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978-1-108-04335-9 - Select Narratives of Holy Women: Syriac Text: From the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai Palimpsest

Edited by Agnes Smith Lewis

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Select Narratives of Holy Women: Syriac Text

The sisters Agnes Lewis (1843–1926) and Margaret Gibson (1843–1920) were pioneering biblical scholars who became experts in a number of ancient languages. Travelling widely in the Middle East, they made several significant discoveries, including one of the earliest manuscripts of the Four Gospels in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, the language probably spoken by Jesus himself. Their chief discoveries were made in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. This fascicule, a useful resource for scholars of Syriac, and originally published as part of the *Studia Sinaitica* series, is the text of a Syriac manuscript from the monastic library at St. Catherine's. Transcribed by Lewis and first published in 1900, the manuscript recounts the tales of a number of saintly women including Pelagia, a rich courtesan who converted to Christianity, and Eugenia, a holy woman who lived as a man and became the abbot of a monastery.

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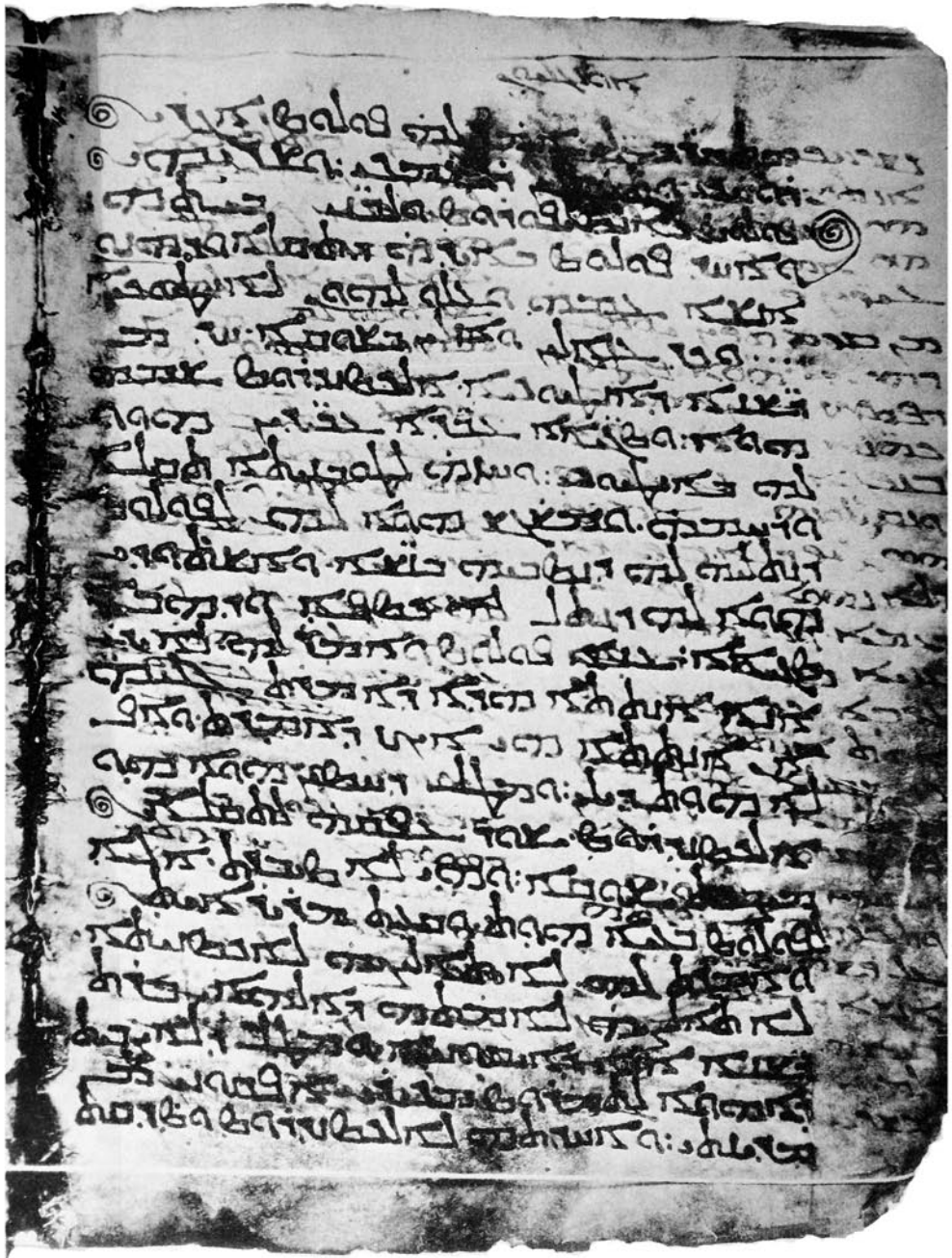
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ܣܘܕܝܘܬܐ ܣܝܢܝܬܐ

STUDIA SINAITICA No. IX

SELECT NARRATIVES
OF
HOLY WOMEN

FROM

THE SYRO-ANTIOCHENE OR SINAI PALIMPSEST

AS WRITTEN ABOVE THE OLD SYRIAC GOSPELS BY JOHN
THE STYLITE, OF BETH-MARI-QANŪN IN A.D. 778

EDITED BY

AGNES SMITH LEWIS M.R.A.S.

HON. PHIL. DR. HALLE-WITTENBERG

SYRIAC TEXT

LONDON

C. J. CLAY AND SONS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS WAREHOUSE

AVE MARIA LANE

1900

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PREFACE.

THE tales in this volume have been copied from those photographs of the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai Palimpsest which I took in 1892, at the time of my discovery of that important manuscript, with the exception of the last, Cyprian and Justa, which was copied in 1893 from the manuscript itself. Whilst for forty days the three Cambridge scholars, the late lamented Dr Bensly, Dr Rendel Harris, and Mr Burkitt occupied themselves during the hours of daylight in transcribing from it the text of Old Syriac Gospels which forms its under-writing, I made use of our slender stock of tallow candles, to secure the text of the one then unpublished tale, and to fill up in my copy of the others all the blanks which had been necessitated by imperfections in my photographs. My copy had, however, to be laid aside for five years, partly owing to our subsequent journeys to the East, partly to illness, but most of all owing to my share in the discovery and the editing of the Palestinian Syriac Lectionaries.

These stories were so highly valued in the eighth century that a monk named John the Recluse or the Stylite, of Beth-Mari-Kaddisha, in Qanūn, a monastery near to the town of Kaukab of Antioch, being in want of vellum, sacrificed for their sake that fourth century text of the Holy Gospels which the Biblical critics of the present day hold in the highest esteem. This is not the place to give any description of that text. A full account of it and of the manuscript which contains it will be found in my *Introduction to the Four Gospels in Syriac transcribed from the Sinaitic Palimpsest* by Professor Bensly,

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Dr Rendel Harris, and Mr Burkitt (1894), and in *Some Pages of the Sinaitic Palimpsest re-transcribed*, by Agnes Smith Lewis (1896). The manuscript was labelled with the number 30, before any Catalogue of the Semitic MSS. in the Convent had been compiled.

Although these "Select Narratives" cannot pretend to much value when compared with the ancient Gospel-text which underlies them, and which has been preserved for their sakes alone during eleven centuries, and though it would be a difficult task to sift the few grains of historical truth which they contain from their bushels of imaginative chaff, they are not without some literary beauty. Piously believed in at the time they were written, they exhibit just such a mingling of exciting adventure with godly precepts, as would make them a favourite means of edification to the monks of the Middle Ages.

The thumb-marks which discolour the margins of the manuscript always at a similar part of each page, bear a silent testimony to their popularity, and we can imagine that they were just the sort of reading suitable for the Convent refectory, neither too deep to interfere with the listener's digestion, nor too frivolous to be rejected as worldly. The first four of the tales, especially, Eugenia, Mary, Onesima, and Euphrosyne, throw a curious light on the character of asceticism in its best days. In each of them we find a maiden who runs away from home, leaving her parents plunged in inconsolable grief, to take refuge either in the desert or in a monastery of men. We have the breaking of natural ties in order to form supernatural ones; and the Devil, whose wiles the fair recluse was supposed to have escaped, torments her more within the walls of the monastery than he could have done in the shelter of her home. The nuns in the story of Onesima have nothing saintly about them but their dress; and an uncomfortable suspicion arises that some of the Christians in the early centuries made themselves unduly obnoxious to the heathen, and brought upon themselves and

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their friends a bitter persecution, not only by their steadfastness in the faith of the Christ, but also by their unchristian denunciation of the marriage bond ; a teaching which, if successful, would have upset all respectable society, and put an end to civilization. We may, however, sympathize with the heroines of these tales, even when they wear the garments of the other sex, by the consideration that, if they had stayed at home, they would have been forced into loveless marriages with unsympathetic, and perhaps godless men.

The text here given is generally that of the upper script in the palimpsest, and it therefore belongs to the seventh or eighth century. But as I found that the stories of Mary the slave of Tertullius, of Sophia, and of Cyprian and Justa existed in a fifth century form in the Library of the British Museum, I have in these cases adopted the earlier text, giving the variants of the Syro-Antiochene one at the foot of the page. The book, as edited by John of Beth-Mari Qanūn, is in a complete form, the stories following each other in regular and unbroken succession. But as John broke up the manuscript of the Old Syriac Gospels, he mingled its leaves at random, and I have therefore indicated at the beginning of each page what part of the Gospel narrative is to be found beneath it, so that future students of the manuscript may thereby have some further assistance in the task of finding their way through it.

Whilst my sheets were passing through the press, I became aware that some of these stories, viz. those of Eugenia, Marina, Euphrosyne, Onesima, Sophia, with Cyprian and Justa had been edited by Bedjan. But as I had announced my intention of publishing them in 1896, and as the MSS. from which he has taken his text are evidently those in the British Museum, most of which are of a date much later than that of the Sinai or Syro-Antiochene Palimpsest, and as, moreover, he has furnished no translation, I thought myself justified in going on with the work.

L. E.

B

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PREFACE.

The Colophon.

The last six lines were read by me on my first visit to Sinai, and were printed in my Introduction to the *Four Gospels in Syriac*, as transcribed by Prof. Bensly, Dr Rendel Harris, and Mr Burkitt (1894). They reappeared in an improved form in my own book, *Some Pages of the four Gospels Retranscribed from the Sinaitic Palimpsest* (1896). I did not observe, however, that the first nine lines of the colophon really belonged to it until I was preparing page ٥١ of this book for the press. True, I had seen them at the foot of the penultimate page in the manuscript, but they appeared to be almost illegible; and though I have a dim recollection that the word “Anṭiokia” once caught my attention when at Sinai, I thought that it must refer to the story of one of the Holy Women whose names were enumerated immediately before them.

And I probably should not have read it yet but for the circumstance that having printed f. 181^a from a photograph taken in 1892, I thought it my duty to place at the foot of the page any stray letters which I could decipher in the illegible portion. A dark shadow lay across the inner margin of the page as shown in the photograph. It had been thrown there by the body of the MS. itself; and it effectually covered the first two letters of every line, including the syllable “An.” As I was engaged in picking up the fragments, I became aware that another photograph of the same page had been bound into the same volume, a photograph taken by me in 1895, and which I had almost rejected, as it was faint from a too short exposure. But on it I read without difficulty the beginnings of eight out of the nine lines. After I had done my best at deciphering these, I sent copies of both photographs, not to Dr Rendel Harris, who was then in America, but to Dr Nestle, and he helped me to eight additional words. Some letters are however, so

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Mar Cononis." Assemani has taken the word ܘܩܘܪܝܘܢ "victorious" as a translation of "Nicolaus," and has misread the word ܘܩܘܪܝܘܢ. The event here narrated took place about the year A.D. 537, two centuries before the Select Narratives were written.

The chief interest of this lies in its bearing on the question of where that codex of Old Syriac Gospels was written which the diligent Stylite pulled to pieces in order to supply himself with vellum for these biographies of Holy Women. I am not quite without hope that an unexpected accident will some day give us a little more light even upon this puzzling question.

Concluding Remarks.

Through the kindness of my sister, Mrs Gibson, and of Mr F. C. Burkitt, I am enabled to add, in Appendices VI and VII, some portions from two of these ancient MSS. which were utilized by John the Stylite for his "Select Narratives" in addition to the Codex of Old Syriac Gospels. These portions include three columns of the Greek Gospel of St John, transcribed from the manuscript itself on Mount Sinai; and eight pages of the Syriac *Acts of Thomas*, which Mr Burkitt has read with great skill, from my photographs.

The fact that these MSS. were used at all seems to point to the conclusion that the Codex of Old Syriac Gospels was already in a mutilated condition, having lost 17 of its leaves when it came into the hands of John the Stylite.

The eight facsimiles here given are reproductions by Messrs T. R. Annan and Co. of Glasgow, from photographs taken in 1897 by the Cavaliere Emilio Silvestri, of Milan, whom my sister and I had the good fortune to meet on our fourth visit to the Convent. They are wider by three-quarters of an inch only than the pages of the Palimpsest, and the under script is somehow fainter in them than it is in my own half-plate photo-

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graphs; but they give an excellent idea of the upper script, which is that of the "Select Narratives." My Introductory Notes to these tales will be found, along with their translation into English, in No. X of this Series.

In conclusion, I have to express my thanks to my friend the Rev. R. H. Kennett, for the kind assistance which he gave me in translating the story of Eugenia; and to Professor Eberhard Nestle of Maulbronn for reading the proofs and revising my translation of all the other tales; also to my dear sister, Mrs Gibson, for her unwearied care in detecting errors.

AGNES SMITH LEWIS.

CASTLE BRAE, CAMBRIDGE.

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
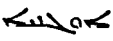


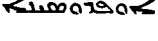
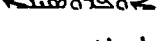


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