



The cave of treasures: Syriac Anthology from late antiquity in Hebrew translation

edited by Bar Belinitzky and Youval Rotman, Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv University Press, 2018, 285 pp., 2 figs., 4 tables, ₪ 98.00 (paperback), ISBN 9789657241875 (Hebrew)

Alessia Bellusci

To cite this article: Alessia Bellusci (2020) The cave of treasures: Syriac Anthology from late antiquity in Hebrew translation, *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 35:1, 120-124, DOI: [10.1080/09518967.2020.1739841](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2020.1739841)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2020.1739841>



Published online: 02 Jun 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

recipe. Finally, the Seder itself, combining feast, dialogue, and educational discourse, resembles the Greek symposium.

The last part of the book is devoted to contemporary recipes showing the variety of possibilities offered by the many geographical origins of Jewish culinary traditions and the influence of recent social changes, especially gender and generational roles around the Seder table and in the preparation of its special foods. Although Weingarten does not draw this comparison explicitly, there is a difference between Orthodox communities that define and limit permissible innovations with regard to recipes or symbolism versus the earnest, free-form understanding of more secular Jews who seek to evoke memories and authenticity, but in a customized fashion. The very creativity and ambiguity with regard to haroset's recipes and symbolism show the slippage between Biblical injunctions and modern individualism. There is a desire to commemorate in accord with a distant past, as well as adapting to social change – Weingarten discusses “men in the kitchen” and “feminist haroset”. Passover and its food rituals continue to evoke religious cohesion and identity under adversity, but now, as in earlier times, they incorporate outside influences.

Paul Freedman

Yale University

paul.freedman@yale.edu

© 2020, Paul Freedman

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2020.1739840>



The cave of treasures: Syriac anthology from late Antiquity in Hebrew translation, edited by Bar Belinitzky and Youval Rotman, Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv University Press, 2018, 285 pp., 2 figs., 4 tables, ₪ 98.00 (paperback), ISBN 9789657241875 (Hebrew)

The official language of some of the most relevant Eastern Churches and the idiom in which one of the earliest translations of the Bible is written, Syriac, has been the subject of academic studies in Europe since the early modern era, inspiring the publication of grammar books, dictionaries, and literary, theological, and historical syntheses, as well as editions and translations of specific texts and manuscripts. Despite the abundance of scholarly resources on Syriac idiom and literature in diverse European languages, there are almost no translations of Syriac texts into Hebrew, a fact that is even more surprising if we consider the remarkable linguistic closeness between Syriac and Hebrew (alphabet derived from the Aramaic script, structure, and grammar), as well as the geographical proximity and cultural affinity of Syriac and Jewish/Aramaic-speaking communities in late Antique Babylonia.

The Cave of Treasures is a most welcome volume which seeks to reverse this unfortunate academic trend, offering for the first time to a Hebrew-speaking audience a rich selection of textual excerpts from classical Syriac literature. As the editors Bar Belinitzky and Youval Rotman point out in their introduction (16), the extent of their project goes far beyond the translation into Hebrew of a variegated collection of Syriac texts – in itself a praiseworthy and pioneering achievement – and aims at raising awareness among the Israeli public about the important and multi-coloured cultural world reflected by the Syriac language. Consistent with their programmatic research

goal is the editors' decision to include in the anthology contributions by many Israeli – or Hebrew-speaking – scholars working on very different aspects of Syriac culture, and to accord them full freedom of choice regarding both the content of the texts selected, and the stylistic and methodological features of the translations and notes offered. In this way, readers are not only invited to take a tour through the intricate lands of Syriac texts, but are also exposed to the most current research developments in this field in the Israeli academic arena (7). Thanks to the remarkable editorial work of Belinitzky and Rotman, this multiplication of voices and approaches never jeopardizes the inner consistency of the volume, which results in an extremely harmonic and pleasant read.

The volume opens with an introduction (9–17) in which the editors offer a concise overview of Syriac language and literature vis-à-vis the history of Syriac Christianity. Noting that Syriac developed from the local Aramaic dialect of Edessa (modern Urfa, in south-eastern Turkey) and soon became the most widespread written language in what they refer to as the “Semitic East” (9 (המזרח השמי, Belinitzky and Rotman point to the mutual impact of this language and the formation of the first Near-Eastern Christian groups, long before the institution of the distinct Christian Church(es). This process is rightly compared to the historical development of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, which gradually became characteristic of the literary production of the Jewish communities of late Antique Babylonia. After briefly describing the three alphabetic systems associated with Syriac (i.e. 'Eṣṙangelā, the earliest; Maḏnḥāyā, commonly known as Nestorian and developed in the east; Serṯā, or Jacobite developed in the west), the editors explain how Syriac-speaking communities never enjoyed national independence, split between the two most powerful late antique empires: the Roman Byzantine Empire in the west and the Sasanian Empire (once Parthian and later to be annexed to the different Islamic caliphates) in the east. Besides the many implications of this lack of geopolitical autonomy and the remarkable influence of both Byzantine and Sasanian cultures, the history of the Syriac civilization was mostly impacted by the occurrence of Christian synods and ecumenical councils. Specifically, several Christological controversies gradually fractured Syriac Christianity into many different churches (e.g. Jacobite, Melkite, Maronite and others), which nonetheless maintained the same liturgical language, that is, Syriac. Yet, it was at the time of the undivided church – before the proliferation of its many intra-religious factions – that Syriac-speaking Christian communities began to develop their unique and independent identity. The spiritual and cultural responses to the persecutions which allegedly occurred in Sasanian Babylonia by the hand of Shapur II, before Christianity became a recognized minority religion, played a significant role in this process. The many surviving hagiographic and martyrological texts in Syriac – two of which are translated in the anthology – reflect well this distinctive religious-cultural trait of Syriac Christianity.

In the second part of the introduction, the editors describe the content and significance of each text translated in the anthology, placing it in the broader context of Syriac literature, which is outlined chronologically and according to its main literary genres, namely exegesis, hagiography, *memrā* (i.e. narrative poetry in rhyme), *madrashā* (lyric poetry in rhyme, in stanzas), homily in prose, *taḥwītā* (literally, “demonstration” in reference to Aphrahat's work, a type of homily in prose), and legal literature. Guiding the reader in approaching the different texts both as independent creations and in the context of a single (albeit remarkably variegated) literary tradition, this second overview proves very useful, especially taking into account that the selected writings are not organized chronologically or by genre in the anthology (see later in this review). The

introductory section is complemented by four tables featuring the graphical signs of the different Syriac alphabet and vocalization systems (18–19), a geo-historical map of the main centres relevant for the Syriac civilization (20), and the reproduction of a page from one of the earliest Syriac (and Christian) manuscripts, namely the so-called “Sinaitic Palimpsest”, a late-fourth-century manuscript kept in Saint Catherine’s Monastery, Egypt (MS. 30, fol. 88 *verso*, 21).

The anthology consists of 18 textual excerpts chosen as among the most representative of the distinctiveness of Syriac Christian culture and, at the same time, as revealing of the lively encounter between Syriac and Jewish culture and, to a lesser extent, of the influence of Syriac on the development of other literary and translation traditions. With the exception of two earlier and two later writings (respectively, in chs. 4, 6, 8, and 9; see later in this article), all the selected texts belong to the golden age of Syriac literature, i.e. the fourth to the seventh century CE. Specifically, more than a half of these works were penned by the three most famous Syriac authors: the fourth-century Church fathers Ephrem and Aphrahat, and Jacob of Sarug (c. 451–521). Their selected writings are gathered in three separate main sections – *Ephrem the Syrian* (chs. 10–14), *Aphrahat* (chs. 15–18), and *Jacob of Sarug* (chs. 19–22) – each of which opens with a synthetic overview of the author and his work, and is correlated by an updated bibliography (by Yifat Monnickendam and Aryeh Kofsky; Bar Belinitzky and Yakir Paz; Ophir Münz-Manor and Shlomo Naeh, respectively).

The first text chosen to represent the literary production of the theologian and Church father Ephrem is an excerpt from his *pushaqā* (exegetical commentary) on Genesis, namely *On Jacob’s Benedictions: Genesis 42–43* (ch. 11, pp. 125–38; by Yifat Monnickendam). This text is particularly interesting as it alludes to several rabbinic traditions (e.g. *Genesis Rabah*) and even preserves a quotation from *Targum Onkelos*, thus reflecting Ephrem’s familiarity with Jewish traditions – and perhaps even with Jewish written sources – probably acquired in Nisibis and Edessa, important centres in the Byzantine Empire where Jewish communities flourished (as mentioned already in Flavius Josephus’ writings and tannaitic sources). Poetry was, though, the arena in which Ephrem, the “harp of the Holy Spirit”, truly excelled. Of his largest collection of *madrashe* (lyric poems), the *Hymns on Faith*, the anthology offers the annotated translations into Hebrew of the famous *Five Poems on the Pearl* (ch. 13, pp. 171–88; by Aryeh Kofsky), as well as of poem 26 and poem 31 (ch. 14, pp. 180–99; by Menahem Kister). The latter includes an interesting passage on the different forms in which God appears to men, which finds a striking parallel in rabbinic literature, in *Pesikhta Rabati*. In the same direction goes poem 3 from the *Hymns on the Resurrection of Jesus* – commented on and translated in the same chapter (ch. 14, pp. 199–203; by Menahem Kister) – which presents some interpretative traditions analogous to those found in the Babylonian Talmud and *Song of Songs Rabah*. The selection from Ephrem’s hymnography is complemented by the first four poems from the 15 *madrashe on Paradise*, which were probably written in Nisibis (ch. 12, pp. 139–70; by Avishai Bar-Asher).

Aphrahat’s 23 demonstrations (*tahwite*) represent the earliest surviving corpus of Syriac literature, and one of the most beautiful examples of Syriac prose. Written as alphabetic acrostics (except for the *tahwitā* 23), these short works address several theological and polemic topics. The section on Aphrahat in *The Cave of Treasures* presents demonstration 13, *On the Sabbath* (ch. 16, pp. 207–17; by Bar Belinitzky and Yakir Paz), demonstration 17, *On the Messiah who is the Son of God* (ch. 17, pp. 219–30; by Menahem Kister), and demonstration 11, *On Circumcision* (ch. 18, pp. 231–40; by

Michael Sokoloff). These three texts, each of which focuses on a subject related to Jewish practice or theology, all document the deep cross-cultural and cross-religious conversation of Syriac literature with the Jewish tradition.

Of the prolific bishop Jacob of Sarug, known as the “flute of the Holy Spirit”, the anthology features two *memre* (pl. of *memrā*) – the *Homily on Jephthah’s daughter* (ch. 20, pp. 243–55; by Ophir Münz-Manor) and the *Homily on the Judgement of Solomon* (ch. 21, pp. 257–73; by Shlomo Naeh) – both of which reinterpret the Biblical text in dramatic narratives and exemplify well the elegant and introspective lyricism of the writer. The section (and the anthology) closes with the *Homily on the Youths of Ephesus* (ch. 22, pp. 275–85; by Meir Bar-Asher), which is preceded by a remarkably thorough analysis and a comparison of the text to *Surah Al-Kahf* (“The Cave”, Quran, *surah* 18) given as a demonstration of the influence of Syriac literature on the Quran and its interpretations.

The remaining eight texts translated in the anthology are anonymous, pseudographic or penned by minor authors. They form a separate section at the beginning of the anthology (chs. 2–9), the result of which is particularly refreshing because of its heterogeneity. Here we find the earliest writings included in the volume – Genesis 38 according to the *Peshitta*, namely the Syriac translation of the Bible dated approximately to the second-century CE (ch. 4, pp. 51–64; by Shraga Asif) and the first chapter of the *Acts of Judas Thomas*, a third-century apocryphal text also surviving in Greek that tells the story of the evangelic mission to India of the apostle Judah, the twin (ܩܘܪܝܢܐ) brother of Jesus himself (!) (ch. 6, pp. 73–83; by Yakir Paz and Belinitzky), as well as the latest – an excerpt from the eighth-century *Canon of Civil Law* by Jesubokt, the earliest legal corpus in the history of the Eastern Church, which reveals the encounter of Pahlavi, Roman, and Islamic legal traditions (ch. 9, pp. 107–21; by Uriel Simonsohn), and the eighth-century Syriac translation by Jacob of Edessa of a homily in prose written in Greek by the patriarch Severus of Antioch in the fifth century (ch. 8, pp. 95–106; by Yonatan Moss). The section also features two of the most studied Syriac texts, an excerpt on Adam and Eve from the *Cave of Treasures*, a fifth-to sixth-century exegetical writing which gathers many Jewish and Persian traditions and after whose evocative title the collection is titled (ch. 2, pp. 23–31; by Sergey Minov), and *memrā* 21, *On the Tree of Adam*, from the *Book of Steps (Liber Gradum)*, an exegetical text which encourages a profound *imitatio Christi* with heavy ascetic tones (ch. 3, pp. 33–49; by Serg Rozner). Another example of *memrā* given in this section is the verse homily *On Elijah, the Famine, and the Widow of Sarepta*, which transforms the biblical text from 1 Kings 17 into a very dramatic narrative that finds an impressive parallel in the Babylonian Talmud (ch. 5, pp. 65–72; by Menahem Kister). This section is also complemented by one of the most interesting writings in the anthology, the *Life of Saint Onesima*, an hagiographic text translated into Syriac from a Greek original and subsequently retranslated into Ethiopic, Arabic, and Georgian, telling the story of a lesser-known “holy fool”, a very unique type of saint developed within Greek Orthodox and Syriac traditions (ch. 7, pp. 85–93; by Bar Belinitzky and Youval Rotman).

In the volume, each Syriac text is given for the first time in its Hebrew annotated translation, preceded by a brief historical and literary analysis and followed by an updated bibliography. In their analyses, some of the contributors focus more on the philological and linguistic features of the translated work, others are more interested in addressing theological or literary aspects, while in certain instances the Syriac text is compared to excerpts from the neighbouring cultures, mostly to rabbinic literature but

also to Islamic literature. In three cases (chs. 4, 12, and 21), the contributors integrate their translation with a transcription of the Syriac text in Hebrew characters to exemplify the linguistic proximity between the two languages. In particular, in Chapter 4 Asif offers a Hebrew transcription of each verse from the selected passage from the *Peshitta*, according to both its standard scientific edition and some of the relevant manuscript variants, and matches it to the corresponding verse from the Hebrew Bible, as a basis to draw a comparison between the two biblical versions and to discuss the dependence of the Syriac translation on the Hebrew text.

Envisaged as an academic introductory manual to Syriac literature and Syriac Christianity, the *Cave of Treasures* is a valuable publication for both a scholarly and a general audience. For the former, the anthology provides an exceptional research and teaching tool in both the history of religion – and, more specifically, history of Eastern Christianity – and Semitic languages (with three Syriac textual excerpts transliterated in Hebrew characters representing a useful starting point for a linguistic exercise for students of Syriac). Furthermore, the thorough and original analyses which accompany the translations – especially those in chapters 5, 7, 12, 14, 18, and 21 – advance remarkably the research on the selected Syriac texts, and are thus appealing for both Syriacists and scholars in related fields. To non-specialized readers, the volume offers unknown (not previously translated into Hebrew) narratives from a far gone “foreign” past, yet still relevant for understanding several aspects of Hebrew identities shaped in part by the proximity to and contrast with Syriac-speaking communities in Sasanian Babylonia. For the wider readership, the *Cave of Treasures* forcefully shows the relevance of Syriac at the crossroads of languages, cultures, and historical developments in the late Antique “Semitic East”. Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Tower of Babel* (1563) welcomes the reader on the cover of the book, not only establishing a strong reference to the main geographical area where Syriac literature developed and thrived, but also evoking the dual nature of Syriac, which originated from a shared Aramaic, but progressively evolved into a distinctive language that mirrors a very unique culture.

Alessia Bellusci
Yale University

alessia.bellusci@yale.edu

© 2020, Alessia Bellusci

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2020.1739841>

