Sacred Landscapes of Greater Syria: Joseph Besson’s 1660 Jesuit Perspective

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Abstract

Joseph Besson’s 1660 account of Jesuit missions in Syria offers a rare glimpse into the region’s cultural landscape from the perspective of French Jesuits living among diverse communities of Jews, Christians (Greek-Orthodox and Catholic), and Muslims. Drawing on unpublished Jesuit relations from 1625 to 1659 and an unsigned map of Syria, this article explores Besson’s portrayal of Greater Syria, a region encompassing modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and western Jordan, within the Ottoman empire. A detailed analysis reveals that the map is likely an original Jesuit creation, highlighting how Jesuit spirituality influenced their interpretation of physical spaces. Furthermore, the study illuminates the Jesuits’ role in shaping European views of the Orient and the Holy Land, contributing to the early development of Orientalism.

Keywords


Introduction

Travel narratives about the Holy Land, dating back to the Crusades, encompass a rich tradition of pilgrimages, missionary journeys, and the accounts of curious
travelers. Many of these accounts were complemented with maps. Although missionary accounts are not typically seen as standard travel narratives, their significance in Christian cultures cannot be understated. In the Holy Land region, missions often doubled as pilgrimages, blending religious motives with exploration. These accounts, shaped by firsthand experiences, offer subjective reflections embedded with the cultural discourses of the travelers. Their focus on geographical knowledge and frequent incorporation of maps render them vital for studying cultural translation.

Joseph Besson’s La Syrie Sainte (Paris, 1660), the earliest published Jesuit account on Syria, holds a special place in this tradition. While not the oldest

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2 One of the earliest preserved is Pietro Vesconte’s map of the Holy Land (c.1321) that was included in Marino Sanudo’s Liber secretorum fidelium crucis (British Library, London, Add.MS 27376, map on fol. 189). Furthermore, at least five other early pilgrims accompanied their narratives with maps: the German priest Johannes Poloner (fifteenth century) who went on the pilgrimage in 1421, the Italian nobleman Gabriele Capodista (d.1477) for the pilgrimage in 1458, the English monk William Wey (c.1407–76) for his travel in 1458–62, the German canon Bernhard von Breydenbach (1440–97) who travelled in 1483, and Frederick III, elector of Saxony (1486–1525) who took the pilgrimage in 1493. Pnina Arad, Christian Maps of the Holy Land: Images and Meanings (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 63.


Joseph Besson: Author of the Earliest Printed Jesuit Account on Syria

Joseph Besson, a French Jesuit missionary and writer (1606, Carpentras, France—1691, Aleppo, Syria), joined the Society of Jesus in 1626 after studying philosophy. His early career involved teaching grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy in various French cities (1628–44). Besson later turned to preaching and served as the rector of the Collège de Nîmes between 1654 and 1657. At fifty-three, he embarked on a new chapter as the superior of the Syrian mission, eventually settling in Aleppo around 1668. A passionate traveler interested in human geography, he extensively toured the Holy Land, Persia, and Arabia and was proficient in Arabic, enabling him to preach in major churches across Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. His engagement with different communities, including the Yazidi and possibly the Alawites or Ismailis in Syria, marked his mission.

Upon his arrival in Syria in April 1659, Besson began gathering geographical data and missionary reports, aware that previous Jesuit accounts since 1625 had

6 Besson's narrative was preceded by Jean Boucher, Bouquet sacré des roses du Calvaire, des lys de Bethlehem, des jacintes d'Olivet (Mans: François Olivier, 1614). Jean Boucher (1548–1646) was a Franciscan friar who, in 1611, took a pilgrimage from Venice to the Holy Land (including Syria). Girolamo Dandini (1554–1634), an Italian Jesuit, published the Missione apostolica al patriarca, e maroniti del Monte Libano ... e sua pellegrinazione a Gerusalemme (Cesena: Neri, 1656). It is Dandini's account of his 1596 travel to the Maronites in Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cyprus. His account does not contain much geographical knowledge and was thus not accompanied by a map.

remained unpublished and inaccessible to a broader audience. Recognizing the lack of documented Jesuit experiences in Syria, he prioritized publishing an account. Within less than a year, he drafted *La Syrie Sainte*, published in July 1660 (Figure 2). The book, aimed at highlighting Jesuit activities in Syria and

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8 The preface to Besson’s book, written by Nicolas Poirresson in the form of a letter to Jacques Renault, the provincial of the Society of Jesus of France is dated November 24, 1659. Yet, another letter, written by Jean-André Peyssonnel, also included in the book, is dated March 2, 1660, which speaks in favor of the fact that the final version of the narrative was sent after that date. Besson, *La Syrie Sainte*, 1:232.
garnering financial support for their mission, heavily relied on previous reports, particularly those of Nicolas Poirresson (d.1673), the mission’s superior from 1652 to 1659.9 While drawing from these sources, Besson’s narrative is uniquely his, reflecting his interpretations and confrontations with the original authors.

9 Apart from the period in which he served as a superior, there is not much known on Nicolas Poirresson. His biography is not included in O’Neill and Domínguez, *Diccionario histórico*. Note on his death in Anti-Lebanon on October 12, 1673 can be found in Josephus Fejér, *Defuncti secundi saeculi Societatis Jesu 1641–1740* (Rome: Curia Generalitia, Institutum Historicum, 1985), 4159.
Establishment of Jesuit Missions in Syria

The early seventeenth century witnessed the expansion of French Jesuit missions around the globe. Unlike in New France, where they enjoyed exclusive missionary rights for a prolonged period, the Jesuits in Ottoman-controlled territories faced competition from other orders. With the Franciscans already established in Jerusalem and opposed to competition, the Jesuits chose to base themselves in Aleppo, supported by the existing network of French merchants and diplomats. The Jesuits’ position in Syria heavily relied on the complex diplomatic and commercial relations between France and the Ottoman empire, as France vied for diplomatic dominance against the Republic of Venice, England, and the Dutch Republic. In this intricate web of international politics, Jesuit missionaries often had to prioritize their identity as French subjects over their ecclesiastical roles to maintain diplomatic favor of the Ottoman Porte.

The initiation of the Jesuit mission in Syria was fraught with challenges. Early missionaries Giovanni Stella (d.1676) and Gaspar Maniglier (d.1652) faced accusations from the Venetians and Franciscans of being spies for the Habsburg monarchy, leading to their immediate exile to Malta upon their arrival in Aleppo in 1625. They returned in 1627, establishing the first Jesuit mission in Aleppo. Initially, their survival hinged on support from Eastern churches and the French consul. For sixteen years, Aleppo remained the sole Jesuit stronghold in Syria. The 1640s marked a turning point with the establishment of three additional missions. By the time of Besson’s arrival,
the Jesuit presence had expanded to fifteen members working across five missions in Aleppo (with visitas in Alexandretta and Quilles), Damascus, Sidon, Tripoli, and Aintoura (Figure 3).  

Despite their efforts, the Jesuits’ influence remained limited under Ottoman rule, which restricted public preaching of the Gospel. Their work was mostly confined to followers of the Eastern Church, promoting conversion to Catholicism. However, the number of Catholics in Syria saw little growth, often stagnating or even declining, reflecting the complex and often adverse conditions under which the Jesuits operated.

![Jesuit missions and their respective visitas established in Syria in 1627–59](image)

**Figure 3** Jesuit missions and their respective visitas established in Syria in 1627–59

*Drawn by the Author*

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Greater Syria as Synonymous with the Holy Land

The term “Holy Land” in contemporary literature typically refers to the territory encompassing the modern State of Israel and the Palestinian territories, including Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. This region holds sacred significance for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. However, in early modern Christian tradition, the definition of the Holy Land was broader, often including Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, all part of the Ottoman empire since 1516. The term “(Greater) Syria,” frequently used in the French tradition, historically referred to a larger area synonymous with the Holy Land. This concept of Greater Syria, covering modern Syria, southern Turkey (Hatay), Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, has its roots in the Arabic geographical term Bilad al-Sham, which denoted a province under various Caliphates from 636 to the 940s. Despite Ottoman rule, the term (Greater) Syria persisted in its classical sense in Western European and Syriac literature.16

In the seventeenth century, French missionaries often used “Syria” as a synonym for the Holy Land to encompass the domains of Jesus and the first Apostles. The Jesuits’ interpretation extended the holy realm to include all lands where the Apostles and early Christian saints were active. Besson, in particular, used “Syria” to describe an expansive Holy Land that included modern southern Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and western Jordan, occasionally extending to Egypt and Mesopotamia.17 His conception of Syria included cities like Antioch, Beirut, Aleppo, and Damascus, which were seldom regarded as part of the Holy Land in other literature but were included in the Jesuits’ Terra Sancta Province.18 Besson even extended this notion to maritime

16 Greater Syria, under Ottoman rule, formed the Damascus Eyalet. In 1534, the Aleppo Eyalet was split into separate administrations. The Tripoli Eyalet was formed out of the Damascus Province in 1579, while later, the Adana Eyalet was split from the Aleppo. In 1660, the Eyalet of Safed was established and, shortly afterwards, renamed the Sidon Eyalet; in 1667, the Mount Lebanon Emirate was given a special autonomous status within the Sidon Province.

17 For his definition of Syria, see Besson, La Syrie Sainte, 1:1–2. However, aware of the dubiousness of identification of the Holy Land with Syria, he later included a chapter titled “Present State of the Holy Land and Its Limits,” where he clarifies that the Holy Land extends northward to the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, thus contradicting what he narrated in the first volume of his book. Besson, La Syrie Sainte, 2:278–79.

geography, referring to the eastern Mediterranean as the Syrian Sea (Mer de Syrie), a term found on Ptolemaic maps.

“Syria the Holy” (La Syrie Sainte) was Besson’s designation for the region, emphasizing the sanctity and significance of Syria, particularly during a time when it was under Islamic rule. This terminology, favoring the term Syria, where the Jesuits were active over the narrower Franciscan-dominated Holy Land, not only highlighted the Society of Jesus’s role but also aligned with the French imperial agenda. Besson’s call for the French reconquest of the Holy Land was rooted in France’s historical role in the Crusades and supported by an eleventh-century legend portraying France as the first European country to receive Jesus’s apostles. This persuasive approach in Besson’s work aimed to influence opinions and beliefs, impacting both the textual and visual aspects of his narrative.

Besson’s Geographical Perception of Greater Syria

Besson’s narrative in La Syrie Sainte exhibits a rich tapestry of content and discourse, spanning traditional travel literature, religious debates, and elements of French imperial expansionism. The initial section provides a historical recount of Jesuit missions in Syria, paired with geographical descriptions and maps. This portion largely synthesizes the manuscript reports of Nicolas Poirresson from the 1650s, supplemented with Besson’s own observations,

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19 He was referring to beliefs that Lazarus and his sisters, Mary Magdalene and Martha, managed to escape persecution in the Holy Land, finding shelter in southern France. Besson, La Syrie Sainte, 1176.

emphasizing the importance of documenting Jesuit endeavors in Syria.\textsuperscript{21} The subsequent part adopts the form of a pilgrim's travelogue, detailing the Holy Land's geography and sacred sites, drawing from both Besson's experiences and the accounts of earlier travelers.

\textit{Religious Discourse of Besson's Geography}

Three distinct discourses emerge in Besson's geographical depiction of the Holy Land: religious, scientific, and political. The religious discourse predominates, focusing on biblical and early Christian significant locations. Besson's geographical interest is deeply intertwined with Jesuit spirituality, leading to an ambivalent portrayal of the land. He admires its beauty while lamenting what he perceives as neglect under Muslim and Ottoman rule, particularly in urban landscapes like Jerusalem,\textsuperscript{22} Damascus,\textsuperscript{23} and Antioch.\textsuperscript{24} This dichotomy extends to cultivated landscapes, which Besson views as glorious due to divine grace rather than the efforts of their Muslim inhabitants.\textsuperscript{25}

Physical geography in Besson's narrative serves as a source of religious inspiration. Forests and mountains of biblical relevance are depicted as sacred, with Besson often interpreting natural formations as symbols of Christian theology.\textsuperscript{26} His approach to human geography, however, is limited to

\textsuperscript{21} All Jesuit reports delivered up to then were still unpublished. Apart from Besson's narrative, the first printed Jesuit account of Syria was a report by Charles Néret from 1713 and published in 1725. See “Lettre du père Néret, missionaire de la Compagnie de Jesus,” \textit{Nouveaux mémoires des missions de la Compagnie de Jésus} 5 (1725): 1–121.

\textsuperscript{22} “Who will believe that Jerusalem is whole if it is ruined, and that it has been ruined if it is whole? It is nevertheless certain that it is whole and ruined since one can visibly recognize among so many ruins all the places that bear the marks of our redemption.” Besson, \textit{La Syrie Sainte}, 257.

\textsuperscript{23} “It is a paradise rather than a city, but it is a paradise like a hell, being almost filled only with darkness.” Besson, \textit{La Syrie Sainte}, 169.

\textsuperscript{24} When speaking about Antioch, Besson writes: “The famous city of Antioch, once almost entirely holy, consecrated by Saint Peter, is now desecrated.” Besson, \textit{La Syrie Sainte}, 193.

\textsuperscript{25} Describing Damascus's vicinity, Besson testifies, “Its countryside is equally vast and delightful; watered by small rivers and fountains; covered with gardens, abundant in fruits; but all these riches and beauties come rather from nature, and from the advantages of the soil, than from art and culture.” Besson, \textit{La Syrie Sainte}, 170.

\textsuperscript{26} “Four leagues from Damascus, on the main road to this city, one sees a small mountain set apart from the others in Lebanon, which rises almost to a point, and which is said to be the eminence from which Jesus Christ called Saint Paul. Indeed, it is given beautiful Arabic names, one is Cauquabe, which means star, and the other Gemal Nour, that is to say, a mountain of light, and the plain below is called the place of the fall of this great Apostle who found his elevation there.” [He refers here to Mount Qalamoun, where Our Lady of Saydnaya Monastery is located. The Qalamoun region received Christianity at the time of St. Paul's pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The pilgrimage usually included a visit to Saydnaya.]. Besson, \textit{La Syrie Sainte}, 173.
ethnographic curiosity, focusing on the composition of Christian populations without a broader demographic context. He portrays the religious diversity under Ottoman rule not as a sign of tolerance but as a challenge to be addressed by Jesuit missionary work.

**Besson’s Scientific References**

In his scientific approach to the geography of the Holy Land, Besson demonstrates meticulous attention to the precise locations mentioned in the Old and New Testaments, complemented by a critical review of existing sources. Emphasizing the value of firsthand observation, he begins his narrative by questioning the reliability of those who describe Syria without having seen it firsthand. His references span a range of authoritative works: *Theatrum Terrae Sanctae* by Christian von Adrichom (1533–85) for general geography, works by Jerónimo de Prado (1547–95) and Juan Bautista Villalpando (1552–1608) on Jerusalem’s topography, Cesare Baronio’s (1538–1607) *Annales ecclesiastici* for church history, Francesco Quaresmio’s (1583–1650) *Historica theologica et moralis* for travel narratives, and Marino Sanudo Torsello’s (c.1270–1343) *Liber secretorum* (c.1270–1343) for Crusades geography. These sources, accompanied by maps and highly respected in Besson’s time, significantly informed his narrative style.

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27 “Many talk about Syria and pass for skillful in their accounts, which are nevertheless mistaken in many things and lead many others into their errors.” Besson, *La Syrie Sainte*, 1:3.

28 Christiano Adrichomio, *Theatrum Terrae Sanctae et biblicarum historiarum cum tabulis geographicas aere expressis* (Cologne: Officina Birckmannica, 1593). Accompanied by twelve maps, including a large folded map of the Holy Land.

29 Jerónimo de Prado, Juan Bautista Villalpando, *Hieronymi Pradi et Ioannis Baptistae Villapandi e Societate Iesu in Ezechielem explanationes et apparatus urbis ac templi Hierosolymitani* (Rome: [Zannetti] and Ciacconi, 1596–1604). Villalpando’s influence has been strongest in the history of architecture. The influence of Vitruvius on Villalpando is crucial, and in this sense, his work may be seen as part of the general Renaissance revival of Vitruvius.


31 Francisco Quaresmio, *Historia theologica et moralis terrae sanctae elucidata* in qua pleraque ad veterem & praezentem eiusdem terrae ... (Antwerp: Officina Plantiniana Balthasaris Moreti, 1639). Accompanied by Adrichomius’s map of the Holy Land. Quaresmio was an Italian author and Orientalist, enrolled among the Franciscans. He was an active missionary in the Holy Land, mostly in Aleppo (1616–18) and then Superior and Commissary Apostolic of the East (1618–19).

**Political Aspects of the Narrative**

Politically, Besson’s narrative encompasses the themes of pilgrimage as a reclaiming act, missionization, and the call for the physical reoccupation of the Holy Land. He presents pilgrimage not merely as a religious journey but as a political statement against Ottoman or schismatic influence.33 Depicting the Holy Land under Muslim rule as a region in decline, Besson advocates for

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33 Heyberger and Verdeil, “Spirituality and Scholarship,” 27.
its salvation through Catholic missionary work. His boldest political stance involves urging King Louis XIV (r.1643–1715) to establish French control over the region, diverging sharply from the more tolerant and culturally respectful reports of his Jesuit contemporaries like Poirresson. While Poirresson praised the Turks for their cultural richness and tolerance, Besson's narrative reflects a stark intolerance towards Muslims, revealing his selective interpretation of his colleagues' accounts to suit his political objectives.34

**Carte de la Syrie: Map as a Form of Spiritual Exercise**

Besson's commitment to a scholarly approach is exemplified by the inclusion of a meticulously detailed map in his work, titled *Carte de la Syrie: Nouvellement corrigée*.35 This map delineates what Besson perceives as (Greater) Syria, stretching from Hatay Province in modern-day southern Turkey to the Dead Sea, and from the Mediterranean Sea eastward to the Euphrates River that he identifies as Syria's boundary.36 Uniquely, the map is folded and placed before the introductory chapter that contains a geographical description of Syria, indicating a deliberate and thoughtful integration into the narrative. Interestingly, the map itself is not directly referenced in the text, a common practice in Jesuit relations where the presence of such maps was implicitly understood and did not necessitate further explanation. Besson opts not to identify the map's creator or its data sources, focusing instead on its accuracy. The map's subtitle proudly declares it as being based on corrected data, thereby positioning it as superior to other existing maps of the region. This choice implicitly critiques the inadequacies of those maps. Notably, Besson

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35 *Carte de la Syrie: Nouvellement corrigée*. Ancillary map in the lower right corner: *Description de Mont Liban et du Quesroan*. Engraving; 28.5 x 26.5 cm. Library of Service Historique de la Défence, Vincennes, Din41.
36 "Syria is part of Asia, located between Asia Minor, which touches along Mount Amanus [Nur Mountains in the Hatay region; author's comment] in the north and Arabia in the south; the Mediterranean Sea lies in the west and the Euphrates River in the east. It stretches longitudinally for 167 French leagues from Mount Amanus to the capital of Idumea, Gaza, and for 100 leagues from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates." Besson, *La Syrie Sainte*, 1:4.
forgoes including a map of Jerusalem, citing the insufficiency of available maps. Instead, he introduces an ancillary map, *Description de Mont Liban et du Quesroan*, highlighting a region predominantly inhabited by Christians (Maronites) and significant to the Jesuit mission (Figure 4).37

The authorship and creation process of the map included in Besson’s work remain enigmatic, as neither the narrative nor the manuscript reports it is based on provides clear answers. Yet, we can infer some details indirectly. This map, the first of its kind in terms of its comprehensive depiction of Syria, stands as an original piece. Its uniqueness is underscored by the fact that no Jesuit reports prior to 1660 included or even referenced a map of this nature. Further supporting its originality is the map’s content, which aligns precisely with Besson’s narrative; nearly all place names on the map are mentioned in the text, with identical spellings. Such congruence strongly suggests Jesuit authorship, possibly by Besson or one of his contemporaries who prepared it specifically for his book. The recurrent appearance of this map in post-1660 Jesuit reports on Syria reinforces this attribution.38 Notably, the German version of the map, published in 1729, carries an explicit notation affirming its Jesuit origin.

37 The term Quesroan refers to Kesroan, the southern part of Mont Lebanon in which Maronites live. According to Besson the region was named after King Qesras, the last of the Catholic princess who reigned there. Besson, *La Syrie Sainte*, 1:111. He possibly refers here to Khāzin sheiks who increased their power there. In 1658 with the mediation of the Jesuit missionaries, Abū Nawfal al-Khāzin was named French vice-consul in Beirut and since then the Khāzins are known as Princes of the Maronites and Mount Lebanon. Richard van Leeuwen, *Notables and Clergy in Mount Lebanon: The Khāzin Sheikhs and the Maronite Church (1736–1840)* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 83.

38 Its first appearance after 1660 was in *Nouveaux mémoires des missions de la Compagnie de Jésus*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1725), where it accompanied the 1713 account of Charles Néret. The map kept the same title, and it was engraved by Claude-Auguste de Berey. The 1713 account by Néret was published with the same map four years later in the *Der Neue Welt-Bott*, vol. 13 (Augsburg, 1729). The map was now titled *Die Landschaft Syrien: Gezeichnet von denen MissionarÝs Soc. Jesu* (engraved by Christoph Dietell). About the same time, another version of the map, titled *La Syrie moderne*, was engraved by Henri Liébaux and published in an unidentified publication. In 1780, Néret's letter from 1713 was published again in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1780), with the map attached under its original title (engraved by N. Ransonette). The same letter was republished in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1810), again with the same map attached (engraved by Canu). When the same series of *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* was reprinted in 1819, Néret's letter from 1713, accompanied by the map, was included as well (engraved by A. Porlier).
**Scientific and Cartographic Base of the Map**

While the original draft of the map, or autograph, remains undiscovered, the printed version showcases notable editorial refinements, including a scale and a grid of latitude and longitude, indicative of its professional production.\(^3^9\) Markedly, the map adopts a northward orientation, a departure from the traditional eastward orientation of travelogue maps of the Holy Land, signaling a modern approach. Interestingly, despite Besson’s narrative positioning Jerusalem at the heart of the Holy Land, the map centers on Damascus, the Syrian capital and a city of particular significance to Besson, alongside Aleppo.

The map’s geographical content is a synthesis of information from Besson’s predecessors and contemporaries, tailored and augmented by Besson’s own insights and narrative requirements. Its creation involved reference to existing maps accompanying Holy Land travelogues, notably *Situs Terrae Promissionis* by Christian von Adrichom (1590), which itself drew from a multitude of sources including Peter Laicksteen, Christian Sgroothen, Tilleman Stella, Jacob Ziegler and others (Figure 5).\(^4^0\) Adrichom’s map was popular among contemporary cartographers like Jan Jansson, Nicolas Sanson, and Nicolaes...

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**Figure 5** Map of the Holy Land published in Christian von Adrichom’s *Theatrum Terrae Sanctae* (Cologne, 1590). Oriented to the east, the entire Holy Land is divided into twelve Tribes, with the shoreline running from Sidon to Alexandria. The map was one of Besson’s primary sources for the geography of the Holy Land.

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\(^3^9\) The map encompasses the region from 30° to 36°30’ North latitude and from 65° to 72° East longitude (prime meridian not indicated). The graphic scale was given in “Lieues francaise,” “Lieues astronomiques,” and “Lieues d’Allemagne.” The approximate scale of the map is 13,700,000.

\(^4^0\) *Situs Terrae Promissionis ss Bibliorum Intelligentiam Exacte Aperiens: Per Christianum Adrichomium Delphum*. Cologne, 1590. Engraving: coloured by hand; 102,3 x 39,5 cm. Ruderman Rare Map Collection.
Visscher, who used it as a basis for their maps of the Holy Land.\textsuperscript{41} It is likely that Besson used a later iteration of Adrichom's map for biblical locations, possibly Philippe Briet's (1601–68) version from 1641.\textsuperscript{42} However, these maps typically depicted a limited view of the Holy Land, extending only as far north as Tyr and Sidon. To represent Lebanon and Syria, Besson had to consult additional, both cartographic and textual, sources. Until then, European cartographic interest in Syria was minimal, often limited to small-scale Ptolemaic maps.\textsuperscript{43} Nicolas Sanson (1600–67), a French royal geographer, made strides in mapping the region with his 1652 map of Syria and Mesopotamia, but its small scale limited its detail (Figure 6).\textsuperscript{44} Addressing this gap, the Jesuits contributed their knowledge to develop a more comprehensive depiction. Consequently, the map included in Besson's narrative presents an original portrayal of Syria and Lebanon, enriched with Jesuit insights, highlighting significant rivers, mountains, urban centers, and ancient cities from the early Christian period.

**Religious and Political Symbolism of the Map**

The Jesuit map of Syria, accompanying Besson's narrative, was meticulously curated to align with the discourse and content of his text. It transcends the typical historical or biblical map by integrating both historical and contemporary elements. The map's focus is on what Besson deemed sacred, incorporating places, mountains, and rivers significant within his sacred geography. Notably, the map omits references to non-sacred political entities, particularly the Ottoman empire, which goes unmentioned, leaving no indication that the region was under Ottoman control. This selective representation is further seen in the use of Greek nomenclature for place names (such as Alexandretta for İskenderun and Antiochia for Antakya), underscoring the Christian heritage of the region, albeit sometimes inconsistently.

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\textsuperscript{43} See, *La nova et esatta descrittione della Soria e della Terra Santa* (Venice, 1566) by Paolo Forlani; *Syria, Cypern, Palestina, Mesopotamia, Babylonia, zwey Arabia mit Berge, Wassern und Stetten* (Basel, 1588) by Sebastian Munster; and *Soria et Terra Santa Nvova Tavola. Descrittione dell'Asia* (Venice, 1599) by Melchior Sessa.

The place names on the map fall into several categories: major cities, biblical locations, early Christian sites (including Maronite ones), and Jesuit missions, with some places fitting multiple categories. Major cities, identified by church symbols, are those with early Christian connections or biblical mentions, including Alexandretta, Antiochia, Seleucia, Laodicea, Gabala, and others, all revered by Besson. Minor biblical locations, additional early Christian sites, and Jesuit missions are marked with simple circles, yet they are equally integral to the consecrated landscape.

In Besson’s focused portrayal of the Holy Land, place names predominantly derive from the Old and New Testaments. The narrative explains the significance of these locations: Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem are central to Jesus’s life and resurrection; others like Shechem, Bethel, and Hebron are associated with Abraham; sites such as Machaerus and Gaza hold historical importance related to John the Baptist and Samson, respectively. Each location on the map is carefully chosen to reflect Besson’s interpretation of sacred geography.

In addition to the major biblical sites, Besson’s map also highlights locations associated with early Christian Saints, particularly in Syria and Lebanon. For
instance, Baalbek is noted as the site of Saint Barbara's imprisonment,\textsuperscript{45} Saydnaya near Damascus is recognized for its early Christian worship of Saint Mary,\textsuperscript{46} and Sarepta, near Saida (biblically known as Zarephath), features a church dedicated to St. Elias (Elijah).\textsuperscript{47} The map pays special attention to sites connected to the Maronite Church, the only Eastern Christian community in full communion with the pope and the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{48} It includes an inset map of Mount Lebanon and Quesorán, showing Maronite sites at a larger scale.\textsuperscript{49} The map details major Maronite centers like Qannoubine and numerous churches and monasteries in the mountains of Lebanon and the Kadisha Valley, also known as the Holy Valley. This valley is home to significant early Christian monastic settlements such as St. Anthony’s of Qozhaya and the Monastery of Our Lady of Hawqa. The map also marks early Christian sites between Batroun and the Abraham River (Adonis River), including Mar Raphail, Mar Michail, Mar Gebrail, and Mar St. Simon, and highlights Maronite communities southward in Kesroan, including the Jesuit mission of Aintoura.

Interestingly, Jesuit missions and their associated \textit{visitas} in places like Aleppo, Alexandretta, Quilles, Tyr, Sidon, Tripoli, and Damascus are not prominently featured; they are marked simply as towns or smaller locations without specific indication of Jesuit activity. The map also includes three ethnic groups: the Nosairis,\textsuperscript{50} Chaldeans,\textsuperscript{51} and Druze.\textsuperscript{52} Although Besson was knowledgeable

\textsuperscript{46} Besson \textit{La Syrie Sainte}, 1:73.
\textsuperscript{47} Besson \textit{La Syrie Sainte}, 1:183.
\textsuperscript{48} The Maronites derive their name from Maron, a Syriac Christian saint. He was an early fourth-century Syriac monk who was venerated as a saint. Some of his followers migrated to the area of Mount Lebanon from their previous place of residence around the area of Antioch, establishing the nucleus of the Antiochene Syriac Maronite Church.
\textsuperscript{49} This map subsequently emerged as an independent entity. It was published in \textit{Cartas edificantes, y curiosas}, vol. ix (Madrid, 1757), to accompany an unsigned account on the mission in Mount Lebanon.
\textsuperscript{50} Besson refers to them as the Nesserians. The Nosairis (also known as the Ansayrii, sometimes the Ansariyeh) inhabit the mountainous country of northern Syria. As set forth in their own sacred book, the \textit{Majmu}, it seems to be a syncretism of Isma'ilite doctrines and the ancient heathenism of Harran. Rene Dussaud, \textit{Histoire de la religion des Nosairis} (Paris: Libraire Émile Bauillon, 1900).
\textsuperscript{51} Besson designated them as the Kalbins. The Chaldeans are followers of the Chaldean Catholic Church that originated from Upper Mesopotamia. When their community entered the communion with Rome, the Catholic Church called them the Chaldeans, prohibiting their designation as Nestorians, reserving the latter term for followers of the Church of the East who were not in communion.
\textsuperscript{52} The Druze are ethnically an Arab and Arabic-speaking community. Their monotheistic religion incorporates many beliefs from Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, and is also influenced by Greek philosophy and Hinduism. The Druze have not proselytized since the eleventh century, and the religion remains closed to outsiders.
about various ethnic groups in the region, these three are specifically represented, possibly due to their perceived affinity with Christian communities or potential receptiveness to Jesuit missionary efforts.

In Besson’s map, the natural landscape is revered as holy, prompting a significant enhancement in depicting physical geography. This advancement includes the correction of numerous inaccuracies found in the portrayal of mountains and rivers on earlier maps, likely a testament to the Jesuits’ firsthand knowledge and their intent to accentuate the sacred nature of the terrain. The representation of mountains, in particular, holds profound iconographic significance. These features are symbols of shelter and refuge integral to the biblical and early Christian narrative. The map’s depiction of relief, a detail often omitted in contemporary maps of the region (such as Nicolas Sanson’s 1652 map), is notably comprehensive. However, only mountains with biblical references are named: Mount Tabor, known as the site of Jesus’s transfiguration; Mount Carmel, associated with the prophet Elisha and the foundation of the Carmelite Order; the Judean Mountains, linked to Saint Zacharias and visited by the Virgin Mary; Mount Lebanon, frequently mentioned in the Old Testament; and Mount St. Simeon Stylites, famous for the pillar of the ascetic St. Simeon. The map also delineates only two mountain ranges, the Anti-Lebanon and Mount Amanus, which serve as geographical boundaries for the Holy Land and Syria, respectively.

Besson’s selective approach extends to the water bodies depicted on the map, with only those he deemed sacred bearing names. This includes Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee), the Jordan River, and Kidron’s Torrent (Valley). In Mount Lebanon, significant rivers such as the Nahr al-Kalb, where the Aintoura mission was located, the Abraham or Adonius River (modern-day Nahr Ibrahim), and the Holy River (Abou Ali River) leading to the Kadisha Valley and its monasteries are marked. These rivers, culminating at the foothills of the secret Cedar Forest, are revered as the heart of Maronite culture. The Cedar Forest itself, labeled “Cedres du Liban” and marked with a tree symbol, is also identified as a sacred site.

In modern-day Syria, the map similarly focuses on historically significant rivers. While Besson’s narrative does not discuss Syrian rivers, the map includes the Oronte River (modern-day Asi River), the Singas, the Nahr Barada, and the Euphrates, all known from the Hellenic era. Interestingly, the map contains a notable error in identifying the Queiq River, where Aleppo stands, as the Singa, a river without connection to the Queiq. This discrepancy, likely originating

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53 The Orontes River derives its historical importance from the convenience of its valley for traffic from N. to S. Roads from N. and N.E., converging at Antioch, follow the course of the stream up to Homs, where they fork to Damascus and to Coele-Syria and Syria. The Singas River (now the Sensja) was the backbone of the Syrian province of Commagene, on which
from Ptolemy’s misconceptions and perpetuated in maps by Jacob Ziegler and Philip Briet, suggests the map might not have been drawn by Besson personally, as he would presumably have accurately named a river running through a city he was familiar with.

Equally telling is what the map omits. It eschews contemporary (Arabic/Turkish) toponyms, favoring names from the Hellenic period. This selective representation extends to excluding significant Islamic cities in Syria, such as Raqqa, Homs, and Maarat, in stark contrast to Palmyra, which is included despite its minimal existence in the seventeenth century. The map’s cartouche, notably neutral in design, contrasts with contemporary maps that often feature Islamic cultural elements, further emphasizing the map’s silence on the presence of Islam in the region (Figures 7 and 8).

Besson’s selective presentation of geographical data plays a crucial role in reinforcing a stark dichotomy between the Christian and Islamic worlds in his narrative. This dichotomy portrays the Christian world as sanctified and the Islamic as desecrating and profane, implying an inherent incompatibility between the two. The map, emphasizing Christian landscapes and sites over Ottoman ones, serves as a potent visual complement to Besson’s textual narrative. In his writings, Besson laments the perceived subordinate status of Christianity within the Islamic Middle East. Thus, the map becomes a visual representation of Besson’s idealized version of the Orient—a landscape that, in his view, should be reclaimed and reshaped by Christian influences. It reflects not only the geographical knowledge of the time but also a missionary vision of what Besson believed the region once was and, with the efforts of the Jesuits, could be again.

**Conclusion**

Joseph Besson’s *La Syrie Sainte*, complemented by the accompanying map of Greater Syria, transcends the confines of a mere missionary account. It marks a significant contribution to the geographic understanding of the region and
FIGURES 7–8  Title cartouche of the map of Syria published in Besson (Paris, 1660) above; cartouche of the map of Syria by Jan Jansson (Amsterdam, c.1660) below. 
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shapes the Western perception of the Orient. Primarily intended to commend Jesuit missions and garner support from superiors, Besson's work provides extensive geographical details, especially of Syria, a region less known to Europeans than the Holy Land. His combination of empirical observations and academic knowledge not only enriched geographic understanding but also bolstered the Jesuit prestige in public and intellectual circles.

Besson's narrative and visual representations vividly reflect the Jesuit discourse on the Orient. In this context, Greater Syria, then a part of the Ottoman empire and predominantly Muslim, is portrayed as a land needing salvation from decline. Besson's negative portrayal of Muslim culture feeds into a stereotypical image of the Orient as a desolate and corrupted space. He advocates that the survival of Christian spirituality in these regions relies on the intervention of Catholic missionaries. His conceptualization of the Holy Land is expansive, imbued with spiritual significance not only from sacred history but also from the travels of Jesuits, extending from Egypt to Mesopotamia. In Besson's view, travel becomes a spiritual exercise, and the map a visual testament to Jesuit spirituality. Yet, this spirituality is intertwined with political aspirations, suggesting a Catholic reclamation of sacred spaces and emphasizing France's role as the protector of Christian sites.

The exchange between European intellectual hubs and the peripheries of Jesuit missions facilitated a unique institutional framework for knowledge production and dissemination. Besson's narrative and depiction of Syria as an integral part of the Holy Land spurred increased European interest in this part of the Orient. French journalist and traveler Jean de La Roque (1661–1745), inspired by Jesuit insights, published his travel account and map of the Oronte River after visiting Greater Syria. Similarly, the Jesuit account by Charles Néret (d.1714) from 1713 was first published in 1725 and reissued multiple times, often including the Jesuit map from Besson's book. This growing intrigue in Syria continued with the works of figures like Constantin-François de Chasseboeuf, count of Volney, who traveled the region and published his narrative in 1787. The resurgence of the Syrian mission by the Jesuits in 1831, along with the nineteenth-century European expansion, led to a second edition of La Syrie Sainte in 1862, aiming to highlight the Jesuits' influence in the Christianization of the Levant and their significant role in the advancement of geographical knowledge as a part of Jesuit science.