

# Two Daughters Competing for Christ

## *Jacob of Sarug on Edessa and Jerusalem*

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This paper discusses a homily of the West Syriac poet and theologian, Jacob of Sarug on Edessa and Jerusalem. After a short introduction about the Syriac author, some specific textual theological issues will be analyzed. The basic question will be what the reasons that lead Jacob to perceive Edessa as superior to Jerusalem are. Is this point of view characteristic of the Syriac theology of that period? What are the theological tools Jacob uses to build his narrative?

### Jacob of Sārūg and His *Mēm̄rā* on Edessa and Jerusalem

Jacob of Sarug (451–521) was a very prolific Syriac author, “perhaps the finest Syriac poet after Ephrem.”<sup>1</sup> He was born in the village of Kūrtūm on the river Euphrates and received his education at the Persian School in Edessa. He became in 518/519 bishop of Baṭnān. He wrote a very large number of biblical and theological homilies (*mēm̄rē*), which contain fascinating pieces of imaginative discourse.<sup>2</sup>

In his homily on Jerusalem and Edessa<sup>3</sup> written in the Passion Week, Jacob takes a stance against the Jewish community with its core in Jerusalem and

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1 Sebastian P. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, (Mōrān ʿEth’ō 9; Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute 1997), 37.

2 For Jacob’s biography and literary work see also: Anton Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur, mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte* (Bonn: A. Marcus und E. Weber 1922), 148–158 § 24c; Brock, *Brief Outline*, 37–42; Jean Baptiste Chabot, *Littérature syriaque* (Paris: Bloud & Gay 1934), 62–63; Rubens Duval, *Anciennes Littératures Chrétiennes, 11, La Littérature Syriaque* (troisième édition, Paris: Librairie Victor Lecoffre 1907), 351–354; Christian Lange, “Jakob von Sarug”, in Wassilios Klein, ed, *Syrische Kirchenväter* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), 217–227. For Jacob’s theology and especially Christology see Tanious Bou Mansour, “Die Christologie des Jakob von Sarug”, in Alois Grillmeier und Theresia Hainthaler, eds, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, vol. 2.3: *Die Kirchen von Jerusalem und Antiochien nach 451 bis 600* (Freiburg im Breisgau / Basel / Vienna: Herder 2002), 449–499.

3 An edition of the text is preserved in Paulus Bedjan, ed, *Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, vol. 5 (Paris / Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1910), 731–747. German Translation is available in

characterizes Edessa in a very positive way. According to the poet of Sarug, there are many reasons to regard Edessa more important than Jerusalem in history. Edessa has demonstrated its faith through the fact that the Syrian city recognized Christ as Son of God while Jerusalem, the city of the “Hebrews”, rejected him.

Jacob of Sarug wrote seven homilies against the Jews.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of the clues included by Jacob in these homilies, Albert – the editor of Syriac text – suggests that these seven *mēm̄rē* have been written before 494 or after 510.<sup>5</sup> In this context it should be possible that the homily on Edessa and Jerusalem belongs to a later period, probably at the end of Jacob’s life. The arguments I invoke in order to support this thesis are the following: firstly, in this later *mēm̄rā* Jacob synthesizes substantial historical and theological motifs familiar to everyone belonging to Syriac tradition, suggesting the maturity of the author; secondly, the Syriac poet seems to be more vehement in his criticism against the Jews.

### The Theological Motifs of the *Mēm̄rā*

Jacob’s *mēm̄rā* on Edessa and Jerusalem is not very different from his other anti-Jewish homilies. The metaphors employed in the text are part of the brilliant argumentation so specific to the Syriac tradition and especially to the poet of Sarug. He divides the text into two major themes, presented in a highly developed metaphorical thinking: 1. The deniable attitude of the Hebrew’s daughter toward Christ; 2. The receptivity of the Aramean’s daughter towards the Son of God.

The *mēm̄rā* deals with the symbol of Jerusalem only outwardly. The main focus of the text lies on the “blessed city” of Edessa, a symbol of pure faith in Christ opposed to the unfaith of Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> As Peter Bruns observed, “it is quite obvious that the *mēm̄rā* contains allusions to Solomon’s Song: Jerusalem and

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Peter Bruns, “Ein Memra des Jakob von Serug auf Edessa und Jerusalem,” in Rüdiger Arnzen and Jörn Thielmann, eds, *Words, Texts and Concepts Cruising the Mediterranean Sea: Studies on the Sources, Contents and Influences of Islamic Civilization and Arabic Philosophy and Science Dedicated to Gerhard Endress on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 139; Leuven / Paris / Dudley, MA: Peeters / Departement Oosterse Studies 2004), 537–553.

4 See Micheline Albert, ed, *Jacques de Saroug, Homélies contre les Juifs* (Édition critique du texte syriaque inédit, traduction française, introduction et notes, Turnhout: Brepols 1976).

5 Albert, *Jacques de Saroug*, 23.

6 Bruns, “Ein Memra des Jakob von Serug auf Edessa und Jerusalem”, 538–539.