GREEK BIOGRAPHY AND PANEGYRIC IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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The Syriac Life of Rabbula and Syrian Hellenism

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In 1865 J. J. Overbeck published for the first time the text of a manuscript in the British Museum that is the only surviving witness to a hagiographic account of the life and achievements of a fifth-century bishop of Edessa, Rabbula.[1] The manuscript, written in Syriac on parchment, displays an estrangelo hand that is generally agreed to date from the sixth century. Since Rabbula died in 435 or 436, this manuscript is relatively close to the bishop's own time, and the lack of any contamination from Theodoret's biographies of Syrian ascetics, the Φιλόθεος ἱστορία produced in 444/5, has led some to believe that the work was written very soon after Rabbula's death. Whatever the precise date of composition, this life is remarkably free from the legendary accretions that mark the lines about Rabbula in the Greek biography of Alexander Akoimētos, who is there credited with converting the future bishop of Edessa from the paganism in which he grew up. The life of Alexander also survives in a single manuscript but from the tenth or eleventh century, and its late date suggests that its substance may be a confection put together well after the Syriac life of Rabbula.[2] The Syriac life makes no mention at all of Alexander.

The Syriac text has been reprinted a few times directly from Overbeck's transcription, and it appears in an abridged form in the chrestomathy that concludes Carl Brockelmann's still indispensable *Syrische Grammatik.* It has attracted remarkably little attention from histori-

1. Overbeck, ed., *S. Ephraemi Syri Rabulae Episcopi Edesseni Balaei Aliorumque opera selecta,* 159–221. I am grateful to the participants in the Bergen colloquium, and in particular to the two editors of this volume, for comments on this chapter. Christopher Jones, who was among those present in Bergen, has done me the great service of commenting helpfully on several drafts, both before and after the colloquium.

2. De Stoop, ed., *Vie d'Alexandre l'Acémète* (*PO* 6, fasc. 5).

ans of late antiquity, possibly because it has been translated into no modern language since Gustav Bickell's unsatisfactory rendering into German in 1874.[3] Yet the narrative of Rabbula's career down to his appointment as bishop in Edessa abounds in detailed references to the Hellenic culture of Syria in the latter part of the fourth century and the early years of the fifth. It affords glimpses into the society of Chalcis (Qennishrîn), where Rabbula was born, and into the asceticism of the desert. It takes the reader to Beroea (Aleppo) and to Cyrrhus, as well as to Jerusalem and Baʿalbek. It is possible that the author was drawing on personal recollection of Rabbula, but he must also have had access to written accounts, including pagan ones. An identification of Christ as "the god of the Christians" (well after he has already been mentioned several times earlier) cannot conceivably be the words of the Christian writer of the extant text.[4] All this material deserves to be taken seriously, not least because the study to which most scholars still turn is a viciously reductionist analysis made by the Bollandist Paul Peeters in 1928.[5]

Peeters tried to discredit virtually everything. His work was subsequently attacked by M. J. Lagrange,[6] and its implausibility was assumed by G. G. Blum in his 1969 book on Rabbula,[7] still the only comprehensive treatment in existence. But Peeters's work continues to be cited, as recently by Pierre-Louis Gatier in his valuable discussion of Syrian topography in the life of Alexander Akoimētos.[8] Gatier has unearthed many allusions to the known landscape of Syria in that

3. Bickell, *Ausgewählte Schriften der syrischen Kirchenväter, Aphraates, Rabbulas und Isaak von Ninive*, 166–211. Robert Doran of Amherst College is planning a translation of the entire life into English. In preparing the present chapter, I had made my own translation of the work as far as Rabbula's appointment as bishop of Edessa, and I quote from that version here. But Professor Doran was kind enough to read over this chapter for me, and my renderings have been much improved by his acute criticism. Although I had thought of publishing my partial translation as an appendix, it now seems far more prudent to leave to Professor Doran the publication of a definitive rendering of the whole.

4. *Life of Rabbula*, 161.13.

5. Peeters, "Vie de Rabboula."

6. Lagrange, "Bulletin."

7. Blum, *Rabbula von Edessa*, 3, 17 (nn. 11 and 14), 20 (n. 25), 31 (n. 75). The most recent comment on Rabbula may be found in Drijvers, "Man of God of Edessa." Drijvers considers the life "idealized" (p. 242), a characterization that may perhaps be defensible for the account of Rabbula's career in Edessa but not for the earlier part. The disjunction between the two parts might be worth exploring in greater detail.

8. Gatier, "Moine sur la frontière."

highly fictionalized account, and his example should encourage a new look at the Rabbula life, which must have been composed at the latest only a little more than a century after the great man's death. The presence of suspected or demonstrable error or fiction in an ancient text does not automatically mean that nothing can be trusted there. The writer who made the error or devised the fiction will inevitably betray his own knowledge of the world about which he writes, and that can often be important for a historian. An imperfect narrator may nonetheless get certain things right, and the biographer of Rabbula is better than most.

So saints' lives, like martyrs' acts and novels, have something to tell us. The life of Rabbula is uncommonly eloquent in its first part. Even before he begins his story, the author outlines the purpose of his writing in a way that illuminates the whole concept of biography in late antiquity. He is evidently working in Edessa and addressing his brethren in a monastery. The work opens as follows: " My brothers, in the zeal of the love of Christ we are painting before you, by means of writings, an icon of the splendid career of lord Rabbula, the bishop, the glory of our city, so that he might be to us and to all generations a model that excites us to imitate his goodness."[9] Greek biographical tradition was well acquainted with parallels to painting and sculpture. Plutarch, in the second chapter of his biography of Cimon, compares the responsibility of portrait painters (ζωγραφοῦντες) to his task when it comes to the representation of imperfections. But the Syriac writer is not making a comparison. He declares that he is painting an icon in words.

Since the word εἰκών in Greek and, in transliteration, also in Syriac can mean both an image in the round and a painted one, we must be sure that the reference here is actually to a painting. That can be guaranteed not only from the verb the writer employs *(ṣār)* but from a comparable phrase some lines below in which he uses another verb *(ršam)* with the meaning "to sketch out." Here he says, "It is our proper duty to sketch out an agreeable remembrance of his (Rabbula's) divine career, so that for us and for all generations there will be an image of his victories, a stimulating model to imitate. Just as with the excellent Fathers and their famous victories—in the past and in recent

9. *Life of Rabbula,* 159.4–8.

times—we lift up images of their triumphs, so by means of the writings in my books do we give an incarnation of sanctity."[10] This elaboration of the opening point leaves no doubt of the identification of the text with a painted icon used in cult.

The references to the victories of Rabbula and the earlier saints led the unfortunate Bickell to label this work a panegyric, and the label has taken hold in some quarters,[11] but obviously this language is, as we shall soon see in greater detail, simply drawn from a metaphor of the stadium and amphitheater that is an important part of Christian rhetoric. The work begins with the birth of Rabbula, traces his life and career, and ends with his death. It is plainly the biography of a saint and therefore rightly assigned to the category of hagiography. But the invocation of drawing or painting icons may be useful in further refining our understanding of the development of the genre.

In a well-known passage at the beginning of his *Alexander,* Plutarch emphasizes that he is writing βίοι, not ἱστορίαι, but, as Arnaldo Momigliano and others have observed, neither Plutarch nor anyone else used the term βιογραφία in extant Greek literature before its appearance in Damascius's life of Isidore toward the end of the fifth century.[12] Damascius declares that he will include in his work only those μέτρα βιογραφίας ("elements of biography") that he believes to be true and heard directly from his teacher. The word is obviously not a neologism in this passage, but it is perhaps of some significance that its first extant appearance occurs in a Syrian author.

The representation of the biography of Rabbula as itself a painting or drawing—as opposed to something similar to a painting or drawing—can be explained in terms of the ambivalence of the Greek verb γράφειν, meaning both "to write" and "to draw (or paint)." No such ambivalence exists in the Syriac vocabulary. The biographer of Rabbula seems to have exploited the γραφία-element in βιογραφία with the sense it has in ζωγραφία. He emphasizes that in order to paint *(ṣār)* or to draw *(ršam)* his εἰκών he has to write *(ktab).* In other words, the metaphor that dominates the author's description of his work in

10. *Life of Rabbula,* 160.5–11.

11. E.g., Gatier, "Moine," 445: *"Panégyrique de Rabboula."*

12. Momigliano, *Development of Greek Biography,* 12; Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity,* 6, n. 11. It is odd that Friedrich Leo, who was aware of the relevant passage in Damascius, seems not to have been interested in its new vocabulary (*Griechisch-römische Biographie,* 266). Cf. Damascius, *Vita Isid.* 8: ἀλλ' οἷα μέτρα βιογραφίας, αὐτὰ μόνα, ἅπερ ἀληθῆ εἶναι πιστεύω καὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ καθηγεμόνος ἀκήκοα, προφερόμενος.

the account of Rabbula reflects, it may be suggested, the inherent ambivalence of the phrase βίους γράφειν or the late coinage βιογραφία. No one, least of all Friedrich Leo, ever asked why the Greek noun for biography never shows up before Damascius despite the survival of a rich biographical literature. Rabbula's biographer may give us the answer: it would have looked too much like ζωγραφία.

Fifth-century play with the two senses of γράφειν can, in fact, be documented precisely in Syria from the prologue to Theodoret's lives of the Syrian ascetics: ἡμεῖς δὲ βίον μὲν συγγράφομεν φιλοσοφίας διδάσκαλον . . . , ζωγραφοῦμεν δὲ οὐ τῶν σωμάτων τοὺς χαρακτῆρας . . . , ἀλλὰ τῶν ἀοράτων ψυχῶν τὰς ἰδέας σκιογραφοῦμεν.[13] We are writing a life, says Theodoret, as instruction in philosophy, but we are not painting physical features: rather we are sketching out spiritual forms. Theodoret's Greek moves between writing and painting or drawing, as if the activity is the same. He is at pains to define the objectives of his work, the nature of the lineaments he will set forth.

The characterization of the life of Rabbula as a recitation of victories depends, we have already noted, upon a rich agonistic metaphor that was deeply rooted in Christian thought. Louis Robert has commented in detail on this in his analysis of the martyrdom of Perpetua and the heavenly agonothete who presides over her final moments.[14] In presenting his ascetics in Syria, Theodoret explicitly alludes to the Olympic games, its athletes and pancratiasts to provide parallels to the victories of his monks. The subjects of his biographies carry off the crown of victory, but in their case, he says, it was not their nature that brought them their victory (παρεῖχε δὲ αὐτοῖς τὴν νίκην οὐχ ἡ φύσις) but divine grace.[15]

The imagery of contest and triumph is as important for the Syriac biographer of Rabbula as it is for Theodoret. At the beginning, Rabbula is introduced "as a competitor in the stadium of justice."[16] The Greek word for stadium appears here in transliteration. A few lines farther on we read, "In all his life the spirit of God remained with him until he took from all the contests with evil the crown of uprightness." The word for contests is *'gwnyn*, ἀγῶνες, and the crown is the athlete's

13. Theodoret, *Historia religiosa, prol.* 3 (*PG* 82: 1285C/D), Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen, eds., *Theodoret de Cyr: Histoire* 1: 130.

14. Robert, "Vision de Perpétue martyre à Carthage en 302."

15. Theodoret, *Historia religiosa, prol.* 5 (1288B) 1:132 Canivet-Leroy-Molinghen.

16. *Life of Rabbula*, 159.8.

crown (which of course also provided the metaphor for the martyr's crown). The biographer later uses the expression "spiritual athlete" to describe his subject when he was tested after conversion. Adorned with his crown of victory, Rabbula is said to be worthy of God.

A particularly striking use of the agonistic metaphor occurs near the beginning of the biography after Rabbula first becomes aware of the healing powers of monks living in the vicinity of his family property around Chalcis. We read, "When he heard the good report of His signs, there fell upon his soul like *'wkyns* the sound of His victories."[17] The Syriac word is clearly a transliteration of a Greek word, and these letters are known to the lexica as representing either ὄγκινος (hook, from Latin *uncinus*) or ὠκεανός (ocean). The manuscript shows supralinear double dots (the Syriac *syāmē*) for this word, and they normally indicate a plural. It would produce a grotesque interpretation if we understand "hook" here ("the sound of God's victories fell on his soul like hooks"), although Brockelmann and others seem to credit this, but "oceans" would take us properly and convincingly again to the stadium or amphitheater. A well-documented Greek acclamation in late antiquity was ὠκεανέ, apparently invoking lavishness and prodigality (like the ocean).[18] The sound of God's victories would therefore be compared with the cries of the audience in praise of all that God made possible, and we may perhaps have here an implicit role for God as agonothete, just as in the case of Perpetua. The news of God's miracles fell upon Rabbula's soul like a wave of acclamations in the stadium.

After the prefatory remarks about the purpose and nature of the biography, as well as a brief celebration of the bishop's achievements, the author proceeds briskly with an account of Rabbula's family and childhood. This is full of interest: "The blessed Rabbula was a pagan from his childhood, because his father was also a pagan and a priest. Through him the apostate Julian dedicated, as they say, his spirit to demons while he was on his way to fight with the Persians. But the mother of Rabbula was a believer, and she struggled with her husband to make him turn to the fear of the Messiah. Although she labored unceasingly, she was unable to convert his rebellious will to

17. Ibid., 161.14.

18. Overall, Roueché, "Acclamations in the Later Roman Empire." For references and bibligraphy on ὠκεανέ as an acclamation, see J. and L. Robert, *Bulletin épigraphique* 1958: 105. Above all, Peterson, "Die Bedeutung der Ὠκεανέ-Akklamation."

the truth."[19] A few lines later we are told that Rabbula's parents were "rich magnates of their city, Qennishrîn."

The city is known to classical sources as Chalcis and was renowned in late antiquity as a center of Neoplatonic polytheism. It had been the home of Iamblichus, whose pupil Aedesius had been a teacher of Julian. The alleged participation of Rabbula's father in some kind of ritual with Julian is therefore eminently credible, despite the extreme skepticism of Peeters. Julian departed from Antioch for the Euphrates on March 5, 363, and we know from a letter he wrote to Libanius that he first stopped at Litarba on the road leading east from Antioch.[20] The same letter reports that he went to Aleppo and sacrificed a white bull on its imposing acropolis. From Aleppo he passed through Batnae to arrive at Hierapolis Bambyce five days after his departure from Antioch. No source names Chalcis as a stop on his itinerary, and Ammianus states that Julian went to the Euphrates *solitis itineribus*,[21] which ought to imply the direct road from Litarba to Aleppo without a diversion to the south. But Chalcis is not at all far from Aleppo and was connected to it by road.[22] A wealthy pagan priest in Neoplatonist Chalcis would have had every reason to make the short trip up to Aleppo to see the world's first Neoplatonist emperor and Iamblichus's spiritual descendant.

The affluence and importance of Rabbula's family appears to be reflected in the title of πατὴρ πόλεως ascribed to Rabbula himself by the biographer of Alexander Akoimētos.[23] In an undoubtedly fictional scene, in which a militantly pagan Rabbula debates with Alexander, this title has a ring of authenticity. As Denis Feissel and Gilbert Dagron have shown through their collection of epigraphic testimonia, the title is well attested in late antiquity as an honor for a leading citizen of a city, and although no epigraphical documentation has appeared for it in Syria, it has turned up in Phoenicia, where it was still in use in the seventh century.[24] The Greek biographer of Alexander reinforces his citation of this title with the observation that Rabbula's

19. *Life of Rabbula*, 160.11–19.
20. Julian, *Epist.* 98, 399b–402b, pp. 180–84.
21. Amm. Marc. 23.2.6.
22. Cf. Dussaud, *Topographie historique de la Syrie antique et médiévale*, 476–77 with *carte* XIV.
23. *Life of Alexander Akoimētos*, ll, 664.14.
24. Feissel, "Appendice 1," in Dagron and Feissel, *Inscriptions de Cilicie*, 215–20, with the evidence for Rabbula and the Phoenician text on p. 218.

family was distinguished by wealth and rhetoric. The Syriac biographer similarly mentions the wealth of the household, and its concern with rhetoric is implicit in his assertion that the young Rabbula was "educated in the books of the Greeks." Sebastian Brock has recently reminded us that Greek was the language of power in Syrian cities, and of Rabbula he observes that "he would no doubt have enjoyed a distinguished secular career had he not converted to Christianity."[25] Although Rabbula communicated in Syriac for most of his adult life, his command of Greek is not in doubt. He spoke in that language when he went to Constantinople, and he is reported to have translated into Syriac some Greek letters by Cyril of Alexandria.[26]

The nexus of wealth, Greek rhetoric, polytheism, and civic leadership at Chalcis emerges vividly from this testimony and illuminates one of the thriving centers of paganism in late fourth-century Syria. It is known that there was a small Christian community there at that time, and obviously Rabbula's mother belonged to it. Although power lay with the Hellenized pagans, the union of Rabbula's parents attests to the possibility of mixed marriages. His mother was evidently a strong woman. She was certainly persistent. We learn from the Syriac life that she made sure her baby was suckled by a Christian wet nurse, and when the time came she ensured that Rabbula took a Christian as his wife—thereby producing a mixed marriage in the next generation. But up to this point her efforts did not bring the ultimate success of conversion. To some extent she seems to have been thwarted by Rabbula's own eminence in the life of Chalcis. Although a committed pagan, he was, we are told, given "a distinguished honorary office" by the emperor himself,[27] and this recognition is reported to have strengthened him in his paganism.

Peeters poured scorn on the reference to the emperor.[28] Since the emperor is not explicitly identified, he judged that the entire testimony was worthless. But, on the contrary, the recognition of influential local citizens by honorary titles was a deeply rooted feature of imperial administration that reached back to the high Roman Em-

25. Brock, "Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria." The citation appears on p. 155.
26. Cf. *Life of Rabbula,* viii.
27. *Life of Rabbula,* 161.4–5: *šūltānā . . . men malkā.*
28. Peeters, "Vie de Rabboula," 173.

pire. Plutarch appears to have enjoyed some such recognition.[29] In the fourth century, a titular governorship would probably have taken the form of an honorary ὑπατεία such as the new Mesopotamian papyri reveal had been bestowed upon the last Abgar of Edessa in the middle of the previous century.[30] Far from being suspect, this item in the life argues for its closeness to the historical career of its subject.

As the author proceeds in his narrative of Rabbula's conversion, his family estates are the scene for an important moment. When he went out to visit some of his landed properties, Rabbula became aware of the monks whose miracles were the first to impress him. (The properties are indicated by a Syriac transliteration of χωρία.) During this tour, at one of the boundaries of his land, directly opposite the open desert, he learned of the blessed Abraham and of monastic brothers known as ξένοι, again named by the Greek word in the Syriac.[31] This appellation for ascetic recluses and its correlative verb ξενιτεύω are exceptionally rare with this meaning and seem to reflect a local Syrian terminology for detaching oneself from the world. Both in Syriac and in later Greek *'ksny'* / ξένος normally means a traveler away from home, a pilgrim, someone who stays in a ξενοδοχεῖον. The word *peregrinus* in the Latin West has a similar meaning, and it then goes on to acquire a monastic sense parallel to ξένος here.[32] But in the Greek East few texts display this sense, notably a passage in the Apophthegmata of the Fathers that shows a comparable use of ξένος, where it appears in conjunction with νηστεύειν (to fast).[33] The presence of the word in a monastic context in Syria implies local information supplied by the writer or his source.

Next, after learning about Abraham and his ξένοι, Rabbula received reports of healings and heard the sounds of God's victories. At this moment, we are told, he began to distance himself from paganism. His conversion is compared with that of Paul, and the Syriac au-

29. Cf. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 29, on the *ornamenta consularia*.

30. Teixidor, "Deux documents syriaques," esp. 147, *scrip. ext. l.* 4 (*bhpty' b'rhy*), and 161–62.

31. *Life of Rabbula*, 161.10–11. The technical nature of the term is implied by the author's use of *lam* in introducing it.

32. See Angenendt, *Monachi peregrini*.

33. *PG* 65: 256C. Philip Rousseau has helpfully pointed out to me that even in this passage ξενιτεῦσαι is linked to keeping control of one's tongue as much as to fasting, and he compares 373B in which the answer to τί ἐστι ξενιτεία; is σιώπα. But this only serves to reinforce the ascetic context.

thor is moved to say that just as Paul was changed "from Judaism to the truth, so too was Rabbula from paganism to Christianity." Since the truth and Christianity are manifestly the same thing, we are left to infer that in the writer's mind at least Judaism and paganism were comparable falsehoods.

The real estate of Rabbula again figures prominently in the aftermath of his baptism. After receiving instruction from Eusebius, the bishop of Chalcis, and Acacius, the bishop of Aleppo, he had gone to the Holy Land to be baptized in the river Jordan. Once he had emerged from the water and the sign of the Cross had appeared on his white linen in the color of Christ's blood, he felt himself ready to return to Chalcis and dispose of all his worldly possessions. And, in view of his social position, they were many. But we are told that the newly baptized Rabbula "made preparation as he vowed and like a wise merchant who had gone after precious pearls, when he found a pearl which he trusted, he went and sold everything he had."[34] This transparent allusion to Jesus' parable of the merchant who found a pearl of great price introduces Rabbula's uncompromising acceptance of Jesus' pronouncement, "Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold and shall inherit everlasting life."[35] A strict application of this doctrine was certainly not universal among Christians in the fourth century, and some Christian apologists from Paul to Augustine felt obliged to mitigate its force in the interest of spreading the Word and enlarging the Christian population.

But what Rabbula gave up shows what he had had before. We read, "He sold his gold and silver, and he distributed to the poor everything he possessed. . . . Next he sold off his lands, and he properly distributed his revenues from them to the poor, so that by this means his deposit would grow into a treasure in heaven, and his investments would be protected with profit accruing."[36] The specificity of this allusion to heavenly treasure is startling and moved G. G. Blum to observe, "Der Gedanke vom Schatz im Himmel wird dann phantasievoll in finanz-technischer Terminologie ausgesponnen, er ist ein

34. *Life of Rabbula,* 165.22–24.
35. Matt. 13.45–46 (merchant); 19.29 (forsaking all).
36. *Life of Rabbula,* 165.24–26, 166.14–17.

Kapital, das Zinsen bringt."[37] Presumably investments were familiar to the pagan Rabbula, and language of this kind could reflect his own account of his actions.

The record of the disposition of his property continues, "Next he freed all his slaves, those who had been born in his house and those who had been bought with money. He provisioned each and every one of them and released them in peace. Some he admonished, instructed, and sent to monasteries." The two categories of slaves, domestic and bought, correspond precisely to the reality of the region, as can be demonstrated from newly published Mesopotamian documents concerning the sale of slaves.[38] A domestic slave is there called by the familiar term οἰκογενής, and a bought slave ἀργυρώνητος. In the biography, the former term is rendered literally as *ylydy byth* (born in his house), and it thereby proves incidentally that the Greek expression cannot mean, as sometimes thought, simply "slave by birth" (not necessarily in the house of his master). Interestingly, the latter term is not found at all in Egyptian documents (where ὠνητός is normal), but it precisely mirrors the Syriac in the Rabbula life *(zbyny ksph,* bought with money). Thus we seem to have an authentically Syrian locution for a bought slave.

But what Jesus had never explicitly prescribed was the freeing of slaves. So enlightened a gesture, humane as it was, nonetheless arose from a recognition of slaves as personal property that had to be disposed of along with everything else. Certainly, humane feelings could hardly characterize what Rabbula did next. He took Jesus at his word. We read, "As for his blessed mother, he took away everything she possessed. She rejoiced and put on the yoke of the Messiah. He also dispossessed his wife in the same manner. His children, being small, he instructed and turned over to monasteries." The writer then sums all this up with the following comprehensive statement: "He was separated, as our Lord commanded, from his mother, from his wife, from

37. "The concept of 'treasure in heaven' is fantastically elaborated in the technical language of finance: it is interest-bearing capital" (Blum, *Rabbula,* 25).

38. See documents 6, 7, 8, and 9 in the dossier published by Feissel, Gascou, and Teixidor, "Documents d'archives romains inédits du Moyen-Euphrate." The terminology for domestic and bought slaves is discussed on p. 27, but without reference to the Rabbula life. In the Syriac parts of these documents, the house slave is called *ylyd'*, which appeared to encourage the supposition that only birth was at issue, not birth in the house of the master: "elle ne contient pas d'allusion à la maison, mais on ne peut nier que cette terminologie ne présente encore quelque obscurité." The Rabbula formulation (with *byth*) would seem to resolve the problem.

his sons and daughters, from his lands and all his possessions, from his guests and from his slaves, from his friends, from everything he owned in the world."[39] Nothing could make clearer just how much he had possessed before all this happened.

The geographical context of Rabbula's spiritual awakening is, apart from the trip to the Holy Land, central Syria. His first intimations of the healing power of Christ are followed by conversations with the known and independently attested bishops of Chalcis and Aleppo. At a sensitive moment in Rabbula's instruction, Acacius, bishop of Aleppo, obliges him to pray at the shrine of Cosmas and Damian. Even Peeters had to acknowledge that this item referred to an authentic martyrium in the region. It was located at Cyrrhus to the north of Aleppo at a distance of about a day's travel, and it enjoyed such renown that Cyrrhus itself acquired the name of Hagiopolis.[40] Subsequently Acacius, together with Eusebius, bishop of Edessa, took Rabbula to the cell of the holy Marcian, another well-documented feature of the late fourth-century Syrian ecclesiastical landscape. Only the Abraham who dwelled at the edge of Rabbula's family land cannot be found in other sources. But overall the picture of bishops, monks, and martyrium in the territory dominated by Aleppo is wholly recognizable.

It was from the three principal cities—Aleppo, Chalcis, and Cyrrhus—that Rabbula made his ascetic forays into the desert. At the time of his greatest trials, after his visit to Jerusalem and his disposal of his family, Rabbula undertook to emulate the desert experiences of Antony. His biographer says that he went for the purpose into the *madbrā gawāyā*, the inner desert.[41] This phrase provides strong and incontrovertible proof of the interpretation of the classical terms, *interior limes* and ἐσώτερον λίμιτον, which have been much discussed in recent years. In the late 1970s, Benjamin Isaac, Mariano Malavolta, and I all suggested that the evidence suggested that the adjective *inner* meant a more remote region, rather than (as often thought) a nearer one.[42] The words in the Syriac life of Rabbula demonstrate

39. *Life of Rabbula*, 166.25–167.1.

40. Peeters, "Vie de Rabboula," 174. Cf. Dussaud, *Topographie*, 471. For the name Hagiopolis, Georg. Cyp., ed. Gelzer, p. 148.

41. *Life of Rabbula*, 168.13.

42. For references see Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 104, no. 41, already noting the phrase in the biography of Rabbula. See also Liebeschuetz, "Defences of Syria in the Sixth Century."

that this is indeed the sense and show its author to have been in touch with a late antique usage that is perhaps most familiar in Ammianus's once problematic phrase *interiores limites.*[43]

Another detail of Syrian geography confirms the author's intimate knowledge of the area even more strikingly. After forsaking family and possessions, Rabbula moved in with Abraham and his brethren. Among these was another Eusebius, who, we are told, was "the man whom the holy Rabbula made bishop in Tela, the victorious city."[44] Tela was the Semitic name for the city called Constantina (or occasionally Constantia) in the fourth century and later. It will be familiar to readers of Procopius. It lay in the vicinity of Edessa and was therefore subject to Rabbula's jurisdiction when he was bishop there. But why is it called "the victorious city"? The answer can be found in a fragment of the historian Uranius, as preserved in Stephanus of Byzantium: Νικηφόριον· οὕτως ἡ Κωνσταντίνα ἡ περὶ Ἔδεσαν πόλις.[45] This is very specialized information, unknown both to other ancient sources and to all modern accounts. The name was given most probably to the city in the Hellenistic age, which saw a Nicephorion at Raqqa, a Nicephorion river near Tigranocerta, and a Nicephorion sanctuary at Pergamum. The epithet "victorious" for the city of Tela in the life of Rabbula proves that its author was, like Uranius, acquainted with this early name for Tela/Constantina and adds considerable support to his credibility.

Another highly unusual expression in the life, although neither geographical nor topographical, also appears to reflect specialized knowledge that could not be part of a legendary or fictional fabrication. It appears in the vivid description of Rabbula's baptism in the Jordan. The writer says, "The linen on his body was wrapped as is customary for the spiritual bridegrooms of Christ."[46] Women as brides of Christ are familiar in the annals of early Christianity, but male bridegrooms are most assuredly not. Blum, in noting this *mystisch-*

43. Amm. Marc. 23.5.1.

44. *Life of Rabbula,* 167.20–22.

45. Jacoby, *FGH* 3.675, F 29, discussed in detail by the present writer with full references in an article on Glaucus and Uranius contributed to a Heidelberg colloquium on *Fragmentsammlungen* in 1995: Bowersock, "Jacoby's Fragments and Two Greek Historians." I was not shown proofs for this article, and as a result it contains more than a dozen typographical errors. But fortunately they are all too obvious (such as "Fulf" for "Gulf") and can therefore be easily corrected by an attentive reader.

46. *Life of Rabbula,* 165.6–8.

bräutliche Vereinigung mit Christus, says simply that such a *Brautmystik* is unknown to monastic tradition, although he is aware of one passage in the Gospel of Thomas as a parallel: "Many stand before the door, but only a solitary man may enter the bridal chamber."[47] Another *logion* near the end of the same gospel seems to resume this idea: "When the bridegroom leaves the bridal chamber, let them fast and pray." A more striking example can be found among the heresies described by Irenaeus, who describes a rite of the Valentinians in which men entered a *sponsale cubiculum* (νυμφών) to be joined in a spiritual marriage with Christ.[48]

Such a mystical marriage of a male with Christ certainly need not be interpreted along the lines of John Boswell's controversial exegesis of the ἀδελφοποίησις ceremony.[49] It may perhaps presuppose a kind of spiritual devotion between males that is most conspicuous, as Boswell saw, in the cult of Saints Sergius and Bacchus—a cult anchored in Syrian and Mesopotamian culture, with its great center at Rusafa near the Euphrates. We should remember as well that, at the end of the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus is reported to have said: "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male. . . . For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." The literature on Thomas, particularly the Gospel and the Acts, most probably took shape in Syria in the area of Edessa, where there was a martyrium of Thomas.[50] Therefore, the surprising appearance of bridegrooms of Christ in the life of Rabbula cannot be a fictional invention. It should be considered still another confirmation of the author's intimate knowledge of Syrian Christianity of the time.

In the final period of Rabbula's career before his episcopate at Edessa, he conceived a great desire for martyrdom. After his struggles with Satan in the remote desert, this new Antony joined the blessed Eusebius, the future bishop of Tela, to travel together to Baʿalbek, described in the biography as "the city of the pagans." There the two went straight to what is identified as "the temple of graven images . . . in order to do something worthy of martyrdom."[51] They presumably

47. Blum, *Rabbula,* 23 with n. 36; *Evang. Thom.* 75.
48. Iren., *Adversus haereses* 1.21.3.
49. Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions.*
50. Drijvers, "Early Syriac Christianity," esp. 171. Cf. J. D. Turner, introducing his translation of the book of Thomas the Contender, in *Nag Hammadi Library,* ed. Robinson, 188.
51. *Life of Rabbula,* 169.26–170.2.

undertook to desecrate the images. Peeters is grossly unfair to the author of the biography when he says that Rabbula and Eusebius intended to destroy the temple, "ni plus ni moins."[52] They simply hoped, as the biographer says, to cause enough trouble to be killed by the populace of the city. But God had other plans for both of them. Although they were mercilessly beaten and thrown down a huge staircase when they appeared to be dead, they managed to survive and escape. Anyone who has seen the temple of Zeus Heliopolitanus at Baʿalbek will have little difficulty in recognizing the monumental staircase of its propylaea as the scene of these horrors.

God withheld the martyr's crown from these two future bishops. "They endured the torments of death as they had sought them, but they did not die in martyrdom as they expected," Rabbula's biographer observes.[53] This interesting indication of the social status of martyrs is another sign of the changing character of eastern Christianity. A Polycarp or a Pionios in the early Christian centuries had serenely suffered public martyrdom, but men of that kind in late antiquity were more likely to retreat to the desert for a time and then to become bishops. The life of Rabbula is a faithful record of this new world and, in particular, of its contours in central Syria. The author has painted an image of the saint in a realistic landscape.

52. Peeters, "Vie de Rabboula," 177.
53. *Life of Rabbula*, 170.16–17.

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