysis, the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* dates to the period prior to Jacob's career and connects to the Syrian Orthodox Church rather than the Church of the East. It strongly promotes the notion that Syriac/Aramaic was the primordial language and attacks the opposing position as "an ignorant error" (*Memory and Identity*, 272–83, and *Cave*, 24:9–11).

26 Moss, "Language of Paradise," 128–29.

27 Under 'Abd al-Malik (685–705 CE), in c. 700 CE, according to the ninth century Persian writer al-Balādhuri, in his *Futūh al-Buldān* (Michael J. de Goeje, ed. *Liber expugnatio regionum* [Leiden: Brill, 1866], 193). See Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Administering the Early Islamic Empire: Insights from the Papyri," in *Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria: A Review of Current Debates*, ed. John F. Haldon, 57–74 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). She comments that documents in Arabic only became common in the eighth century (69).

Jacob's apparently anomalous position among late antique and medieval Syriac writers on the primordial language is therefore not so strange when seen within his historical and theological context. He draws on the authority of past figures and sources – the ancient Jewish tradition of Jubilees, apostolic Christianity in "Clement," and the "Syrian in Greek dress," Eusebius of Emesa – to find further ground for opposition to the views of scholars in the Church of the East.

3 Jacob the Hebraist?

Did Jacob's evident respect for Hebrew as the Adamic language have any practical implications for him? The statement that Jacob was a triglot, "equally conversant with Syriac, Greek and Hebrew," was made by the Victorian scholar William Wright,[28] and a century later it was repeated by François Graffin.[29] However, Theodor Nöldeke was much more disparaging, noting that Jacob's Hebrew was "sehr, sehr fadenscheinig."[30] Notably, the biography of Jacob preserved in Michael the Syrian and Barhebraeus speaks only of his mastery and promotion of Greek language and learning.[31]

So why did modern scholars believe that Jacob actually knew Hebrew? It must be partially due to the many references to Hebrew etymologies and Jewish exegetical traditions within his vast literary output. Another reason would be Jacob's "high" view of the Hebrew language, as for instance expressed in his Letter XIII to John the Stylite mentioned above. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, Syriac was a relatively new and fashionable subject in Europe, thanks to important manuscript discoveries in Egypt, including some early manuscripts of Jacob's own work. Scholars such as Wright were no doubt keen to raise the profile of Syriac studies in the face of the dominance of Greek and Latin authors. Thus Jacob could be portrayed as the Syriac equivalent of St Jerome. But even without an investigation of the sources of Jacob's erudite comments on Scripture, it was clear at an early stage of the enquiry that Jacob's own revisions of several Old Testament books, produced between c. 695–705, involved no consultation of

28 Wright, "Two Epistles of Mar Jacob, Bishop of Edessa," 430.

29 François Graffin, "Jacques d'Édesse réviseur des Homélies de Sévère d'Antioche d'après le ms. syriaque B.M. Add 12.159," in *Symposium Syriacum 1976, Chantilly, France*, ed. François Graffin and Antoine Guillaumont, 243–55 (Rome: Istituto Pontificio Biblico, 1978): 250.

30 In Eberhard Nestle, "Jakob von Edessa über den Schem Hammephorasch und andere Gottesnamen. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Tetragrammaton," *ZDMG* 32 (1878): 465–508, esp. 473–74, n. 3.

31 Nestle, "Jakob von Edessa über den Schem Hammephorasch," esp. 473–74, n. 4.

the Hebrew biblical text.[32] If he had been as gifted a Hebraist as Jerome, or even Origen, it would have been an obvious step to use his Hebrew knowledge as a tool in the process of revision. But this is not the case. In fact, in one of his letters he doubts his ability to explain Hebrew expressions to his correspondent.[33]

Examples of Jacob's use of Jewish and Hebrew traditions occur in several of his discussions of problems in the biblical text. He wrote letters to learned friends on theological matters; there are later collections of his scholia on the Old Testament; there are marginal notes and scholia that he added to his revision of the Syriac translation of the *Cathedral Homilies* of Severus of Antioch; a Commentary on the Octateuch;[34] there are also comments on Hebrew etymologies in his work on the six days of Creation, the *Hexaemeron*, which was written during the last few years of his life.

Jacob often cites "Jewish stories/histories" (*taš'yāṯā yūdāyāṯā*) to explain difficulties in the text of Genesis: it is clear that Jacob used a work closely related to what we know as the book of Jubilees. This latter work is attested in many Hebrew fragments at Qumran and Masada, cited in Greek by Christian writers and translated into Latin, but only preserved in full form in Ethiopic translation.[35] Jacob probably had access to a Greek version.[36] But of course, despite Jacob's enthusiasm for this work, this does not indicate that he knew Hebrew.

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32 Although Nau says that Jacob's citation of Job in Letter XIII seems to be a combination of Hebrew and Greek, this is highly unlikely (Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse," 263, n. 1).

33 Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse," 270; Wright, "Two Epistles of Mar Jacob, Bishop of Edessa," p. *ḥ*.

34 Not yet fully edited and published: see R.B. ter Haar Romeny, "Ephrem and Jacob of Edessa in the Commentary of the Monk Severus," in *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone. Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock*, ed. George A. Kiraz, 535–57 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008).

35 See Sebastian P. Brock, "Abraham and the Ravens: A Syriac Counterpart to Jubilees 11–12 and Its Implications," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 9 (1978): 135–52; William Adler, "Abraham and the Burning of the Temple of Idols: Jubilees' Traditions in Christian Chronography," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 77, no. 2/3 (Oct. 1986–Jan. 1987): 95–117; William Adler, "Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Jacob of Edessa's Letters and Historical Writings," in *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day*, ed. R.B. ter Haar Romeny, 49–65 (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Adler argues that Jewish pseudepigrapha became more popular after their exclusion from the canon by Athanasius in the late fourth century: in his Letter XIII, Jacob explains that Athanasius needed to exclude them in order to discourage the heresies of that period, but that in the present day it was possible to use the genuine apocryphal books such as Enoch, which was known and used by the apostles such as Jude (Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse," 206–208; Wright, "Two Epistles of Mar Jacob, Bishop of Edessa," pp. *z-ṭ*.). See also Jacob's remarks about "the written stories transmitted by the Jews" that are "not false," apparently referring to Jubilees (Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse," 207; Wright, "Two Epistles of Mar Jacob, Bishop of Edessa," p. *ṭ*.).

36 See Adler, "Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Jacob of Edessa's Letters and Historical Writings," 64, and n. 51.

The following are a few examples typical of his use of Hebrew and Jewish traditions:

a) *Hexaemeron*, ed. Chabot,[37] p. 19: Maḥnim

> [The patriarch Jacob] saw the armies of holy angels there who surrounded him, and even up to the present the Hebrews call the place "Maḥnim." The Israelites built a fortified city in it, where David took refuge when he was fleeing from his son Absalom.

No doubt owing to the use of the term "encampment" earlier in Gen 32:3 in both LXX and Peshitta, Jacob realizes that the toponym Maḥnim in the Peshitta has a similar meaning and is a transliteration of the Hebrew name. There is no indication that he was employing direct knowledge of Hebrew.

b) *Hexaemeron*, ed. Chabot, p. 76: "heavens"

> This word *šêmāyā* (heavens) we use was not part of our Mesopotamian, Aramaic speech. Rather, it is a loanword from the language of the Hebrews that we use regularly as if it were our own expression. Many people who employ it, whether in speech, reading or writing, do not realize this. Since it is a loanword, we do not differentiate it as singular or plural. As for its meaning, we use it in both senses, since we employ exactly the same word and expression as singular and plural. For we say *šêmāyā* for singular and plural alike. We are unable to change the expression because it is as I have said, a loanword, not native to our language. Now, among the Hebrews, who possess the first, Adamic tongue, this expression is used in the singular sense, while also being understood and written in the plural. For they say *šōmā* in the singular, and *šōmāīm* in the plural.[38] And as far as it possible to compare, this particular expression is a composite form from the term for water. For *mā* is how they say "water" in the singular, and *māīm* in the plural. So as I said, *šōmā* is one heaven, and *šōmāīm* is the plural form . . . This is how this word seems to be formed and pronounced among the Hebrews.

Jacob's discussion of singular versus plural forms of the word "heaven" in Hebrew has some similarities to John Chrysostom's *Homily* 4.10 on Genesis, where the Greek writer remarks on the use of the "plural" for heavens in Hebrew.[39] However,

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37 Jean-Baptiste Chabot, ed., *Iacobi Edesseni Hexaemeron, seu in opus creationis libri septem*, CSCO 92, SS 44 (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1928–32); Latin translation in and by Arthur Vaschalde, *Iacobi Edesseni Hexaemeron, seu in opus creationis libri septem*, CSCO 97, SS 48 (Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1932).

38 In the early manuscript of the *Hexaemeron* presented in Chabot's facsimile edition, given as ܫܡܝܐ and ܫܡܝܐ. The "Hebrew" for water is transcribed as ܡ and ܡܝ, with a Greek note MA in the margin.

39 PG 53: 43: Λέγουσι τοίνυν οἱ τὴν γλῶτταν ἐκείνην ἀκριβῶς ἠσκημένοι, τὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὄνομα πληθυντικῶς καλεῖσθαι παρὰ τοῖς Ἑβραίοις, καὶ τοῦτο καὶ οἱ τὴν Σύρων γλῶτταν ἐπιστάμενοι συνομολογοῦσι. (English translation in Robert C. Hill, *Homilies on Genesis 18–45*. Fathers of the Church 82. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2001, 57: "Those with a precise

the source of Jacob's unusual transliterations *šōmā* and *šōmayim* is obscure. The Greek transliteration of שמים in the second column of Origen's Hexapla gives the Hebrew as σαμμαϊμ.[40] Therefore Jacob's use of a *waw* in his Syriac transliteration, indicating the pronunciation *šōmayim,* suggests that this was not the ultimate origin of his comment. Procopius of Gaza's *Commentary on Genesis* does preserve an alternative transliteration, σουμην, in a philological explanation of the word "heaven" in Gen 1.8, but this is not particularly close to Jacob's version either.[41]

It is possible Jacob may have been aware of the Hebrew pronunciation of his day, where *qameṣ* was pronounced in the (emerging) Palestinian system as a sound between *a* and *o*, or open *o* (a similar change would take place in Western Syriac as well).[42] If this is the case, unusually, he may be relying on a first-hand oral source, even a Jewish one, for the pronunciation. He does mention in one letter on the subject of the direction of prayer (the *qibla)* that he himself has witnessed both Jews and Muslims praying in Egypt,[43] but there is no indication of direct conversational contact with Jews in his works.

c) Jacob's *Scholion on the Divine Name,* ed. Brière, p. 196/[700][44]

> They say that the name that the Hebrews use and that is pronounced *'Elōhīm*, is translated as "Maker." In that they know that he is the Maker of all, the Hebrews regard this as the true name. Similarly we Arameans or Syrians, because of our relationship[45] to them and of

knowledge of that language tell us that among the Hebrews the word is used in the plural and those who know the language of the Syrians confirm this.")

40 On Ps 89:30. See Benjamin P. Kantor, "The Second Column of Origen's Hexapla in Light of Greek Pronunciation" (PhD diss, University of Texas, Austin, 2017), 32.

41 Karin Metzler, *Prokop Von Gaza: Der Genesiskommentar. Aus den "Eclogarum in Libros Historicos Veteris Testamenti Epitome" übersetzt und mit Anmerkungen versehen*. GCS 23 Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, p. 32: "daher heiße es in hebräischer Sprache auch 'Sumen,' was gefrorenes Wasser anzeigen." Metzler notes that the source of this observation is unidentified. Also Kantor, "Second Column," 217 and n. 257.

42 See Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 111; Edward Y. Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll (I Q Isa[a])* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 495 on Jerome's transcriptions *rob* and *gob* for Hebrew *rab* and *gab*.

43 Jacob's Letter XIV to John the Stylite in BL Add. MS 12,272, fol. 124a.

44 Found between Severus of Antioch's *Homiliae Cathedrales* 123 and 124: Maurice Brière, "Scolie (au sujet du nom honorable et secret)," in *Les Homiliae Cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche. Traduction syriaque de Jacques d'Édesse*, ed. Maurice Brière, PO 29 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1960). On 206 [710], Brière reproduces the diagram at the end of the scholion, which contrasts the false and true names of God and Psalm 109 (110): 1 in Syriac, Greek and "Hebrew," i.e. a Greek transliteration of Hebrew.

45 The notion that Syriac is close (a "neighbour") to Hebrew is found in the Syrian Greek writer Eusebius of Emesa (c. 300–360) whose *Commentary on Genesis* is preserved in Armenian: Françoise

> our language to theirs, imitated this name that comes from them. We called the Maker of all *ʾAlāhā*, and likewise also the Ṭayāyē, or Arabs, their neighbours . . . Neither the sages of the Hebrews nor the ancient Syrians transmitted [the false form PIPI as the Divine Name], neither did the orators and writers of the Greeks . . .

This excerpt is from a very lengthy scholion in which Jacob attacks the use of the nonsense word "*Pīpī*" (ܦܝܦܝ) in manuscripts of the Syrohexapla as an alternative for the normal Syriac title for God, *māryā*, "Lord." He explains that the name *Pīpī* arose out of ignorance, and is connected to the different direction of writing: it arose because Greek scribes misunderstood the Hebrew Tetragrammaton written in square script, and treated it as if it were Greek, hence ΠΙΠΙ. This was then transliterated into Syriac. (It indeed is frequently found in extant manuscripts of the Syrohexapla as a marginal note where *māryā* occurs in the main text.) Jacob regards the "name" *Pīpī* as the invention of Satan, since it misrepresents the Name of God.

His information on the Tetragrammaton may derive ultimately from Origen of Alexandria's comments on the names of God, and there are also some brief comments by Evagrius on ΠΙΠΙ, but Jacob's treatment is far fuller.[46]

Jacob transcribes Hebrew *ʾĕlōhîm* correctly, though he did not need to know any Hebrew to do so, since the transliterations Ἐλωείμ and *'Elōhīm* can be found in the Greek and Syriac Bibles (e.g. Peshitta Gen. 6:4). As with the "Hebrew" forms that Jacob cites for "heaven" and "soul," he assumes that the similarity between Hebrew and Syriac forms means that Syriac borrowed the word from Hebrew, since in his view Hebrew existed first.

Petit, Lucas van Rompay, and Jos J.S. Weitenberg, eds., *Eusèbe d'Émèse, Commentaire de la Génèse. Texte arménien de l'édition de Venise (1980). Fragments grecs et syriaques*, Traditio Exegetica Graeca 15 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 22–23. This may be the source for the remark found in John Chrysostom, following the discussion of the meaning of the name Abram cited above: Πολλὴ δὲ τῇ Σύρων φωνῇ πρὸς τὴν τῶν Ἑβραίων γλῶτταν ἡ συγγένεια (*Sermons 1–9 on Genesis*, PG 54: 624).

46 E.g. Origen, *Selecta in Psalmos* PG 12: 1101–04; and 1269 line 19; *Contra Celsum* VI.32.18, Origen gives Ἰαὼ/Ἰὰ, Σαβαὼθ . . . Ἀδωναῖον . . . Ἐλωαῖον/Ἐλωαΐ; and Paul de Lagarde, ed., *Onomastica sacra,* 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Horstmann, 1887): 229–30, Ἦλ, Ἐλωείμ, Ἀδών, Σαβαώθ, Σαδδαΐ, Αἰιὲ ἐσεριέ.

There are several other similar examples of Jacob's reference to "Hebrew" words,[47] and his high regard for Hebrew can be seen in the *Hexaemeron* when he refers to it as "the ancient and revered language of the Hebrews."[48]

4 Jacob on Hebrew and Jewish Traditions

As for what Jacob's pro-Hebrew stance might have to do with his attitude towards contemporary Jews and Judaism, the answer is: very little. His views on Hebrew and on "Jewish stories" are part romantic, part theological. Any direct personal contact with Jews would have been limited to the four years he was bishop of Edessa, since he spent most of his life in monasteries. The church canons he edited and the canonical issues he rules on in correspondence mention issues of Christian dealings with Jews, but there is nothing new in them compared to the new guidelines for dealing with Muslims (referred to as *Ṭayāyē*, "Arabs" and *Mahgrāyē*, "Hagarenes").[49] In the late seventh century, Judaism and Judaizing were much less of a threat to Syriac Christians than heterodox Chalcedonian and Nestorian forms of Christianity or, most recently, Islam. So it is likely that Jacob could afford to be relaxed about emphasising the links between his "orthodox" Christianity and the Hebraic past. (This would be comparable to his use of apocryphal books of Jewish origin, now that the "age of heresy" had passed.[50])

Jacob took Hebrew seriously, but this does not mean he did not have a strong sense of Syriac identity. He spoke with pride about the links between the Hebrew and Syriac languages. Members of the Syriac church in Northern Mesopotamia identified with biblical geography and often self-identified with the family of Abraham via Laban, who lived in Aram-Nahrain, near Harran. Harran was still in existence in Jacob's day, and was close to the heartland of Syriac Christianity and his bishopric of Edessa. (This is perhaps why the name Jacob was so popular

47 See Alison Salvesen, "Did Jacob of Edessa Know Hebrew?," in *Biblical Hebrew, Biblical Texts. Essays in Memory of Michael Weitzman*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Gillian Greenberg, 457–67 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2001); Alison Salvesen, "Was Jacob Trilingual? Jacob of Edessa's Knowledge of Hebrew Revisited," in *Studies on Jacob of Edessa*, ed. Gregorios Y. Ibrahim and George A. Kiraz, 93–105 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010).

48 Chabot, *Hexaemeron,* 324b.

49 Hoyland, "Jacob and Early Islamic Edessa," 16–18. In contrast, Herman Teule notes that dealings with Jews are not an important theme in Jacob's canons: Herman G.B. Teule, "Jacob of Edessa and Canon Law" in *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of his Day,* ed. R.B. ter Haar Romeny, MPIL 18 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008): 96–97.

50 See Adler, "Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Jacob of Edessa's Letters and Historical Writings," 49.

among Syrian Orthodox clergy and monks: it was a name conveniently shared with the Hebrew patriarch in Genesis and with the brother of Jesus, as well as the revered Syriac ecclesiastics Jacob of Nisibis and Jacob Baradaeus.[51]) Jacob's emphasis on this geographical coincidence perhaps meant that the Syriac *language* did not need to be the sole cornerstone of Syrian Orthodox identity.[52]

Rubin may be correct in seeing a direct connection between Jacob and the majority view of the Greek church, that Hebrew was the primordial language. In support of her suggestion, we may note that Jacob's promotion of Greek in Syrian Orthodox monasteries was a contentious issue. As mentioned earlier, he had to leave one institution where he had taught for a decade because of the "hatred" that the monks there had for the "Greeks," meaning presumably the Byzantine Chalcedonians. But Jacob himself had a lively awareness of different languages and their scripts,[53] he had some basic knowledge about Arabic, and could identify differences between Syriac and what we now call Christian Palestinian Aramaic.[54] However, Jacob's choice of supporting evidence for the priority of Hebrew is drawn not from Byzantine Greek writers but from the sub-apostolic writer "Clement," the pre-Chalcedonian Greek Syrian Eusebius of Emesa, and less explicitly from the "Jewish stories" of Jubilees that he favoured.

51 Cf. also Jean M. Fiey, *Saints syriaques*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 6 (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 2004), 105–11. In the mid-fourth century, Ephrem's older contemporary, Aphrahat, who may have lived in the region of Mosul, describes Jacob three times as *'abūn*, "our father" (twice in *Dem*. IV.5 on Prayer, describing Jacob's prayer at Bethel, once in *Dem*. XVI.1). However, in all three places the context may indicate that Jacob is seen as the father of the "People from the Peoples," rather than the ancestor specifically of Syriac Christians. Isaac is also referred to once as 'our father' (*Dem*. XIV.27), in a more indefinite context. Though Aphrahat often describes Abraham as father of many nations (cf. Gen. 17:5), especially of those from all nations who act righteously (cf. *Dem*. XI, on Circumcision), he never refers to Abraham as "*our* father."

52 See Alison Salvesen, "The Genesis of Ethnicity? The Role of the Bible in the Self-Definition of Syriac Writers," *The Harp* 23 (2008): 369–82

53 On the direction of writing, see *Scholion on the Divine Name,* PO 29, ed. Brière, 196 [700], lines 28–30: "Those who write from left to right: the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and Armenians. Those who write from right to left: the Hebrews, Syrians, Tayāyē and Persians." Compare the very different and theological point made on the basis of the different directions of scripts in *The Cave of Treasures* (Minov, *Memory and Identity,* 272, 281–83).

54 See William Wright, *A Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. 2 (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1871), 984b. giving a note in Jacob's *Encheiridion* where he distinguishes the use of the particle *yath* in "Mesopotamian Syriac" and "Palestinian Syriac."

5 Conclusion

Jacob's attitude to Hebrew has both vertical and horizontal functions. Vertically, or historically, it reaches back into antiquity and grafts Syrian Orthodox Christians onto a privileged lineage via the Arameans, relatives of the Hebrew patriarchs. Horizontally, or contemporaneously, it marks itself off from other Syriac Christian communities whom Jacob considered heterodox and who took a different view of what the primordial language had been.

Jacob's admiration for Hebrew was unique among the Syriac writers who discuss the language. Not only does he state that Hebrew is the Adamic language, but he often refers to Hebrew words in his works. His stance is likely to represent a reaction against the predominant view of the Church of the East.

As for scholarly contact between Jews and Christians in the period, it is not supported by Jacob's appreciation of Jewish traditions and reference to "Hebrew" etymologies, since both of these are almost entirely received at second- or third-hand. It may only imply that that in the new world order of the late seventh century, it was safe to promote them: Judaism was now seen as much less of a threat to Syriac Christians than Islam was becoming.

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