

The (“Nestorian”) Church of the East has two important theological Summas, both written in Arabic, the Books of Mysteries (Asfār al-Asrār) by the priest Ṣalibā b. Yuḥannā (14th cent.) and the Book of the Tower. J.S. Assemani, the scriptor of the Biblioteca Vaticana, followed by Graf, is at the origin of much confusion concerning both works, postulating two distinct Books of the Tower, one by Mari b. Sulaymān, another by ‘Amr ibn Mattā, and even a revision of the latter by a smart and cunning ‘plagiarist’, Ṣalibā ibn Yuḥannā. It is basically the careful analysis of the relevant manuscripts by Bénédicte Landron (1994) which has settled the question and which lies at the basis of Gianazza’s work, first his critical edition of the Asfār al-Asrār (Patrimoine arabe chrétien 33 & 34, 2018–19, other volumes forthcoming) accompanied by a complete Italian translation (Patrimonio Culturale Arabo Cristiano 12, 2017), and second, the first part (in two volumes) of his critical edition and Italian translation of the Book of the Tower, discussed in this review.

This Book of the Tower, composed around the year 1000, is a major source of information on the theology and history of the Church of the East of the 10th century. It not only discusses classical theological themes such as Trinity or Incarnation, but also liturgical matters (baptism, qorbānā) and spiritual and monastic issues (passions, vices, …). This first part edited by Gianazza does not give the beginning chapters of the Tower, but the fifth chapter of the fifth part, dealing with the history of the Church of the East. Gianazza’s critical edition follows the methodology developed by Samir Khalil Samir for his series “Patrimoine arabe chrétien” and offers a fully vocalized text, “correcting” the sometimes defective spelling of the five original manuscripts used for the edition, briefly presented in the introduction.

The text begins with the “constitutions and laws” of the Apostles, basically a history of the beginning and early spread of Christianity, seen from the perspective of the Church of the East, with interesting details on the election of the Patriarch and metropolitans. This section is followed by the well-known “Patriarchal History” (already published by H. Gismondi, 1899), beginning with Addai and ending with al-Muqlī (d. 1148). The fact that al-Muqlī figures in a
work dated by Gianazza – following Landron – on the basis of internal criteria to the turn of the first millennium, would have required some explanation. It may be that the Chronicle Part was somewhat updated by later copyists or redactors, as often happens with this kind of texts. After all, the oldest available manuscript is dated to the beginning of the 13th century, which would allow for such additions.

Gianazza’s translation of a sometimes hermetic Arabic text is excellent. The translation is accompanied by abundant explanatory footnotes, drawing attention, for example, to Syriacizing renderings of Arabic proper names, the identification of place names, etc. I especially appreciate his references to the Mukhtaṣar al-akhbār al-Bī’yya, a not yet well studied chronicle edited by B. Haddad in 2000, of which the relationship to the “Patriarchal History” is yet to be investigated more closely. The volumes end with several indices: biblical and qur’anic references, foreign words (basically Syriac loanwords), names of persons and places.

The two volumes cover about one fifth of the whole work. We wish the editor time, courage and health to also complete the remaining parts.

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