"Christ has subjected us to the harsh yoke of the Arabs":
the Syriac exegesis of Jacob of Edessa in the new world order

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1. Introduction

Jacob, bishop of Edessa, was the most prominent monophysite scholar of the early medieval period. His work covers a remarkable range, from biblical exegesis, to the codification and transmission of philosophy and Greek scientific knowledge,[1] the development of ecclesiatical law, and historiography. All these areas of his output are interlinked in various ways. This makes it difficult for the modern scholar to isolate any particular aspect of his oeuvre.

Jacob was born near Antioch sometime in the 630s CE. Therefore his early years would have coincided with the death of the Prophet Muhammed and the subsequent captures of Damascus (634 CE), Antioch (636) and Edessa (638). However, in his earlier works and in the scant biographical information about him there is no overt sign of what we would regard as epic changes taking place in his vicinity. Perhaps this is because, for Christians in the Middle East, disruption had become the norm, particularly since the Persian invasions in the earlier part of the seventh century and the deepening schisms within the Christian Church.

Apart from a brief period as bishop of Edessa during the 680s, a post from which he in fact resigned, Jacob spent most of his life studying and teaching in some of the great monasteries of Syria, namely Qenneshrin, Kaysum, Eusebona, and Tell 'Ada.[2] He wrote in Syriac but was thoroughly conversant in Greek. Many of his works still survive. They are at once conservative, preserving the best of what had preceded him from both Christian tradition and pagan Greek culture, and also cutting-edge, such as his *Chronicon*, his *Hexaemeron* (a series of treatises on the Six Days of Creation), and his own "version" of the Old Testament.

1 For the role of Syriac Christian scholars and monasteries in transmitting Greek philosophy and science to the Arabs, see Scott L. Montgomery, *Science in Translation: Movements of Knowledge through Cultures and Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000), esp. 69; Cristina d'Ancona, "Greek into Arabic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy,* eds. Peter Adamson, Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: University Press, 2005), 18–20.

2 Eusebona and Tell 'Ada were located to the south west of Beroea (modern Aleppo); Kaysum due north of Nisibis (now Nizip on the Turkish border); and archaeologists have lately identified Qenneshrin on the west bank of the Euphrates near Jarablus in northern Syria. See the map in Florence Jullien, ed., *Le monachisme syriaque* (Paris: Geuthner, 2010), 10.

2. Jacob and the exegesis of Scripture

Jacob's scriptural exegesis falls into two main areas. First there is his version of the Old Testament, of which a few books survive in single manuscripts. The version is a clever amalgamation in Syriac form of the Greek Septuagint and Syriac Peshitta texts. There has been some scholarly debate over what principles he used to create this version or why he produced it.[3]

More pertinent to the theme of the present volume is Jacob's extensive work in solving various difficulties in Scripture, such as the meaning of individual words, or narrative or theological problems in the text. His solutions are preserved in various different places: collections of scholia, marginal comments, and letters to his correspondents.[4] Almost all of them are concerned with the Pentateuch and historical books of the Old Testament.[5]

The exegetical techniques that Jacob employs are mainly traditional ones. First he gives an explanation of the narrative or historical context of the passage, with explanations of apparent problems in it. He may then draw out the *theoria*, a term that means many different things for Christian authors, but for Jacob it generally refers to a deeper spiritual sense, and often a typological meaning. For instance, King Saul's two daughters may represent the Jews and the Church respectively, since the elder sister rejects David as a spouse (David being a "type" of Christ), while the other loves and marries him.[6]

The present chapter examines whether Jacob's biblical exegesis tried to meet the challenge of Arab political domination and the rise of Islam, or whether his approach was a fundamentally conservative one that aimed to shore up Syrian Orthodox identity without innovation. Below are three examples where Jacob's

3 For a summary, see A. Salvesen, "Scholarship on the Margins: Biblical and Secular Learning in the Work of Jacob of Edessa," *Syriac Encounters*, eds. Kyle Smith, Emilio Fiano, and Maria Doefler (forthcoming).

4 For editions and translations of many of Jacob's scholia, see George Phillips, *Scholia on Passages of the Old Testament by Mar Jacob Bishop of Edessa* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), from collections of scholia in two British Library Additional manuscripts, 17,193 and 14,483. A useful article on the problems of the scholia is that of Dirk Kruisheer, "Reconstructing Jacob of Edessa's Scholia", in Judith Frishman and Lucas van Rompay, eds., *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation. A Collection of Essays* (TEG 5; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 187–96. For some examples of biblical exegesis in Jacob's letters see William Wright, "Two Epistles of Mar Jacob, Bishop of Edessa," *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* 10 (1867): 430–60 (English synopsis and Syriac text), and François Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse (exégèse biblique)," *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 10 (1905): 197–208, 258–282 (French translation). Letters 12 and 13 are from British Library Add. MS 12,172.

5 There are also some marginal scholia in the manuscripts of his own version of Old Testament prophetic books (Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel). These manuscripts remain largely unedited.

6 Phillips, *Scholia,* 29, Syriac text *8–*10.

approach to Scripture could be said to reflect the impact of his historical circumstances, and where the influence of Jewish and early Islamic arguments is perceptible, in a way that would not have been seen in exegetes of the previous century.

2.1 Use of Jewish traditions and apocryphal books to solve difficulties

William Adler has shown how Jacob used Jewish pseudepigrapha to answer questions from his correspondents on difficulties in the book of Genesis. Despite the view of the fourth century Alexandrian patriarch Athanasius that the Book of Enoch was inauthentic, Jacob cites Enoch as an authoritative source.[7] This is because he says it was known to the apostles (in fact it is cited in the New Testament, in Jude 1:14–15). Following on from the work of Sebastian Brock, Adler also notes Jacob's use of a work that Jacob describes as "Jewish Histories". From its content this work seems to be closely linked to what we know as the Book of Jubilees, which like the Book of Enoch has its origins in Jewish circles of the Second Temple period, though it postdates it by a century or so.[8] However, the form that Jacob uses may not be identical to the Book of Jubilees known to us. Adler argues that Jacob elaborated and shaped the material that he found in his "Jewish Histories" in order to present a more coherent and theologically persuasive narrative.[9] In other words, Jacob acted in a similar way to the creators of Jewish haggadic midrash, by "filling in the gaps" of Scripture in a way that was theologically appropriate to his circle and by means of earlier traditions.

To give some examples of Jacob's use of early Jewish traditions, Jacob draws on "Jewish Histories" (Jubilees) in the account of Abraham's early life in Ur of the

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7 Although the oldest portions of 1 Enoch go back to the third century BCE, and there are Aramaic fragments among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and some material in Greek and Latin, today Enoch is preserved only in the ancient Ethiopian language, Ge'ez. See George W.E. Nickelsburg and James C. Vanderkam, eds., *1 Enoch: A New Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). Jacob of Edessa no doubt knew the work in its Greek form. Although a single small fragment of Syriac Enoch survives in the medieval chronicle of Michael the Syrian, the work as a whole is unlikely to have been rendered into Syriac: see S.P. Brock, "A Fragment of Enoch in Syriac," *Journal of Theological Studies* (1968): 626–31.

8 The textual situation of Jubilees is similar to that of 1 Enoch in that it is preserved in full only in Ge'ez, with fragments in Hebrew and Aramaic among the Dead Sea Scrolls, some material in Greek and Latin, and short extracts in Syriac (Eugène Tisserant, "Fragments syriaques du livre des Jubilés", in *Revue Biblique* 30 (1921),55-86, 206-232). For a translation of the Ethiopic version, see Robert H. Charles, *The Book of Jubilees* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1917).

9 William Adler, "Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Jacob of Edessa's Letters and Historical Writings" *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of his Day*, eds. R.B. ter Haar Romeny (MPIL 18; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 49–65; 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.

Chaldees.[10] Likewise, Jacob answers John the Stylite's question concerning the existence of writing before Moses with a reference to "reliable written stories transmitted by Jews",[11] in which Moses is described as being taught Hebrew and Egyptian writing by his father Amram (= Jubilees 47:9).[12]

Other explanations by Jacob also display a knowledge of traditions originating in Jewish midrash. Two of his scholia and one of his letters refer to the identity of the widow who appealed to Elisha in 2 Kings 4:1.

i) From the 7th scholion, about the woman who appealed to Elisha and about the transformation of the waters to oil through the prophet's prayer....[2 Kings 4:1][13]

Firstly one should know whose wife the woman was, where she was from, and what was the reason for the debt she owed, on account of which the creditor wanted to take her children into slavery... She was the wife of the Obadiah who feared God, Ahab's steward, who loved and honoured Elijah the prophet [1 Kings 18]. He was also numbered among the Twelve holy prophets. When he saved the hundred prophets from the power of the murderess Jezebel and hid them in two caves, owing to the severity of the time and the scarcity of food, he was forced to borrow money and incur a debt on behalf of himself and his wife and children in order to feed them [the prophets] during the scarcity, so that he could save them from famine as he had saved them from slaughter. "I saved them: let them not be neglected now and die of hunger!" This was the cause of the debt for which Obadiah's children were being led into slavery. For this reason his wife appealed to Elisha, "You know that your servant my husband..." [a lacuna intervenes at this point]

ii) From Jacob's 16th scholion, showing how Jezebel killed the prophets, and about Obadiah, how he hid the rest.... [1 Kings 18:3–4]

...Now Obadiah, Ahab's steward and faithful, a true servant of God, true as his name,[14] and a secret God-fearer, concealed from her and the murderers one hundred of his brothers the prophets and hid them in two caves. He saved them from two deaths, one by the sword, and one by hunger that would follow. Because of the expense involved in this and the considerable debt that resulted in two of his children being led off to slavery, his wife and mother of the boys appealed to Elisha the prophet.[15]

iii) I will tell you a little about Obadiah the prophet. There exists the opinion among readers that he was the third captain of fifty who went up to Elijah and entreated that he should not perish as his predecessors had, and he went down with him to King Ahaziah of Israel [2 Kings 1:11–16].

To this I can add for your benefit another fact about him that is reliable and not mere supposition. This is that he was the husband of the woman who came to Elisha the

10 G. Phillips, *Scholia,* 3–6, Syriac **2**–3.
11 G. Phillips, *Scholia,* Syriac *10.
12 Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII", 207–8.
13 This scholion appears in BL Add. MS 14,483, of the ninth or tenth century, folios 27r–27v. It was not published by Phillips, probably because the end of it is damaged in the manuscript.
14 The Hebrew name Obadiah means "servant of the Lord", and this meaning would have been fairly clear in Syriac also.
15 BL Add. MS 17,193, fol. 56v-57r, edited and translated by G. Phillips, *Scholia,* 45–47, Syriac *29–30. The translation above is my own. Cf. also foll. 20v and 21r of BL Add. MS 14,483 for another version of this 16th scholion.

> prophet and said to him, "Your servant my husband has died. You know that your servant feared the Lord, and a creditor has come to take away my two sons as slaves." [Elisha] performed for her the miracle in which water was transformed into oil. For this man had borrowed money during the period of famine under Ahab, and bought food for the prophets who had fled from Jezebel.[16]

Jacob says that the woman in 2 Kings 4 was the wife of Obadiah, Ahab's steward who feared the Lord and saved one hundred prophets by hiding them from Jezebel and feeding them throughout the famine (1 Kings 18:3–4). By so doing Obadiah incurred a huge debt, and this is why his widow had to appeal to Elisha to prevent her sons being enslaved to pay off his creditors. Jacob also identifies the man with the prophet Obadiah.

As the original editor of the scholia George Phillips notes, a similar tradition to Jacob's explanation is found in the work of the Hellenistic Jewish writer Flavius Josephus.[17] Later Jewish sources include the Babylonian Talmud (bSanh 39b) and the medieval midrashic work Exodus Rabbah (31.3–4). The Aramaic Targum Jonathan to 2 Kings expands the biblical text of 4:1, to show the widow telling Elisha,

> "Your servant *Obadiah* my husband is dead: and you know that your servant was fearing *from before* the Lord, *so that when Jezebel killed the prophets of the Lord, he took from them one hundred men and hid them in fifties in caves. He used to borrow money and feed them so as not to provide them with food from Ahab's wealth because it was wrongfully obtained.* And now the creditor has come to take away my two sons as slaves!" [additions to the biblical text italicised][18]

Despite the evident Jewish origin of the tradition, it is highly unlikely that Jacob derived his explanation directly from either the rabbinic Targum or from Josephus. An intermediary Greek Christian source is probable. Jacob no doubt approved of the identification of the two men in 1 Kings 18 and 2 Kings 4:1 because it was soundly

16 Wright, "Two Epistles", Syriac pp. *18–*19, from British Library Add. MS 12,172, fol. 79–134. French translation in Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII", 270–71.

17 G. Phillips, *Scholia*, 47 n. 8. Flavius Josephus (d. c. 100 CE), *Antiquities of the Jews* IX.4: "For they say that the widow of Obadiah the prophet and Ahab's steward, came to [Elisha], and said that he was not ignorant how her husband had preserved the prophets that were to be slain by Jezebel, wife of Ahab; for she said that he had hidden a hundred of them, and had borrowed money for their maintenance, and that following her husband's death, she and her children were being taken away to slavery by the creditors; and she asked him to have mercy on her on account of her husband's good deed and to provide her with some assistance" [translation based on the older one of Whiston].

18 Translation my own. See also Daniel J. Harrington and Anthony J. Saldarini, *The Aramaic Bible 10. Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets. Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 270, and Carol A. Dray, *Translation and Interpretation in Targum to the Book of Kings*. Studies in the Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 65–66, 114.

based on the verbal link between the passages: Obadiah in the biblical text of 1 Kings is said to have "feared the Lord", the very characteristic of the dead man that his widow mentions in 2 Kings 4. The association with the prophet Obadiah, about whom nothing much is otherwise known, is a more obvious step, ansd although it no doubt originates in Jewish tradition, it could also have been made independently later.

Jacob mentions a further tradition in his 13th Letter to John the Stylite of Litarba. Jacob notes that opinion exists that the prophet Obadiah was the third captain of fifty men sent to arrest Elisha in 2 Kings 1:13. This is attested in the Greek work *Lives of the Prophets* that was falsely attributed to the Christian writer Epiphanius of Salamis.[19] Jacob mentions both this work and its attribution in disparaging terms earlier in Letter 13.[20] Perhaps for this reason he is evinces less conviction concerning the identification of the prophet Obadiah with the captain of fifty than the tradition that he was the husband of the widow mentioned in 2 Kings 4:1.[21]

Thus "Jewish histories", apocryphal writings ("secret books"), and other traditions are all of use to Jacob as commentary on Scripture. In view of Jacob's hostility to Jews and Judaism of his own day (a hostility expressed in his canons and other works), his use of these originally Jewish extra-canonical books to solve exegetical problems is perhaps a little surprising.

However, Jacob does not use such sources indiscriminately, but assesses whether they withstand the tests of apostolic use (for example in the case of the citation of Enoch in the Letter of Jude) or historical chronology. For instance, Jacob rejects the identification of the prophet Jonah with the boy raised by Elijah, given by Pseudo-Epiphanius, since their respective lifetimes could not have overlapped.[22] He

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19 Douglas R.A. Hare, "The Lives of the Prophets", in ed. James Charlesworth *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* II (London: Darton and Todd, 1985), 379–400.

Coincidentally the same Syriac manuscript containing the second version of Jacob's scholion above, BL Add. MS 17,683, also includes a Syriac version of the *Lives of the Prophets*. It states, "Obadiah means 'serving the Lord', according to the Hebrew language. Obadiah was from the land of Shechem, from a region called Beth 'Aqerem. He was Elijah's disciple, and since he bore many things on his behalf, he was saved. He was the third head of fifty, whom Elijah spared, and he went down to Ahaziah. After he left the king's service he became a prophet and when he died in peace he was buried with his fathers."

20 Wright, "Two Epistles", Syriac *19, Nau, "Traduction", 268.

21 The fifth century Greek Syrian writer Theodoret of Cyrrhus also identifies Obadiah with Ahab's steward and the deceased husband in 2 Kings 4:1, and like Jacob's, his account is independent of the *Lives of the Prophets*. Natalio Fernández Marcos and José R. Busto Saiz, *Theodoreti Cyrensis Quaestiones in Reges et Paralipomena* (Madrid: Instituto "Arias Montano", C.S.I.C, 1984), §14, 202.

22 Wright, 'Two Epistles", *17. Jacob describes such works as "superfluous stories lacking reliability".

clearly distinguishes between the unreliability of what he sometimes terms "superfluous tales" and the authority of "Jewish books".[23] In this respect his approach is perhaps comparable to that of St Jerome (though it is hardly likely that Jacob would have known of the fourth century Latin writer).[24]

2.2 "Deuteronomistic" theology: a biblical parallel to the plight of the Syrian Orthodox at the end of the seventh century

What modern scholars term the "Deuteronomistic" theological outlook on history is a pervasive concept in the Hebrew Bible. It expresses the idea that God's people enjoy his favour and his covenant conditionally: though he will never reject them entirely, he will chastise them by subjection to foreign powers and expulsion from their land if they practise idolatry and break his commandments.[25] Yet repentance and a return to right worship and living will bring about restoration of God's favour.[26]

This theology was dominant after the Babylonian Exile, and even more so after 70 CE in the works of the rabbis.[27] It is certainly far from unusual in Christian works, including Syriac texts contemporaneous with Jacob of Edessa, in the late seventh century.[28] Generally, it means that world events are interpreted according to this biblical paradigm: oppression of the religious community or nation by an enemy is taken to indicate God's displeasure at sin within the community. This is explicit in the famous remark in the Syriac historical work, the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, where the writer, commenting on the *jizya* imposed by Abd al-Malik in 692 CE/AG 1003, states: "From this time the Sons of Hagar began to subject the Sons of Aram to

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23 Wright, "Two Epistles", 430 and Syriac *8, French translation Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII", 206–207, using the Syriac term for "apocrypha", *ktābē mṭašayā*, "hidden books".

24 See Alison Salvesen, "*Tradunt Hebraei*... The problem of the function and reception of Jewish midrash in Jerome", in *Midrash in Context,* eds. M. Fishbane and J. Weinberg (Oxford/Portland, Oregon: Littmann Library, 2013), 57–81.

25 See for example Deuteronomy chs. 28 and 29; Ezra 9:7.

26 E.g. Deut 30:1–5.

27 See R. Goldenberg, "The Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple: its meaning and its consequences", in *Cambridge History of Judaism IV. The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period,* ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 191–205, esp. 196–97. The concept of divine punishment is brought out frequently in Targum, e.g. Targum Jonathan to Isaiah 1:3–9, especially 1:7: "your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your presence *the Gentiles take possession of your land* and *because of your sins it is removed from you and given to* aliens" (Bruce D. Chilton, The *Aramaic Bible* 11. *The Isaiah Targum. Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987], 3).

28 Compare the chronicle of disasters a few years later, covering the years 712–716 CE, in which the themes of judgment and repentance are prominent (A. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993], 45–48), and a Chalcedonian writer's interpretation of recent history in S.P. Brock, "North Mesopotamia in the late seventh century. Book XV of John Bar Penkayē's *Riš Mellē*", *JSAI* 19 (1987): 57–75 (repr. in S.P. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity. History, Literature and Theology* [Variorum; Hampshire: Ashgate, 1992], ch. II).

Egyptian slavery. Yet woe unto us! Because we sinned, slaves have gained authority over us!"[29] Similarly, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, dated to the early 690s by Palmer and Reinink, says of "these Children of Ishmael" "it was not because God loves them that he allowed them to enter the kingdom of the Christians, but because of the wickness and sin committed by Christians, the like of which was not done in any previous generation".[30]

In more than forty preserved scholia deriving from Jacob there is only one instance where he mentions contemporary historical circumstances. And yet, as in contemporaneous Syriac sources, Jacob uses the opportunity to make a connection between the sinful state of Syrian Orthodox Christians and their subjugation to the Arabs.[31]

> "And Rehoboam son of Solomon became king over Judah. Rehoboam was forty-six years old when he became king, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city that the Lord chose for himself to place his name in it, out of all the tribes of Israel. His mother's name was Ma'cah the Ammonite. Rehoboam and Judah did what was evil before the Lord', etc. etc." [= 1 Kings 14.21-22a]
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> From these words it is clear that all the people of Israel were ready to turn away from the Lord and to go after the error and abomination of the nations who worshipped demons, even if Jeroboam himself had not made the golden calves that he did, and through which he caused Israel to sin. For the people of Judah, who were not subject to Jeroboam, acted more wickedly than Jeroboam and the people of Israel, because it was their own desire to turn aside from the Lord and to serve the gods of the nations. In addition to dishonouring God and bowing down to idols, they also dishonoured and polluted the city of Jerusalem that the Lord had chosen for himself and over which he had invoked his Name.
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> For this reason when recounting that Rehoboam became king, the scriptural narrative wishes to demonstrate the extent of his wickedness and inquity by describing him as the son of Solomon, the one who abandoned God and worshipped idols. It also notes that it was in the city that the Lord had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel to set his name, that [Rehoboam] reigned: as one might say, he together with all the people of Israel that he ruled, dishonoured and defiled even this holy place.
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> Scripture also says that [Rehoboam] was the son of an Ammonite woman, who had made his father Solomon set up an idol and altar to Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites, to bow down to it and offer sacrifices to it. [Scripture says this] in order to [show] that the paganism and error learned from his father and mother, [Rehoboam] practised more thoroughly than his father and also more than Jeroboam himself, that lawless apostate who caused Israel to sin. Thus both Rehoboam and the people of Judah who were called the Lord's portion and the house of David, and were in the Lord's holy city of Jerusalem, sinned, acted wickedly and did what was evil

29 Syriac text ed. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dicto,* II (CSCO 104, SS 53; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1965), 154, lines 25–27.

30 Syriac text in Gerard J. Reinink, *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius* (CSCO 540, 541 ; 220, 221; Louvain: Peeters, 1993), Texte XI.5, p. 25, lines 9–12. See Reinink's long note, n. 3*, pp. 43–44.

31 The scholion appears in G. Phillips, *Scholia,* 39–41, Syriac *25–*27. Since Phillips's translation is both rather dated and occasionally misleading, I have provided a fresh version on the basis of BL Add. MS 14,483, fol. 18v–19v. I am grateful to David G.K. Taylor for assistance with a difficult section in the Syriac.

before the Lord, though they were called by his own Name.

Both through their name [i.e. Judah] and their small size, they portray typologically this small, confessing people, who are called and are indeed "orthodox" and acknowledge the Lord Christ, and are in the church, the city of God, Jerusalem, that the Lord chose for himself and sanctified out of all the peoples of the earth. Yet they provoke him by their deeds and lawless ways of life, "more than all the nations". This is because, despite being called by his Name, they cause everyone to stumble, even in the faith itself. As [God] would say, as well as "My own Name is blasphemed among the nations because of you", also "You have dishonoured and polluted the church, Jerusalem, the city that I chose, and my house you have made a cave of thieves".

So we are those who name ourselves true Christians and confessors of Christ and of the house of God, and "His portion, Jacob", and "Israel His inheritance", and "the people which sees God", and "the holy nation", and "the royal priesthood". Yet we have become those who sin more than anyone, and who are deprived of every virtue, and right behaviour, and of love, peace, and harmony. While these [virtues] were apparent in us, they declared us to be disciples of Christ. Their removal declares us to be opponents of Christ, as we trample upon his laws and the commandments that he taught us.

Thus, because of the wickedness of Rehoboam and of Judah, God brought on them Shushaqaym[32] king of Egypt. He took captives and scattered them, and he destroyed their cities because of their sins and their provocation, as divine Scripture recounts.

In the same way, because of our many sins and iniquities, Christ has delivered us up also. He has subjected us to the harsh yoke of the Arabs[33] who do not acknowledge him to be God and son of God — Christ, who is God and God's Son, he who bought us by his blood from the slavery of sin. He saved us through his cross from the subjection of the Accuser and of demons, and he freed us and rescued us by his death from death and corruption. He gave us true hope of resurrection from the dead, and he promised us the blessed life of the world to come, and a portion and inheritance of the kingdom of heaven. Because we did not understand all this grace and freedom that was given to us, and we were ungrateful and deniers of grace, we have been handed over to slavery and subjection, just as ancient Judah was [handed over] to plundering and captivity.

Jacob's scholion comments on a passage that presents no textual difficulty. Thus his choice of passage is, unusually, for theological reasons, the desire to explain contemporary issues through biblical precedent.[34] Yet the choice of 1 Kings 14 is not an obvious one even in this respect. Though it is possible that the post-Chalcedonian split over christology was seen as comparable to the split of the Northern Kingdom of Israel from the southern Kingdom of Judah after the reign of Solomon, Rehoboam and Shishak are not obvious ciphers for a particular Byzantine emperor and a particular caliph. Usually it is the Babylonian Exile that both Jewish and Christian authors use as the paradigm for the idea of God's chastisement. Or Jacob could have

32 This is closer to the form of the name found in the Septuagint, ratheer than the one in the Peshitta.

33 The term that Jacob uses here is *'Arabāyē* (from the Greek Ἀραβαιοι). In other places he tends to use two other terms, *Ṭayāyē*, originally referring to the Syrian Arab tribe of the *Ṭay* but later applied more widely to Arabs as an ethnic designation; or the religious designation *Mahgrāyē*, used to denote Muslims.

34 See for instance John Gray, *I and II Kings*. Old Testament Library (2nd rev. edn.; London: SCM Press, 1970), 340–46, on the Deuteronomistic editor/writer.

chosen a story from Judges describing Philistine oppression of the pre-monarchic tribes as divine chastisement for unfaithfulness to the Lord.

Towards the end of the scholion Jacob refers to "Shushaqaym" king of Egypt taking captives, scattering the people and destroying the cities because of the people's sins. However, in the biblical account in 1 Kings 14, Shishak comes up to Jerusalem and then merely departs with the treasures of Jerusalem. In fact Jacob's comment on the Kings passage must have been influenced by the more detailed parallel account of Rehoboam's reign found in 2 Chron 12:1-14. Unlike the version in 1 Kings, 2 Chronicles describes the king of Egypt plundering and attacking cities widely in Judah, and raiding Jerusalem including both palace and Temple. Rehoboam then humbles himself before the Lord in response to a prophet who accuses him of infidelity to God. The Egyptian army therefore leaves.[35] One explanation for this is that the books of Chronicles are less prominent in Syriac churches (and are barely commented on), so that while Chronicles provided useful material for Jacob's exegesis of the passage in 1 Kings, he may not have wanted to depend on the Chronicles account explicitly. Perhaps the use of the version in Chronicles also subtly suggested the possiblity of redemption through communal repentance?

The last section of Jacob's scholion has three interlocking motifs, brought out by the structure of the discourse and the vocabulary used by Jacob. First, there is the "Deuteronomistic" paradigm of divine chastisement for sin, where he creates a parallel between the case of Judah/Jerusalem and the contemporary situation of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Secondly, there is the idea that because Christians denied God's grace in Christ, they have been handed into the power of those who deny Christ's divine status (i.e the punishment fits the crime). Finally, there is the perception that because Christians failed to appreciate Christ's liberation of them from slavery to sin and subjugation to the devil and to demons, they are punished by being delivered into slavery and subjugation to the Arabs instead.

Another work that may be connected to Jacob's interpretation of current

35 David Phillips, "The Reception of Peshitta Chronicles: Some elements for investigation" in *The Peshitta: Its Use in Literature and Liturgy. Papers read at the 3rd Peshitta Symposium, e*d. Robert B. ter Haar Romeny (MPIL 15; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 259—95. He notes that although Chronicles was fully canonical by the seventeenth century and appeared in complete bibles, in the seventh century MS 7a1, the book was in "bad company", i.e. it appears with the deuteroncanonical books Judith, Ben Sira, Apocalypse of Baruch, 4 Ezra (261). But from the eighth century onwards Chronicles appears in "good company", following the books of Kings. Phillips comments that Jacob terms Chronicles "the book of Missing Things [*Ḥasīrāṯā,* like the Greek name for the book, Παραλειπόμενα]" in a scholion in his own version of Samuel (267).

events, is the *Testamentum Domini,* a semi-apocalyptic work prefaced to the "Clementine" collection of church canons.[36] It purports to be an account of Jesus Christ warning his followers about the end times, and commanding his disciples to observe his commands, precisely. Then they will be preserved in the time of trial in the coming days of oppression. By "Christ's commands" the work refers to the church canons that covered many aspects of ecclesiastical life, from the structure of the church building to the character of the bishop, the form of prayers, and various other rules. Following the discourse between Jesus and the disciples the text presents the canons as spoken by Christ himself. The *Testamentum Domini* includes an apocalyptic section where Jesus describes the suffering of the end times and the coming of the Antichrist. The precedent for this is the Gospel account of Jesus warning his disciples about the eschaton before his death (Matt 24:7).

Some scholars[37] have argued that the *Testamentum Domini* was updated or even composed by Jacob, who almost certainly was responsible for translating it from Greek to Syriac in 686/7 CE.[38] The *Testamentum Domini* is particularly concerned with canonical laxity on the part of the "evil pastors" whose vices will cause unbelief and other sins among the nations during the endtimes.[39] In the time of the Son of Perdition, Syria's fate is the first to be mentioned: "Syria will be captive and mourn for her children".[40]

The *Testamentum Domini* shares the concerns expressed in Jacob's scholion on 1 Kings 14. It also has parallels with the account of Jacob's life which states that Jacob resigned the bishopric of Edessa because of the clergy's laxity and failure to

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36 Arthur Vööbus, ed., *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition,* vol. I, 27-32, Syriac text 1–7.

37 Principally Han J.W. Drijvers, "The Testament of our Lord: Jacob of Edessa's response to Islam" in *ARAM* 6 (1994): 104–114; and Drijvers, "The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, 1. Problems in the Literary Source Material,* eds. Averil Cameron and Lawrence J. Conrad (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1992), 189–213, esp. 209–10. Michael Kohlbacher is one of the scholars who disagree ("Wessen Kirche ordnete das Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi? Anmerkungen zum historischen Kontext von CPG 1743," in eds. Martin Tamcke and Andreas Heinz, *Zu Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie und Gegenwartslage der syrischen Kirchen. Ausgewählte Vorträge des deutschen Syrologen-Symposiums vom 2.–4 Oktober 1998 in Hermannsburg* [Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte 9; Münster/Hamburg/London: LIT, 2000], 55–137).

38 According to the subscription in some manuscripts, ascribing the work of translation to "the wretched man Jacob [*meskinā*]" and providing a date of AG 998: Ignatius Ephrem II Rahmani, *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* (Mainz, 1899; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), p. XIV. The *Testamentum* forms the first two books of the Clementine Octateuch: Arthur Vööbus, *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition* (CSCO 367 and 368, SS 161, 162), Texte 1–49, Version 27–64, and Herman Teule, "Jacob of Edessa and Canon Law," in *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day*, 84–86.

39 Vööbus, *Synodicon*, Syriac text, 3.

40 Vööbus, *Synodicon*, Syriac text, 5. Other nations affected by the upheavals are Cilicia, Babylon, Cappadocia, Lycia, Lycaonia, Armenia, Pontus, Bithynia, Pisidia, Judea, Phoenicia. Vööbus's

observe church canons. He then burned a book of canons in front of the patriarch's house.[41] Han Drijvers argued that the laxity of observance that Jacob criticised was linked to the patriarch Julian's accommodation with Muslims, and that Jacob feared Christian conversion to Islam.[42] This of course may be reading too much into these sources, although as Robert Hoyland observes, apostasy to Islam is certainly of concern to Jacob in his canonical rulings.[43]

The *Testamentum Domini* and the scholion on 1 Kings 14 differ a little in emphasis. In the scholion Jacob's concern is that the hardships of the late seventh century are divine chastisement for falling Christian standards of behaviour. In the *Testamentum Domini,* the writer advocates virtuous conduct and adherence to canonical norms, in order to withstand persecution and receive a divine reward. In neither text does there seem to be any hope of an imminent improvement of the earthly situation for Christians.

Given Jacob's hostility towards Jews in this period, it is ironic that both his diagnosis of the cause of his community's plight as God's punishment for their sin and his advocacy of precise observance of religious law are resemble those of rabbinic Jews in Late Antiquity. But it is an attitude common to other contemporary works by Christians in this region.

3. Use of syllogism and chronological arguments: the Davidic descent of the Virgin Mary

> That the Messiah is of Davidic descent is confessed by everyone, whether Jews, Mahgrāyē, or by Christians. They all confess that he was incarnate and made human by nature. So this, that the Messiah is of Davidic descent by the flesh, is the confession as was predicted by the holy prophets, and is a fundamental belief for all, whether Jews, *Mahgrāyē* [Muslims] or Christians. As for the Jews, I said that it was a fundamental statement even though they deny the true Messiah who has truly come. Even in the case of that false Messiah that they expect, they firmly state that he is a descendant of

translation is rather inaccurate on page 29.

41 Michael the Syrian, ed. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* (4 vols.; 1899–1910), vol. 4, 445–46 (Syr.); vol. 2, 471–472 (French translation) (Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1963). The shorter version of Barhebraeus can be found in eds. Jean-Baptiste Abbeloos and Thomas Joseph Lamy, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, vol. 1 (Louvain: Peeters, 1872), 289–94.

42 Drijvers, "Testament of Our Lord", **pp.?** and see also Drijvers, "The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles," where he argues that the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* was influenced by the *Testamentum Domini* (213).

43 Robert G. Hoyland, "Jacob and Early Islamic Edessa", in *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of his Day,* ed. Robert B. ter Haar Romeny (MPIL 18; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 16–18; and Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), pp. 162–163.

David and is destined to come from him. The *Mahgrāyē* too, even though they do not know or wish to say that this true Messiah (who has come and is confessed by Christians) is God and Son of God, [they admit] that he is the true Messiah who was to come and who was foretold by the prophets. All of them [i.e. Muslims] confess it firmly, and they have no dispute with us about this, but instead they disagree with Jews over it.

...I myself judge that by means of a compelling and convincing syllogism of this kind we can demonstrate to any Christian or *Mahgrāyā* who asks whether the Holy Virgin Mary, the God-bearer, is of Davidic descent, even though this cannot be demonstrated from Scripture. We should not adduce testimony about this from popular and superfluous stories cited by many people, and recorded and read, but which are not part of Holy Scripture. O lover of the truth, I know well that there are stories written by zealous people on their own initiative, without any confirmation from Scripture, that demonstrate that the Holy Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, was daughter of Anna and the just man Joachin...

As I have already stated, I do not wish to prove what is required by means of superfluous proof from a popular story, but instead through this compelling and convincing syllogism.... If it should happen that the man who in conversation presses you about this, whether he is a *Mahgrāyā* or a Christian, if he is intelligent and has a rational approach, he will understand the syllogism when he hears it and testify to its truthfulness of his own accord, without disputing it...

I must now set forth for you here the words of the Prophets, which show you clearly that Christ is of Davidic descent in the flesh, and after that it will be shown to you as a refutation to the Jews that the Messiah did come at the time he was meant to, as was written about him, and that therefore [Jewish] hope is empty, since for their wickedness and blindness of heart they have been consigned to believe in falsehood and not truth....[44]

This text, from Jacob's 6th letter to his correspondent John the Stylite, reflects both Jacob's animosity towards Jews (as mentioned previously) and a perhaps surprisingly neutral attitude towards Muslims. Jacob also employs a less common method of solving a problem in Scripture, namely syllogism.

The accounts of Christ's birth in the gospels of Matthew and Luke give the genealogy of Jesus from King David by the paternal line. But for anyone who accepts the Virgin Birth of Jesus, Joseph was not Jesus' natural father, and so John of Litarba's question is, was Mary also of Davidic descent?

Jacob's letter is typically rather repetitious and convoluted, so I will summarise his argument. He cannot rely on the apocryphal accounts for proof of Mary's Davidic descent: although they were written by people motivated by pious intentions, they are not part of Holy Scripture. This is an interesting objection, as Jacob was only too ready to use apocryphal material for "gap-filling" and problem-solving in the case of Old Testament passages, as we saw earlier. Yet because

44 François Nau, "Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse sur la généalogie de la sainte Vierge," *ROC* 6 (1901): 512–31, from BL Add. MS 12, 272, fols. 87v-91r.

Christians and Muslims shared a common belief in Mary's virginity and that her son Jesus was Christ/the Messiah, it is possible that Jacob was reluctant to use proofs that Muslims would certainly have rejected as being unscriptural.

i) The first premise of the syllogism is that the Messiah has already come, and at the time foretold by the Prophets. Jacob goes into this step in some chronological detail, to counter Jewish arguments that the prophesied Messiah has not yet come. He demonstrates that Jewish reckonings of the number of years until the coming of the Messiah (based on Daniel) are erroneous, and that his own reckoning is correct: so Christ has already come, at the time foretold.

ii) The second premise is that the Messiah was of Davidic descent. Again, this is supported by scriptural arguments.

iii) The conclusion of the syllogism is thus that, since the Messiah born of Mary was of Davidic descent, his mother Mary was necessarily also of Davidic descent.

Thus Jacob displays his well-known interests in chronography and philosophy, but in this instance he employs them in an exegetical context. An awareness of Muslim beliefs in relation to a central tenet of Christianity is a fairly new feature of Christian exegesis, and Jacob takes an eirenic approach: though Jacob ascribes Muslim use of the term "Spirit of God" to refer to Jesus as due to ignorance, he otherwise does not criticise them. By contrast, he attacks the obduracy of Jewish beliefs that Jacob, in an all-too familiar way.

3. Conclusion

Jacob depends on earlier Christian interpretative techniques such as typology and *theoria*, worked out in traditional genres such as commentary and scholia as well as letters. Where there are difficulties in the biblical text he compares the Syriac Peshitta with the Greek Septuagint, and uses information from what he acknowledges are Jewish extra-canonical works but vouched for by apostolic authority.

Unsurprisingly, Jacob's interpretation of history is heavily influenced by the Deuteronomistic theology of the Old Testament that holds sway for both Christians and rabbinic Jews. So he attributes the domination of Christians by the Arabs to Christian sin, and his implied response is similar to that of the late biblical era and the rabbis: a rigorous keeping of the "commandments" – in his case, those of Jesus

Christ, rather than the precepts of the Torah.

Despite Jacob's regard for Scripture, if Drijvers is correct and Jacob was indeed responsible for the form of the *Testamentum Domini* that we have, this would suggest a lack of embarrassment about presenting a work that claimed dominical authority. The *Testamentum Domini* shows strong affinities with other apocalyptic documents of the period from the region: the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*[45] and the *Apocalypse of Ps-Methodius*;[46] the *Edessene Apocalypse*; John of Fenek's *Riš Mellē*. Though these works were written by Melkites,[47] monophysites and Eastern church writers, rather than by Syrian Orthodox scholars, they all appear to have been composed from the late 680s to early 690s. They respond in similar ways to the disruption of the Second Fitna, the plague and famine which followed, and the subsequent heavy taxation under Abdul Malik. Most of these works, like Jacob's scholion, attribute Muslim domination to divine punishment for Christian sin.

Where Scripture failed to answer a key question, that concerning the Davidic descent of Mary the mother of Jesus, Jacob did not turn to the Church's apocryphal stories of Mary's birth to fill in this apparent gap in the biblical account. Instead he turned to a combination of chronography and syllogism to prove his point in a way that could be countenanced by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

45 James Rendel Harris, ed., *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles together with the Apocalypses of each one of them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900); Han J. Drijvers, "The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: A Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period," *Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East 1.,* 189–213.

46 See Gerard Reinink, "Ps.-Methodius: a Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam," in *Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East 1*, 149–87;

47 Middle Eastern Christians adhering to the Chalcedonian confession of the Byzantine Empire.