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MACARIAN OR EVAGRIAN:
THE PROBLEM OF ORIGENIST LEGACY IN EASTERN SYRIAC
MYSTICAL LITERATURE*

It is well known that the Syriac ascetic tradition was considerably influenced by an Origenist flow of ideas in the form of Evagrian «noetic» mysticism¹. However, it was not asceticism itself but its Christological implications which played an important role in the history of the divisions in the Christian Orient and constitute the core of the «second Origenism» problem. Simply speaking, asceticism and Christology do treat the same subject: Jesus Christ, true God and true Man. Therefore, to retrace the ways by which Origenism made its way into the Syriac-speaking *milieu* would be a task by far exceeding the limits of this article, the purpose of which, rather, will be twofold:

1. to better locate the Christological implications of the Syrian mysticism amongst two traditions, those of Evagrius and of pseudo-Macarius;
2. to try to determinate a somewhat broader context in which this theology developed.

1. Hagiographic context: Mār Awgēn, a New Vindication of Egypt

The origin of the coenobitic monasticism in Syria and Mesopotamia is traditionally connected with the cult of Morūghē (Mār Awgēn), which became widespread amongst Syrians in approximately the 6th century². Mar Awgēn was a Syrian who retired to Egypt, entered the monastery of Pachomius and became his disciple. After some time he decided to return back to Mesopotamia. Tradition has him bringing some kind of monastic discipline influenced by Pachomian Rule into the Syriac *milieu*³. Though his dossier (BHO 120, 121) is a typical legendary one⁴ and no apparent ties did exist between the Syriac initial monasticism (*ihīdayūthā*) and the coenobitic Pachomian tradition, a certain typological likeness can be noted between ascribing monastic tradition to a disciple of Pachomius and ascribing one

* It is my pleasant duty to thank the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris) for granting me the possibility to attend the «Colloquium». Further I should express my deepest gratitude to Sister Vassa (Larina) for improving my English style.

1. It is of major importance to distinguish between the personal asceticism of Evagrius and that of the later overtly Origenist *milieu* influenced by some Evagrian ideas but quite unique in content.

2. A. ДЯКОНОВ, *Къ истории купѣкаго сказанія о св. Марѣ-Евгѣнѣ*, in *Khristianskij Vostok* 6/2 (1918) 107-174; J.M. FIEY, *Aonès, Awun et Awgin (Eugène). Aux origines du monachisme mésopotamien*, in *AB* 80 (1962) 52-81.

3. The *Life* of Mār Awgēn, AAMS, III, ed. BEDJAN, 376-480, in ch. 9 describes how Mar Awgēn founded a monastery on Mt. Izla near Me'arthā, where the community lived for 30 years.

4. The discussions are being held on the historicity of Mār Awgēn himself, as well as on different topics of the *Life*.

of the most famous Syriac ascetic *corpora* to the famous Egyptian hermit Macarius. The case of the Macarian *corpus* is a πολυθρόλλητον and we shall not go into details, but for a small note. The recent research by P. Géhin revealed that some Macarian pieces were combined with apophthegms about Macarius the Egyptian quite early and for the most pieces which have been for a long time thought as originally Syriac or Arabic, Greek originals exist. That could mean that the name of the famous Coptic hermit was forged as an author for the *corpus* in some perhaps bilingual monastic milieu⁵. The very name of Symeon of Mesopotamia, who was the most probable author of the *corpus*, became unpopular after the condemnation of messalian heresy in Ephesus 431.

The cycle of Mār Awgēn is strongly connected to another mysterious dossier – that of St. Jacob of Nisibis. This holy bishop was the very one who found Noah's ark on the Masis (biblical Ararat) and under whose name the *Demonstrations* of Afrahat were translated into Armenian. As his *Life* puts it, Mār Awgēn was one of the promoters of St. Jacob's episcopal election to the see of Nisibis. Neither in the *Life* nor in the different traditions concerning Mār Awgēn and his 69 disciples is there any trace of Palestinian-Evagrian influence⁶. To my mind it means that one is dealing with some tradition which counter-posed itself to the mainstream of the Church of the East which tried to purify Evagrian tradition from the interpretation of Stephen bar-Sud'aylē (or *apa* John) and return to «pure» Evagrius. A. Diakonov rightly wrote that «the history of the *Life of Mar Awgēn* before the 7th century (and afterwards) is quite obscure..., but the *Life* should have originated not later than the beginning of the 6th century»⁷. It is of great importance for the history of Mār Awgēn that «Abdišō» in his *Catalogue* writes that Theodore of Merw wrote in the 6th cent. a *memra* on Mār Awgēn (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܐ ܕܡܪܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܘܢܐ). Theodore, who was a disciple of catholicos Mār Abā and a *mefēškānā* (official interpreter of Scriptures) in the School of Persians in Nisibis, travelled together with his teacher and with Paul of Nisibis to Justinian's court between 525 and 533 in order to discuss Christological matters. Unfortunately protocols of that discussion published by A. Guillaumont are uncompleted, but the whole enterprise ended in nothing. The circle of Mār Abā (Πατρικίος) tended to a certain «pro-western» position. The same Theodore corresponded with the famous western Syriac scholar Sergius of Reš'aynā. In his *memra* Theodore glorifies the great Syriac *abba*, who spent all his life in Mesopotamia and founded a monastery there. There is no mention, neither of Egypt, nor of Pachomius. It was as a consequence of an adaptation that some author used this early tradition to justify Egyptian myth: the

5. The most up-to-date survey can be found in St. Macarius, *Преподобный Макарий Египетский Духовные слова и послания* / Изд. А.Г. Дунаев, Moscow 2002, esp. pp. 37-323.

6. Evagrian pieces could have penetrated into Syrian monastic circles with some monastic groups or single monks coming from Egypt or fleeing from anti-Origenist archbishop Theophilus. At quite an early date Evagrian apophthegms were introduced in most monastic paterica and florilegia.

7. ДЯКОНОВ (n. 2), 142: the author's point of view was that it was Michael who composed the early version of the *Life*. The later redactor recomposed it in order to make us think that he was an eye-witness and a disciple of Awgēn (p. 134).

Macarian «Egyptian» asceticism comes along with St. Pachomius and his disciple Mār Awgēn.

The beginnings of the Nestorian monastic movement were connected with Abraham of Nathpar, a representative of quite an early ascetic tradition close to that of Afrahat or Saḥdōnā, free of any Evagrian or Macarian influence. But in the 7th-8th cent. the *akme* of the Eastern Syriac asceticism practically sanctioned Evagrian ascetic language after which it became widely adopted. The core of the eastern Syriac ascetic tradition was created by a certain succession of writers, the most important of which was Isaac the Syrian. Others were John of Dalyāthā, Dadishō' of Qatar, Joseph Hazzāyā (or the Seer), Shem'ōn the Graceful or of Taybūteh and Abrāhām bar Dashandad. Some of them were condemned under catholicos Timotheos I by the Synod of the Church of the East in 786 or 787 for their «messalianism». In fact, Eastern Syriac ascetical writers actually used both Evagrius and Macarian writings as well as Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita and some other mystical Fathers of the Byzantine tradition. Thus, although the writers pertaining to the Eastern Syriac mystical tradition (Isaac, John of Dalyāthā) leaned to the Macarian language, it would generally be an unhistorical exaggeration to give prevalence to one language and to exclude the other.

The question as to what extent that language was translated for the later generations of ascetics and in particular that of St. Isaac the Syrian, the most characteristic representative of this group, compels us to analyse some passages of his *corpus*. Following the analysis of S. Brock we discern «the remembering of the mighty works of the infinite divine care, need to recover childlike quality», clear differentiation between spiritual and intellectual knowledge, detachment from the world (= the passions). The goal of the spiritual process is a «natural state» of illumination, its forerunner – the gift of tears, the means – seeking God, freedom of earthly cares and incessant prayer. For the perfect one the divine care is revealed clearly and there can be «no fortuitous events». This spiritual process had some specific features of which three are of particular importance: twofold anthropology, the emphasised unity «body-soul» (the mystic of heart) and emphasis on contrition. These themes may be called the principal ones for the majority of the Eastern Syriac ascetic writers.

There are indications that it was John of Dalyāthā who may be regarded as the marker of a synthesis. He lived before 581 and wrote his famous *Spiritual Letters*. There with the aid of the Dionysian writings he develops an interesting system of spiritual grades (*taksē*), bodily, psychic and spiritual. These correspond to the ascetic progress from the perfection in the commandments through the *theoria* to the purity (*dakhyūthā*) and permanent prayer. The two latter terms are of overtly Evagrian origin and are parts of the borrowings-theory but in a quite ingenious manner they are combined with Macarian and Dionysian themes as the triad purification-illumination-unity. That gives: 1st phase – purification, 2nd – diligence (*hubbā*) and the 3rd – perfect love (*hubbā*) which is a unity. The synthesis of Evagrian ascetics, Dionysian mystics and biblical anthropology of Ps.-Macarius was in a great part the merit of John. His influence was prolonged to the 12th century, when Dionysius bar Salibi commented upon the second Syriac version of the *Centuries* of Evagrius.

2. Evagrius in Syriac Dress

Most of the work on the *Evagriana syriaca* was undertaken by A. Guillaumont, J. Muyldermans and I. Hausherr⁸ who did a lot of text editing and formulated some conceptions upon which the story of the Syriac Origenism is basically reconstructed. We would like just to add some points to this picture.

Evagrian writings were quite widely spread in the Syrian monastic circles mainly due to the high esteem granted to Evagrius' ascetic teaching. Many generations of Syriac monks and nuns, regardless of their confessional beliefs, read Evagrian treatises in their daily monastic readings. Furthermore, it is believed however that in the Syriac Orient Evagrius did not have such a bad reputation as it had later in the Greco-Roman world (the situation worsened esp. after the 6th cent. with the anathemas on Origen, Didymus and Evagrius himself), because he was perceived very early not as a cosmologist but as a monastic writer from Egypt. The complex of ideas which may be described as later Origenism (of which Evagrius makes an essential part) found its way into the Syriac monastic world gradually. Firstly, by means of different collections of apophthegm-like *gnomai* or short sentences, then by way of more detailed collections, where Evagrius was represented with whole works, and finally by a number of translations of Evagrius' works under his name. Quite typically *Homily* 64 of St. Isaac the Syrian (Bedjan 65, Theotokis 34) mentions Evagrius thrice: first when speaking of compunction as of a furnace, he mentions «*abba* Evagrius» as author of different ascetic *gnomai* like: «compunction is like a fire of furnace during the prayer» or «a clear pathway comes from showing mercy» or (the most eloquent) «to ponder upon death for God's sake brings our intellect to union with God»⁹. Although there are more quotations from Evagrian pieces, nowhere else in the *corpus* is Evagrius mentioned by name. St. Isaac's comparatively cautious usage of Evagrian tradition has its pre-history.

a. *The Book of the Holy Hierotheus and the Hnanite Movement in the Church of the East*

The most intriguing is the situation in the Eastern Syriac Church in the 5th-6th cent., the period directly preceding the prime of the mystical tradition. It looks as if there was a strong Origenist movement from which Stephen bar Sud'aylê among others came. It is known that Stephen resided some time in Egypt where he learnt Origenist ideas from some monk called John. Although Stephen flourished in the monophysite milieu, even there Philoxenos was advising his friends to be cautious with Stephen because of his serious dogmatic deviations. It is not clear, whether the famous *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, a witness of a mystical trend which had a considerable influence upon the Palestine monastic circles, was a work of his, but it is very

8 A. GUILLAUMONT, *Les Kephalaia Gnostika d'Évagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'origénisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens*, Paris 1962. I. HAUSHERR, *Le De Oratione d'Évagre le Pontique en syriaque et en arabe*, in *Orientalia* 9 (1939) 7-71.

9 The latest *gnomai* is found only in Syriac.

likely¹⁰. He tried to combine Evagrian Origenism and his own pantheistic approach, making use of the Dionysian writings. His approach was highly eschatological and pantheistic at the same time: in the *eschaton* all will be God.

However this type of esoteric mystical theory was an isolated phenomenon and had no real continuation beyond that Palestinian movement¹¹. When the Palestinian crisis broke out, emperor Justinian published his writings against Origenists initiating two edicts of 543 and 553 as well as conciliar decisions against them: it wasn't so much the pre-existence or *apocatastasis* but rather christological issues that were central and played the role of motivation¹².

As far as the Syriac Orient is concerned, the main *crux* is a case with the anathematization of Hnana of Hedayab pronounced under *catholicos* Išō'yav for the triple heresy: «chaldeism», «Origenism» and «heresy in general». According to his adversaries, Hnana subscribed to the opinion about the animated character of the stars, denied the judgement and thought that men can participate in the Nature of God. The most virulent of his adversaries, Babai the Great, was the most important Nestorian theologian of the 6th cent. Church of the East who made a decisive christological turn toward the two *quomae* theory. He wrote an extensive commentary to the *Centuries* of Evagrius, aimed precisely at Hnana¹³. One cannot but sense that it was not Hnana's ascetic teaching Babai was aiming at but his pro-Chalcedonian christology. But having set out to refute Hnana as Origenist, he points even to the doctrine of the spherical form of souls after the resurrection¹⁴. Witnesses point only to his attempt to reorientate the christology from Theodore and Diodore of Tarsus toward St. John Chrysostomus¹⁵. Significantly, it was the Palestinian Origenists who built the case against Antiochene teachers and instigated the condemnation of the Three Chapters.

b. *Origenist Anthropology vs. Nestorian Christology*

The Syriac ascetic writers tried to distance themselves from the extreme dyophysite christology of Babai, and at the same time from «Evagrian» anthropology which

10. A.L. FROTHINGHAM, *Stephen Bar Sudaili the Syrian Mystic and the Book of Hierotheos*, Leiden 1886; F.S. MARSH, *The Book which is called the Book of the Holy Hierotheos with extracts from the Prolegomena and Commentary of Theodosios of Antioch and from the Book of Excerpts and other works of Gregory Bar Hebraeus*, London - Oxford 1927; T. JANSMA, *Philoxenus' Letter to Abraham and Orestes concerning Stephen bar Sudaili. Some proposals with regard to the correction of the Syriac text and the English translation*, in *Museum* 87 (1974) 79-86.

11. Even there it is not altogether proven that Stephen's mystic was the *causa malorum*.

12. A. GUILLAUMONT, *Les Kephalaia Gnostika* (n. 8), 136-151. Settling matters in the field of Christology was the biggest concern for Justinian during all his lifetime.

13. W. FRANKENBERG, *Evagrius Ponticus*, in *AKGWG n.s.* XIII/2 (1912) 8-471, cf. GUILLAUMONT, *Les Kephalaia Gnostika* (n. 8), 259-290. Babai's writings of the same time on the Spiritual Rule of the Monk Marcus: *Cognitio sapientiae. Die Erkenntnis der Wahrheit nach den unveröffentlichten beiden Sermones Babais des Grossen über das Gesetz des Mönches Markus*, in *StPatr* 5 (1962) 377-381.

14. In fact Babai was refuting not only Hnana's ascetical or protological teachings, but also his and Justinian's christology; all his christological polemic can be found in: *Synodicon Orientale ou recueil des synodes nestoriens*, ed. J.-B. CHABOT, Paris 1902, 625-634.

15. J. LABOURT, *Le christianisme dans l'empire perse*, Paris 1904, 280.

implied Origenist overtones in christology. Paradoxically that christology suited Babai and his adherents from the Small Monastery of the Mt. Izla. The point of divergence laid in what we called ascetical anthropology: an anthropological concept of man as a whole, how man was «taken on» (لَحْص) by the Saviour and how it should be treated by «ascetics» (مَسْكَنَة) imitating the Only-begotten. Since A. Grillmeier has already made a profound analysis of Evagrius' and «Evagrian» christology¹⁶, I shall reiterate only the anthropological topics which could have made a link between an extreme Origenistic understanding of man and an extreme dyophysite christology. We shall begin with the status of the body. The body in the Origenistic sense is a result of the fall for the πνεύματα καθάρá and should be in «classic Origenism» for the most part disregarded. Subsequently its role for the salvation as opposed to that of νοῦς / ψυχὴ λογικὴ is less emphasized. To this effect Evagrius says for instance (*Practical chapters* 52-53) that the body cannot be separated from the soul physically, but the soul should separate itself (ἀναχώρησις) from the body. The body is only an impediment for the purification of intellect. This was impossible to adopt for Syriac mystics in such a form. Thus St. Isaac in the first *memrā* (*logos*) says «the intelligence (*nous / re'ayānā*) is a part of the spirit (*ruhā*)» which reflects his basic idea that the aim of the ascetic is the liberation from the flesh, but while in the flesh the ascetic should act together with it.

It is noticeable that the same Babai the Great was also responsible for the disorder in the Great Monastery on the Mt. Izla, where he was abbot. Here a group of elders (Mar Jacob was amongst them) had to leave their abode because of the abbot's overwhelming stringency¹⁷. His extreme Nestorian position in christology (two *kyānē*, two *qnōmē* thus producing a volte-face from earlier two *kyānē*-one *qnōmā* language) also gave cause for opposition from monks who were disciples of the Macarian theology and its «language of mixture». As previously mentioned, it was the Palestinian Origenists with Theodore Askidas who initiated under Justinian the process of condemnation of the Three Chapters – «Origen's revenge», as Alois Grillmeier put it. Theodore wanted to rescue his fellow-monks, devoted to Origenist theology by means of the condemnation of the Antiochene teachers. Ascetic theology and the anthropology of Evagrius were thus disputed by the Nestorian teacher Babai and the Origenist monk Theodore.

Although we do not know in what form Macarian writings were available to Isaac and other Syriac monastic writers, one can suppose that the theology of the Macarian type served as a base for them¹⁸. In the writings of the Syriac mystics one can observe the following main themes: anthropology close to Macarian one and the Macarian conception of purification combined with the exhaustion of the body in order to obtain the desired state of unity. Particularly, the usage of the word

heart (*lebbā / kardia*) in St. Isaac is somewhat different from Evagrius, who prefers to use the word *nous* (V 1, D29: «faith comes from grace and through the testimony of the mind fortifies heart»). In the *memrā* 31 Isaac says that «no earthly thoughts come to my heart»; *memrā* 37: «the heart of the saints can contemplate God face to face»; *memrā* 38: «the heart which took into itself the feeling of spiritual is dead for the passions» etc. But the most elucidating passage is *memrā* 3: «the heart is a principle or root, the mind is a sense». Paradoxically as it may seem, this more or less «Macarian» exposition serves as a prelude to the Evagrian expressions as the «nudity of the intellect» and «*theoria* as a cloak of the mind».

The first complete translations of Evagrius' writings were made by Western Syriac scholars like Philoxenus. We know that it was in the fight with the Origenist christology of patriarch Eutychius, that a certain form of *apharsia*-doctrine was developed by the Emperor Justinian. This phase ended with the emergence of the monothelete christology. All this evolution was completely foreign to the theologians of the Church of the East, for the condemnation of the Three Chapters and the turn to the «*trēn-qnōmē*» christological language made a deep abyss between the two theologies. But it seems that St. Isaac, the most prolific and influent author of the Eastern Syriac tradition, had left us some landmarks. In the D4 of the Vol. I Isaac refutes the perverse conception about the body of Christ being impalpable and somewhat phantasmal. One wonders whether this was the counterweight against Cyrillian theopaschite language of Justinian and some «miaphysites» who tried to make a bridge between the christological anthropology of Severians (individual manhood) and the orthodox doctrine? The Evagrian reception by the Eastern Syriac mystics did not deny the idea of the «spiritual body», but applied this idea only to the Body of the resurrected Christ and the bodies of the men after the resurrection. But this was in a certain way contrary to the intuition of Evagrius himself.

Conclusion

Certainly there are more questions than answers here. It is clear that Evagrian (*i.e.* more or less Origenist) influence was very much present in the Eastern Syriac milieu and had left its stamp on the mystical doctrine of the Eastern Syriac Fathers. But as a result of the struggle with the heretical interpretation of *hnanites* (*isochristoi*) and the cyrillican *apharsia* language, it was ingeniously combined with Dionysius and Macarius. Through the *Logoi* of St. Isaac this type of theology came down to the Byzantine and Russian monastic circles. The dialogue went on over barriers: the Syriac mystic succeeded in operating synthesis.

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16. A. Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche. I: Von der apostolischen Zeit bis zum Konzil von Chalcedon*, Freiburg Basel - Wien 1990; II/2: *Die Kirche von Konstantinopel im A. M.*, Freiburg Basel Wien 1999.

17. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, I, ed. F. A. WALLIS BUDGE, London 1893, 7ff.

18. The role of the macarian corpus in the Syriac milieu was investigated by W. STROTHMANN, *Makarios und die Makarianerlehre in der syrischen Literatur*, in *OrChr* 54 (1970) 96-105.