1. Introduction

One of the most important entries to the life and personality of Jacob of Edessa is undoubtedly the study of his activity in the field of canon law.

Jacob’s respect for ecclesiastical canons is one of the most conspicuous features of the short biography of Jacob which can be found in the Chronicle of Michael the Syrian.1 When Jacob was appointed bishop of Uruhay in 683/842 at the age of about 44, he rapidly came into conflict with the then Patriarch (Julian II Romayā) about the observance of ecclesiastical canons. Although everybody in the entourage of the Patriarch advised him to accommodate himself to ‘the circumstances of time’, he brought a volume containing the ecclesiastical canons to ‘the monastery of the Patriarch’,3 set fire to it, exclaiming: ‘I set fire to these canons; trampled upon and despised by you they are superfluous and no longer necessary.’ His abdication, only four years after his accession to the episcopal throne, was the logical consequence of this provocative gesture and he retired to the monastery of Mar Jacob at Kayshum, where, however, he continued to take an interest in juridical matters. According to Michael the Syrian, he there composed two different treatises, one, quite understandably, ‘against the pastors of the Church’, the other ‘against those who transgress the law (κανών) and the canons (κανώνια) of the Church’.

Chabot points to the fact that parts of this latter treatise are to be found in two London manuscripts, British Library Add. 12154 and 17193.4 In manuscript Add. 12154, a patristic anthology of miscellaneous

3 Possibly the monastery of Qnesshrin, to which Julian belonged before his elevation to the Patriarchate. Jacobite patriarchs frequently continued to keep their former monastery as their normal place of residence. Cf. W. Hage, Die syrisch-jakobitische Kirche in frühislamischer Zeit (Wiesbaden 1966), table A and p. 141.
4 W. Wright, Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1938 2 (London 1871), 984 (dcccclx) and 996–997 (dcccclxi).
character, dated by Wright to the end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century, the title of this treatise of apparently canonical content is (fol. 164b): ‘A memrā of rebuke against some arrogant people, who transgress the law of God and trample under foot the canons of the Church.’ Unfortunately, the compendium only provides the text of chapter twelve, which, judging from the title (‘on what Christianity is, and on its being the oldest of all religions’), does not deal with canonical issues, although it must be said that one of Jacob’s concerns for composing canons was to provide some guidance with regard to contacts with members of other religions, such as pagans, Jews and Muslims. Ms. BL Add. 17193 (AD 874), too, a comparable compendium, only gives this chapter 12 (fol. 58a).

The same concern about ecclesiastical discipline is stressed in the account of Jacob’s life composed by Barhebraeus.5 That Jacob himself did not entertain any illusions about the preparedness of people to observe the canons appears from the introduction to one of his letters to John the Stylite from the village of Litarba. Here Jacob states sadly: ‘In fact there is no need for even a single canon, since there is nobody to observe the canons.’6

This bitter and perhaps realistic attitude notwithstanding, he must be considered one of the most productive and original authors in the field of canon law of the Syrian Orthodox Church. He exerted his canonical activity along several lines.

2. Jacob of Edessa’s Juridical Activity

2.1 Translations

According to Baumstark,7 followed by Vööbus8 and Selb,9 Jacob is the translator (from the Greek) of the entire juridical compilation normally referred to as the Clementine Octateuch. Kaufhold is more cautious in his judgement and limits himself to mentioning a West Syrian origin

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6 K.E. Rignell, A Letter from Jacob of Edessa to John the Stylite of Litarab Concerning Ecclesiastical Canons (Lund 1979), 46.
7 A. Baumstark, Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluß der christlich-palästinensischen Texte (Bonn 1922), 252.