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Alexander M. Schweitzer

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#### CATHOLIC BIBLICAL FEDERATION

General Secretariat

Postfach 10 52 22

70045 Stuttgart

Germany

Tel.: +49-(0)711-1 69 24-0

Fax: +49-(0)711-1 69 24-24

E-mail: bdv@c-b-f.org

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EDITORIAL

**Dear Readers,**

In this issue of the Bulletin Dei Verbum we continue with the series of articles on the countries of the Middle East, thereby filling in more of the mosaic that represents the diversity of the churches, the religions, the social groups and their complex histories in every region of the world.

In connection with the upcoming Plenary Assembly in Beirut there is much talk of diversity and pluralism. And where would this better come to expression than against the background of the countries of the Middle East, the hosting region for the Plenary Assembly? In Lebanon alone, a country with about four million inhabitants, there exist 17 different churches or religious communities. Twelve of these are Christian, four are Islamic and one is of Jewish origin.

Of course the question of pluralism is more than one of quantity, more than a mere numbers game. It is about existential questions, about questions of quality. What are my own values – and what other values are there? How do my own (faith) convictions relate to others? What role does tolerance play? Where is indifference in order, and where must one insist on absolute validity? How do I handle it when my world-view, my view of God or of man is called into question? Is dialogue possible, desirable, enriching? Is there *one* way? Or are there *many* ways?

These existential themes play an inescapable role in the concrete context of the Middle East. They also come to light in the Acts of the Apostles, which portrays the movement of early Christianity into a pluralistic world and which will serve as a biblical point of reference for the Plenary Assembly.

It is our hope, then, that this issue too, with its articles on the countries of the Bible and of the upcoming Plenary Assembly, and with the news from the Federation, will again contain information and stimulus that will help you, dear reader, in your own dealings with the question of pluralism and enrich your concrete preparations for the Plenary Assembly in Beirut.

Alexander M. Schweitzer



## Abraham and Monotheism

*Paul Féghaly, Middle East Subregional Coordinator of the CBF, Lebanon*

When Abraham is mentioned in the Near East, it is above all his monotheism that comes to mind; this is the point of convergence between the three religions that originated in this oriental world, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Of course, the Christian God is not only the one God; he is also triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

These three traditions acclaim Abraham as the model man of God. But if their common father in faith unites them, there are also things that separate them. In the following paragraphs we will dwell in turn on each of these religions, which have their own specific political and religious approaches.

### 1. The Jewish world

A survey of the Jewish writings of about the time of the Christian era reveals how important the patriarch is for his descendants. He is the model of the pious Jew and the guarantor of the existence of the chosen people. The phrase: "Abraham our father" expresses the close relationship that unites the people to their father in faith. These traditions insist on the glory as well as on the virtues of Abraham; they praise his perfection, and recall his works. The patriarch's attitude serves as an example to his children who are invited to imitate him. Finally, the patriarch insures salvation to his own, because his merits overflow on those who follow his path.

Abraham attacked idols, and this was the first step on the path of monotheism. In fact, corruption was rampant in the era when this patriarch lived: we are at the time of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel. The tradition reports that Abraham's birth was preceded by a phenomenon of the heavenly order that attracted the attention of the sovereign who was himself an astrologer. The tyrant fearing the loss of his throne ordered the death of the new-born children in the country; but Terah's child miraculously escaped.

Abraham rejected the idolatry that was rampant in the country and turned toward the true God. Here we confront two traditions. One of these affirms that the patriarch recognized the one God from his earliest youth,

from the age of three, or even when he was no more than one year old. The other tradition accepts the idea that Abraham was originally involved in the worship of the stars, before he came to worship the master of the universe at the age of forty-eight. For the first, he received in his own family the teaching of Noah and Shem. For those who follow the second tradition, it was through the contemplation of the world or the heavens that the patriarch came to recognize the errors of idolatry. This is why some say of Abraham that he was the first convert before becoming the first missionary.

In fact, Abraham began by renouncing astrology, and he then took up the fight against idols. He ridiculed them, employing the arguments found in Second Isaiah. His father was a servant of Nimrod and a maker of idols, but Abraham did not follow his lead. On the contrary, he pursued his struggle against idolatry and destroyed the statues of the gods. Having been caught and arrested he was thrown into fire; but he emerged safe and sound from the furnace, like Daniel and his companions. This is how the tradition understood God's statement: "I am the Lord who brought you out of the fire (Ur) of the Chaldeans" (Gen 15:7). In this sense, Jewish tradition presents the patriarch as a being marked with a special sign from before the time of his birth, as a man whose zeal for the true religion nothing could overturn.

Besides this aspect of the destruction of idols, the Jewish teachers insist very particularly on the positive aspect of Abraham's life: his monotheism and his election. They recall his virtues and his trials, and they point to his merits for posterity. They generally agree in affirming that Abraham was the first human being to acknowledge God. They then enumerate his special virtues which number seven: his obedience, attested to above all in his departure from Haran and in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac; his justice, because of which there will always be a certain number of just among his people; his faith, which made it possible for him to inherit both this world and the world to come; his humility, which his children are to imitate; his education, his hospitality, and finally his missionary activity. The Jewish tradition also brings out the fact that Abraham was subjected to ten





tests, or trials: the first is the departure from Ur; the most important, the aqedah (sacrifice) of Isaac. Finally, much is made of the wisdom of Abraham, his prophetic gifts, and his prayer.

Such is the portrait of Abraham found in the tradition of the rabbis; this tradition never ceases to exalt him as "Father (our Father)", to present him as the savior of Israel and the guarantor of the existence of the universe; to show how his justice justified his posterity. But the unique grandeur that Abraham represents in the eyes of the doctors of Israel is founded not on himself, but on a reality that transcends him, the Torah.

## 2. The Christian world

Our purpose here is to discover Abraham as the New Testament presents him to us. He is one of the personalities of the Old Testament most frequently mentioned in the apostolic tradition. His name appears seventy-two times in the New Testament; Moses, whose name occurs eighty times, is the only one who surpasses him; as for David, he is not far behind him, with fifty-nine references. It should be added however that in most cases Moses is mentioned in the New Testament only in connection with the Torah whose presumed author he is, whereas the patriarch intervenes as an historical personage whose destiny plays a decisive role with regard to his descendants. So Abraham has something of a unique position in the New Testament.

In Matthew, the name Abraham occurs seven times: in the genealogy of Jesus and in the preaching of the Baptist, with reference to the messianic banquet and the resurrection. Luke places still more emphasis on the patriarch; he uses his name fifteen times, of which ten are in texts proper to him, such as the infancy narrative and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. In John, Abraham is mentioned eleven times: all the references are found in chapter 8.

The Acts of the Apostles speaks of the patriarch in seven places, in the missionary discourses, and notably in the speech of Stephen. The apostle Paul often refers to Abraham, particularly in Romans and Galatians, and

with reference especially to the problem of justification. Finally, Abraham is mentioned ten times in the Epistle to the Hebrews and three times in the Catholic Epistles.

This list of references shows on the one hand the importance of the patriarch for the authors of the New Testament and Abraham's ties with the Christians of Judeo-Palestinian origin. On the other hand, the data relative to Abraham seem to belong to the oldest strata of the New Testament; which puts us back in the period of the Jewish traditions contemporary to Jesus or to the early Church. Moreover, since Abraham is also cited in the writings linked to the Hellenistic world, such as Luke, Acts and Hebrews, one could say that we are here in the line of Pauline theology.

What the New Testament says of Abraham is in perfect harmony with the Old Testament and with Jewish tradition. This is because the Church sees itself as in perfect continuity with the Old Covenant. It affirms its links with the patriarch and presents itself as his heir and his successor. The Church is part of a plan of salvation that God inaugurated in Abraham, confirmed and realized in Christ; it is at once the beneficiary and the witness of a promise made long ago to the patriarch ... and it resorts quite naturally to the Scriptures of Israel to situate itself within the framework of the history of salvation.

We will not undertake an exegesis of these texts here. It is sufficient to know, for example, that the Epistle of James, which treats of faith and works, bases its argument very particularly on the example of Abraham. As for the Epistle to the Hebrews, it returns to the theme of perseverance in faith. In chapter 11 especially, the author presents a kind of summary of history; he presents this in the form of a "praise of the fathers", in the style of the book of Sirach. Among these people of whom the Epistle speaks, Abraham is found to be one of those who received a good commendation, and this in the line of Abel, Enoch and Noah; after him come Moses, the judges, the kings and the prophets. Abraham inaugurates a new series of examples of believers whose life is marked by faith.



If we move to the Epistles of Paul we see the apostle faced with the problem of the Abrahamic tradition. Two questions present themselves to him: what is the exact place of Abraham in the plan of God for the benefit of humanity? Who or what is the true posterity of the patriarch?

How are human beings saved? By faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law. This is the response Paul gives to those who take circumcision as the foundation. He then goes on to affirm that the posterity of Abraham is constituted by all those who believe in Jesus Christ. Consequently, Jews and Gentiles alike can form part of the patriarch's heritage. In the Epistle to the Galatians, Paul insists on the close link that ties Christ to Abraham, and from this he draws the conclusion that to be in Christ is to belong by the same token to the family of the patriarch. In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul is more interested in the immediate relations that exist between Abraham and believers; this is why he here insists on the role of father played by Abraham with reference to believers; he also highlights points of similarity, both in substance and in quality, between the faith of Abraham and the faith of Christians.

The interpretations the New Testament offers of the patriarch are diverse. He is the model of obedience: it is thus our duty to imitate him. When one claims Abraham by doing his works, one should recognize in his descendant Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ sent by the Father to accomplish what he promised long ago to the patriarch. Finally, the texts insist on the unique role attributed to Abraham in the biblical revelation. It is with him that God inaugurates a new chapter of the history of the world, where humanity as a whole is called to live under the banner of the promise, the banner of faith.

### 3. The Moslem world

Jewish tradition traces the steps of Abraham, above all in his monotheism and his practice of the Law. Christianity sees in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of the promises once made to Abraham. What was begun with Abraham, Christ has brought to fulfillment. What was present in seed at the start of the first people finds its

complete flowering in Christ in whom all the promises of God are "yes". What then is the specifically Islamic perspective on Abraham?

Youwakim Moubarak thinks that Islam confers on Abraham an exceptional place, one given to him in no other Semitic religion. In the Koran, in particular, the patriarch occupies the most central place. No biblical personage is named as frequently as Abraham. His name appears seventy-nine times in the canonical text: in 25 suras, 37 passages and 140 verses. These texts belong to the Meccan period (619-622) as well as to the Medinan period (622-632).

What do we observe in these texts? Very much the same things that we already encountered in the Jewish texts. So the Islamic tradition appears as in direct continuity with the Jewish world, bypassing the unique perspective of the Christian world. Two elements call for particular attention. The first concerns the struggle of Abraham against idolatry, the patriarch's preaching of monotheistic doctrine, the polemic against idols, the iconoclastic gesture of Abraham and his condemnation. The second element is the sacrifice of Ishmael, with the latter's consent, following a dream.

Abraham reproaches his people with rendering worship to gods who are incapable of hearing them, and of being content to simply imitate the practices of their ancestors. He then goes on to confess his faith, stating his desire to worship only the Lord of the worlds, the God who created the universe, who governs it by his providence, gives it food and drink, brings healing to its people, and causes them to die and to rise again.

Here is reported a conversation between Abraham and his father, in line with the Testament of Abraham. Abraham begs his father to abandon idolatry, but in vain. The patriarch then decides to break with his family, without ceasing however to intercede for his father. We have here then an echo of the disputes of Abraham with the idolaters of his time. Having turned to derision, they decide to condemn Abraham to the torture of fire. But God has transformed the fire into coldness and for



Abraham the result is salvation rather than death.

Two elements present in Moslem thought go back to Jewish traditions. The first says: by contemplating the stars, the patriarch came to realize that neither the moon nor the sun can be associated with the Lord of the universe. The second speaks of Abraham as of one who has overcome trials and whom God chose to guide humanity. He is the model of the perfect believer, the founder of Islam. It is thus that with Ismael, he built the Ka'aba, instituted the pilgrimage in memory of the sacrifice of his son, and begged of God to send an apostle who, in his turn, would be able to teach the faithful and to read Scripture to them.

We conclude with Father Moubarak: in his infinite foreknowledge, God foresaw Abraham, his friend, who would turn from the cult of the stars to worship him alone. Abraham then went on to preach the one God to his father, to his people and to his king, and he was a destroyer of idols. He is thrown into fire, but God delivers him. He never ceases to pray for his father and he leaves his family behind when confronted with their obstinacy in not accepting his message. He leaves for the Holy Land with Lot. ...

And if one continues to read the texts, one sees that Mohammed is recognizable in Abraham. The prophet saw in Abraham a model and a precursor, the perfect historical realization of his own monotheistic vocation, as Fr. Moubarak put it. Indeed, Islam does not look like a new religion at all; its intention is to return to the sources of primitive monotheism, such as it was proclaimed and lived by Abraham.

#### **Conclusion**

Despite their diversity, the Jewish, Christian and Moslem commentaries converge on a number of points. They all insist on the importance of Abraham for their own tradition: the patriarch realizes the spiritual program of Jews, of Christians and of Moslems. He represents a unique presence in Judaism, in the Church and in Islam. In fact, the different readings are all concerned with the faith of Abraham and with his submission to the Lord; they attest the patriarch's profoundly religious attitude toward God and they agree, finally, in referring to Abraham as the friend of God.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

□



## Coptic Christianity

Mark Sheridan, *osb*, Rome

*The author, Mark Sheridan osb, is the Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the Pontifical Institute of Sant'Anselmo in Rome and Professor of early Christian literature at the Pontifical Institutes of Sant'Anselmo and the Augustinianum in Rome.*

The word "Copt", derived from the Arabic *qibt*, which in turn derived from the Greek word for Egypt (*Aigyptos*), has been used in Latin and modern European languages since the sixteenth century to designate the modern Christian inhabitants of Egypt and the language used by them in their liturgy. The Arabic word *qibt* is used by the Coptic (Egyptian) Christians as the equivalent of the Coptic word for Egypt (*xhmi - cheme*). With the increased flow of Coptic manuscripts into Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the more scientific study of the language, the word "Copt" came to be applied to the Egyptian language in all its dialects as spoken and written from the third century onwards of the present era independently of the religious association.

### Christianity in Egypt before Nicaea

According to the church historian Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* II, 16,24), reflecting the traditions of his day (early fourth century), the evangelist Mark first preached the gospel in Alexandria, and the Coptic Church claims an unbroken succession of patriarchs from that time to the present. Although manuscript evidence reveals that Christianity was firmly established in Egypt in the early second century, it is only in the last quarter of the second century that it emerges into the full light of history with the figures of the catechists Pantaenus, Clement and Origen, the bishop Demetrius I and others. By the time of the peace of the Church under Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (325) there may have been as many as 72 bishops in Egypt including Cyrenica and Libya. The Egyptian Church was unique among the Oriental Churches in the monarchical structure that it developed under the bishop of Alexandria. From the third century onwards it was the custom of the bishops of Alexandria to send a circular letter to all the bishops of Egypt announcing the date of Easter and dealing with other doctrinal and disciplinary matters.

### The development of the Coptic language and literature

Greek had been spoken in Egypt since the conquest of the country by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. and the foundation of the city of Alexandria in 331, which soon became one of the principal cities of the Hellenistic world. There is reason to believe that, at least by the second and third century, there was a fairly large and prosperous bilingual population of native Egyptian origin. The creation of the Coptic script in the middle or second half of the third century seems to have been a deliberate attempt on the part of a bilingual educated elite to revive the Egyptian language as a literary medium. This script made use of the Greek alphabet together with six or seven letters borrowed from demotic to represent sounds not found in the Greek alphabet. The first major literary work to have been produced in this language appears to have been the translation of the Christian Scriptures.

### The rise of the monastic movement

From at least the first part of the fourth century the monastic movement became an important feature of the life of the Egyptian Church and has remained such throughout its history. The monastic movement assumed a variety of external forms ranging from the solitary hermit to the highly organized cenobitic communities and this variety is found throughout the Nile Valley as well as in Delta from the beginning. Two names in particular are associated with the rise of monasticism, Antony (d. 356) and Pachomius (d. 346) who became the patrons of the eremitical and cenobitical forms of monasticism respectively. Letters attributed to them and to the successors of Pachomius, Theodore and Horsiesius, are among the earliest items of Coptic literature. By the middle of the fourth century many thousands had taken up the monastic life and the fame of the monks spread beyond Egypt attracting many recruits from other parts of the Roman empire.

### Chalcedon and its aftermath

The Council of Chalcedon (451) proved to be a turning point in the relationship of the Egyptian Church with the other Churches. From the point of view of the theology



developed by Cyril the definition of the two natures of Christ by Chalcedon was essentially the adoption of the Nestorian heresy and therefore a denial of the full reality of the Incarnation. From the point of view of the defenders of Chalcedon, the Alexandrian-Egyptian theology was “monophysite”, that is, it did not distinguish the two natures of Christ, divine and human, but recognized only a single nature (*mia physis* in Cyril’s terminology). The dispute revolved around the sense of the word “physis” (nature) and neither side was able to recognize that the other was using the term in a different sense. In the course of the century and more that followed, various attempts were made to preserve the unity of the Church (and the empire) either by devising compromise formulas or by controlling the appointment of the patriarch of Alexandria or by force. The Egyptian Church was not alone in refusing to accept Chalcedon. It did not recognize the validity of sacraments administered by those who subscribed to the formula of Chalcedon whom they regarded as heretics. Therefore they would not accept ordination from the patriarch imposed by Constantinople. This led to establishment of a separate hierarchy and patriarch through the intervention of Jacob Bardesanes, consecrated bishop by Theodosius in 543 with a roving commission. So successful was Jacob in establishing a monophysite clergy during his constant journeys throughout the Middle East that these Churches became known as “Jacobite.” Hence, since the sixth century there existed in Egypt two competing patriarchs and hierarchies, the Chalcedonian (or Melchite) and the non-Chalcedonian or Jacobite. The vast majority of the people in the Egyptian Church recognized only the latter and the former was maintained in power only in the city of Alexandria with the aid of the civil and military authority. The non-Chalcedonian patriarch had to take refuge in one of the monasteries outside of Alexandria. The Arab conquest of Egypt in 641-2 finally put an end to the Byzantine efforts to control the Church and opened a new era in the history of the Egyptian Church. There has continued to be a Melchite (Greek Orthodox) patriarch of Alexandria, although under Turkish rule he was forced to live in Constantinople. It is important to emphasize that the original division was not along lines of Greek vs. Copt

since all of the original champions of the monophysite cause were Greek speakers and writers.



*Coptic Cross*

### **The Arab invasion**

At the time of the Arab invasion it is estimated that two thirds at least of the Egyptian population was Christian but the pressure exerted to convert to Islam in the subsequent centuries resulted in reducing the Church to a minority status in the country. It also resulted in the gradual disappearance of Greek as a spoken language and even as a liturgical language and the substitution of the Bohairic dialect of Coptic as the liturgical language and eventually the substitution of Arabic as the spoken language of the Christian population.

In this situation the monasteries, particularly those of the Wadi-n-Natrun, the Red Sea monasteries of Antony and Pau, and the White Monastery near Sohag played an important role in the preservation of the Coptic heritage. Here the earlier literature was collected and copied for



preservation. In the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries the majority of the patriarchs came from the monastery of Abu-Makar in the Wadi-n-Natrun, which led to the adoption of the Bohairic dialect (that of the region) as the liturgical language of the Coptic Church. This period also saw the beginning of Coptic-Arabic literature. Another important monument of Coptic literature in Arabic is the work on the Churches and Monasteries of Egypt by Abu al-Makarim (but attributed erroneously in the English translation to Abu Salih the Armenian). In this period also Arabic was introduced into the liturgy and from the late medieval period onwards the liturgical manuscripts tend to be in Arabic and Coptic (Bohairic).

#### **The modern era**

The modern era for the Copts began with the French invasion of Bonaparte in 1798, and the rule of Mohammed Ali permitted them to be reintegrated into the national life of the country and eventually to receive equal recognition before the law. The patriarchate of Cyril IV (1854-1861) marked an important step in the revival of Coptic institutions and the promotion of education. More recently the revival in the Coptic monasteries during the last thirty years has had important effects throughout the life of the Coptic Church. In recent years the rise of Islamic fundamentalism has caused tensions and even led to the house arrest of the patriarch from 1981-1985.

#### **Liturgy and spiritual life**

The liturgical language of the Egyptian Church had been Greek from the beginning and Greek continued to be used in the liturgy, at least in part, long after the Arab invasion. In the eighth century the patriarchs were still sending their festal letters in Greek to other parts of Egypt. But there is also evidence that Coptic (Sahidic) was being introduced into the liturgy in the seventh century. It is not clear that there was ever a completely Sahidic liturgy or that there was uniform liturgical practice in the Coptic Church before the time of the patriarch Gabriel II (1130-1144). By this time Arabic was already entering into the celebration of the liturgy. In addition to the Eucharist, the Coptic Church

knows the sacraments of baptism, chrism (confirmation), penance, marriage, orders and anointing of the sick. The liturgical books include the Euchologion (missal), the lectionary (katameros), the synaxary (lives of the saints), Horologion (Canonical Hours), the Difnar (antiphonal), the sacramentary and the pontifical among others. From ancient times pilgrimages (mouleds), often lasting as long as a week and connected with a fair, have been an important feature of popular religious culture in the Coptic Church.

#### **The present situation**

Estimates of the number of members of the Coptic Orthodox Church vary considerably (from 4 to 8 million) because of the inexact population figures available for Egypt. It is undoubtedly the largest Christian community in the Middle East. The Church organisation includes some 20 dioceses in Egypt and dioceses outside Egypt in North America, East Africa, France, Jerusalem, Nubia, and Khartoum because of the large number of Copts who have emigrated in the last twenty-five years. There are over 40 Coptic communities in the United States, nine in Canada, 14 in Australia, 6 in Britain. There are also Coptic communities with resident priests in other European countries including Austria, Italy and Switzerland. There are about 1,500 married priests in the Church in Egypt. The bishops by ancient tradition are not married and are usually drawn from the monks. In addition to the diocesan bishops and their auxiliaries, there are a number of bishops with special responsibilities such as ecumenical affairs, youth, and higher education. The Church maintains schools and seminaries in Egypt and conducts an extensive Sunday school program. The patriarch is chosen from one of three candidates selected by an assembly composed of the bishops, representatives of the clergy, the monks and laymen. The final selection is made by a child who draws the name of one of the three candidates. The present patriarch is Shenouda III, elected in 1973, under whose leadership ecumenical dialogue has been carried on with the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Anglican communion, and with the Evangelical and Reformed Churches.





### The Coptic Catholic Church

In addition to the Coptic Orthodox Church there is a body of Coptic rite united with the Roman Catholic Church. Although Franciscans are known to have been in Egypt earlier, the continuous presence of the Catholics in Egypt in modern times dates to the Franciscan mission in Cairo in 1630, followed by the Jesuits in 1697. Vicars-apostolic have been appointed since 1741 for Catholics of the Coptic rite which at that time numbered about 2000. Pope Leo XII erected a Coptic patriarchate in 1824 but did not name a patriarch.

Leo XIII named the first Catholic patriarch, Cyril Makarios, in 1899 (deposed 1910), but a second was not named until 1947. Today the Church has six dioceses and about 200 priests with 100 Coptic parishes and a total membership of about 150,000 members.

### The Coptic Evangelical Church

Although numerous Protestant bodies are represented in Egypt, the only one that defines itself as Coptic is the Coptic Evangelical Church, founded by the United Presbyterian Church in North America in 1854 and completely independent since 1957. The Church has about 250 churches plus 200 prayer centers, a community of about 250,000 with about 340 pastors and maintains the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo and a large publishing house. ■



*El-Moallaka Church in Cairo*





## Egypt and the Bible

*Paul Féghaly, Middle East Subregional Coordinator of the CBF, Lebanon*

Egypt, cradle of a flourishing civilization in the third millennium BC, was in contact with the world of the Bible over the course of three periods: that of the Exodus, that of King Solomon and the three kings who succeeded him, and finally at the time of the Ptolemies, successors of Alexander the Great.

### 1. Egypt at the time of the Exodus

In order to understand this relationship of Egypt to the Hebrew people, one must recall the great invasion of the Hyksos, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century BC. This migration, one could say, involved all the tribes which would later go to make up the people of Israel. It is to this period that one should date the departure to Egypt of Jacob and his sons, who went down to rejoin Joseph, the great vizier. Of course the text has been embellished and the story of Joseph is late. This is clear, for example, from the sense of forgiveness in the story that is so close to the teaching of the Gospel. Then, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century BC, there was a contrary movement, beginning in upper Egypt, in pursuit of the Hyksos. This is what has been called the first Exodus: the invaders were driven back. But some "Hyksos" remained in Egypt, or even returned there because of the severe famines that were an almost regular occurrence in Palestine. One could mention in this regard three tribes that will leave at the time of the Exodus escape, as it is called. These are the tribe of Levi, that of Moses and Aaron, the tribe of Ephraim, that of Joshua who entered Palestine by the East, through Moab, and finally the tribe of Judah, which infiltrated Palestine through the south with Caleb, the Kenites... This Exodus escape was centered on the person of Moses, an Egyptian name which originally meant "servant of the god Re". Later on, Re dropped off and only the second part of the name remained, which then took on a Semitic signification: "the one saved from the waters" (Ex 2:10).

The text of Exodus speaks of the oppression of the Hebrews in Egypt: they worked in the fields and on the Delta fortifications. Others were shepherds, as Jacob stated to the Pharaoh when he came down to Egypt to join his son Joseph. Their desire to leave Egypt raised strong opposition on the part of the Pharaoh, who is not

named in the biblical account. Moses took advantage of the weather conditions to announce the plagues that were to strike Egypt. Finally, the death of the Pharaoh's first-born was regarded as God's revenge on this sovereign who had ordered the death of the Hebrew children. Pharaoh permitted the Hebrews to depart. In fact, it was the three tribes named above that fled and arrived in the desert of Sinai, after having passed through the lakes called Bitter, those marshlands whose fords they well knew. Of course, popular imagination speaks of the passage through the Red Sea; but it was really the Sea of Reeds that the Hebrews passed through. Moreover, all the people who were living at the time of David and Solomon are mentioned in the account and not only the three tribes who had actually left Egypt at that time. This of course affects the number of Hebrews reportedly involved in the incident.



*Pyramid with Sphinx at Giza*

Once in the desert, the Hebrews sought to return into Egypt, a country very rich in water, fish, meat, cucumbers, watermelons... but they were harshly repressed there. In a first stage, they moved steadily forward in the direction of Sinai. In the second stage, they move in the direction of Moab, the door through which they would pass to reach "the Land of Promise".



## 2. Egypt in the time of Solomon and his successors

Although we have been following the biblical account, it would have been possible to cite the stele of Merneptah, discovered at Thebes in 1895. The Pharaoh says: "Canaan is devastated, Ashkelon is fallen, Gezer is ruined, Yanoam is reduced to nothing, Israel is desolate and her seed is no more." This could possibly be a reference to the pursuit of the Egyptians against Israel. But this is all no more than a hypothesis.

After this period of the Exodus there is total silence till the reign of David. There we read in 1 K 11:14-22 that an Edomite prince, Hadad, fled to the court of Egypt to escape from Joab. Later, there was a reconciliation between Egypt and Solomon who married the daughter of the Pharaoh Psusennis (cf. 1 K 3:1; 9:16). Thereafter, the biblical text mentions a transit trade between the two countries. The horses of Cilicia were delivered to Egypt and the chariots of Egypt were delivered to the kings of Aram (1 K 10:28-29).

The role of Egypt was to diminish with the invasions, first of the Assyrians, and then of the Babylonians. But it carried on just the same through its allies in Canaan and Syria. The two kingdoms of Judah and Samaria were affected. In Jerusalem, there was always a pro-Egyptian party, which was often subject to attack by the prophets who were opposed on principle to any alliance with the pagan nations. Thus, e.g., around 721, Isaiah attempted in vain to prevent an alliance between Ahaz and the Pharaoh Shabaka (Is 31:1). On the other hand, King Josiah was killed in 609, at Megiddo, when he tried to block the passage of Egyptian troops who were rushing to the help of the struggling Assyria. Finally, Jerusalem, under siege by Nebuchadnezzar, was counting on assistance from the Egyptian army. Pharaoh Apries attempted to divert the siege, but he got cold feet and returned to his country. So Jerusalem fell in 587.

## 3. The Egypt of the Ptolemies

The Bible does not speak of the relations between Judah and Israel on the one hand and Egypt on the other during the Persian period. We must await the arrival of Alexander, who was welcomed, it is said, by the high priest in Jerusalem and the sudden death of the conqueror in 323 BC. It was the Ptolemies of Egypt who then occupied Palestine till the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and the arrival of the Seleucids of Antioch in Syria.

Alexandria had allotted one of the city districts to the Jews. Their numbers were to increase in this great metropolis. Philo speaks of a million Jews in Alexandria. This is clearly an inflated figure, given that the city's total population was no more than a million inhabitants. 100,000 would be a more realistic figure.

Moreover, the Ptolemies who occupied Palestine had very good relations with the Jews of Jerusalem and the sympathy of these rulers will remain, even with the occupation of the region by the Seleucids.



*Wall of temple at Karnak listing conquered towns*

It was at Alexandria that the version of the Bible known as the Septuagint was written. Pseudo-Aristeas relates that Ptolemy II Philadelphus asked the Jews to provide a Greek translation of the Mosaic Law. Seventy-two Jewish scholars, according to the legend, translated the Torah in seventy-two days. It should be noted that it is this translation of the Hebrew Bible that is cited by the New Testament authors. This explains the repudiation of the Septuagint by the Jews of Jamnia who ordered another, more literal translation. To the Septuagint, other books written directly in Greek were then added: e.g., the book of Wisdom and the translation of Ben Sirach. The books of the Maccabees and the other texts of the intertestamental period should be mentioned as well.

Finally, we note that the book of the Proverbs of Solomon drew on the work of Amenemope, that high Egyptian functionary who lived at the beginning of the first millennium BC and wrote a book of maxims of wisdom, addressed to his son (Pr 22:17 – 24:22). Moreover, when one reads the names of the functionaries of Solomon, one can detect the names of Egyptian scribes who lived at the court of this great king. So it should come as no surprise if we find points of contact between the wisdom literature of Israel and Egyptian wisdom, or if we find similarities with regard to the instruments of worship: the Ark of the Covenant for example, is somewhat reminiscent of the boats in which the Egyptian priests would transport the statues of their divinities during solemn processions.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)



## Iran and its Churches

*Pierre Humblot, Chaldean Church priest, Teheran, Iran*

### 1. The Country

#### Geography

Iran is a vast country whose dimensions would probably come as a surprise to some: 1,684,000 square kilometers, or a territory the size of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt combined, but with an immense central desert plateau surrounded by well watered mountains, a situation that permits an irrigated agriculture, rich and varied, as well as the rearing of cattle, above all of sheep, which at times necessitates a seasonal nomadism. The Caspian Sea supports an almost tropical micro-climate, favorable to forests, citrus fruits and rice.

#### Population

Vast and diverse as an empire, with a rapidly increasing population, this country counted more than sixty million inhabitants as of the latest census of 1996. This population is made up of numerous ethnic groups, remnants of multiple invasions and witnesses of an ancient and tumultuous past. The inhabitants are quickly becoming urbanized, for example in this great capital city of Teheran, with its roughly fifteen million inhabitants. Because of the demographic explosion that has taken place since the Revolution, half of the population is now under 18 years of age. At this rate, it is estimated that the country's population will number one hundred and twenty million inhabitants in twenty years, which will result in serious problems, among them that of the water supply, given the limited amount of annual rainfall.

#### Political evolution

For the last twenty-one years, following the Revolution (1979) whose jolting stops and starts you have undoubtedly followed and which overturned the regime of the Shah, we have become an Islamic Republic, a curiously "theocratic-democratic" regime which many fear, but which appears to have a somewhat falsified image in the West: we are, after all, a country of great culture and the Persians could not possibly be as fanatical as is claimed by certain newspapers which demonize our regime for publicity purposes. Moreover, you know how quickly mentalities evolve, and the election of Hojat-ol-Islam

Saïd Mohammed Khatemi as president of the Republic is one sign of this among others, a sign very strongly confirmed by the recent municipal elections, followed by the legislative elections, which were won in great majority by his supporters, in particular a great number of young people who did not know the Revolution and who desire a more flexible framework of life, more free, but also less difficult from the economic point of view.

#### Economy

As for our economy, you know its strengths and weaknesses, which are due to the variations in the currency of crude oil, our main wealth, in addition to the mineral resources and agriculture. But allow me to recall that the petroleum industry is in the process of expanding in the region, over a vast area around the Caspian Sea, which is of interest not only to the demand of the West, but to that of all the countries of Central Asia as well, from the Caucasus to China, and which perhaps explains many of the present conflicts over the places where the pipelines pass, whether those currently in use or those still in the planning stages, from Afghanistan to Chechnya, not to mention Kurdistan, Iraq and that region of the Gulf that I dare not name... Zone of fractures in our Asiatic humanity, with the added element of that neighbor in the Holy Land that considers Iran her most dangerous enemy.

Zone of the future, then, for the world economy, but also a region of cultural transition from West to East, "Empire of the Middle" between Arab Mesopotamia and the Indus, as well as from North to South, between the Slavic, or Turko-Mongolian world and Arabia. We are very evidently the link between the Near East and Central Asia, inevitably a pathway of invasions, route of the silk trade in times past, and today of pipelines, but also of railroads, of merchandise, of ideas, and also, unfortunately, of narcotics.

#### Culture

In spite of continual invasions which have painfully marked its history, Iran has managed to maintain an authentic and very rich civilization whose glorious Zoroastrian past and the present richness of Iranian



Shiism, so marked by the mystical poetry of a Hafez or a Molana, we know – a culture quite distinct from that of the Arab Sunnite world. Persian, an Indo-European language, is spoken not only in Iran but in Afghanistan and Tadjikistan, that is, by some ninety-three million persons, among whom, for Iran, a population of about two million Iranians who have emigrated to the West since the Islamic Revolution. The rate of literacy was at about the 80 % level in 1996, as opposed to 59% in 1976.

### Religions

The Shiite Moslems make up 85% of the population, the Sunnites 12 %. The remaining 3% represent small Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and Bahai minorities. Zoroastrianism, an ancient and very profound monotheistic religion, marks Persian tradition and culture with numerous traits, and accounts for the fact that our often mystical religious intuitions incline toward Indian civilization rather than toward the Arab world.

## 2. The Churches in Iran

### Concealed history?

An unknown story is that of our Oriental Church, which is improperly called Nestorian and which, founded perhaps before the year 79 AD by a disciple of Saint Thomas, spread without noise or war from Mesopotamia all the way to Japan. The Book of the "Acts of the Apostles" is really just the "Acts of a few Apostles to the West", the other Apostles having probably done better than to remain dormant in Palestine! In line with numerous historians, our Patriarch affirmed in the course of the special Synod for Asia that this Church of the East had grown by the beginning of the second millennium BC to include eighty million faithful, assembled in two hundred and fifty dioceses. Today, however, it numbers just a few more than a million faithful, scattered between Mesopotamia and America... Our (Latin) Church History manuals, without saying so, treat almost exclusively the Church of the West and are almost completely silent about the Church of the East and its history. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of the Synod for Asia, Pope John Paul II recalled: "Persian merchants brought the Good News as far as China in the early fifth century. The first Christian Church was planted there in the early seventh century. During the T'ang dynasty (618-907), the Church flourished there for almost two centuries. The decline of the Church living in China at the end of the first millennium BC is one of the saddest chapters of the history of the people of God on the Asian continent. In the thirteenth century, the Good News was announced to the Mongols, to the Turks and once again to the Chinese. But Christianity has now practically disappeared from these regions..." Might our Church of Iran today be the last ruins on the eastern frontier of this

engulfed evangelization? And if that happens, how will we remember, and what Jubilee will we be celebrating?"

### Runaway emigration

Being a tiny remnant, divided into seven communities, our Churches in Iran assemble no more than a total of some 75,000 Christians, the majority being "Gregorian" Armenians. And since the Islamic Revolution (1979) we have suffered a drastic erosion due to the runaway emigration. According to official statistics, the percentage of Christians in 1976 was .05 % but, twenty years later, it is .01%. These figures are confirmed by a small sampling of our own church statistics: the registers of the Chaldean Catholic diocese of Teheran indicate a hundred and fifty baptisms and fifty-four marriages in 1976 to 36 baptisms and 13 marriages twenty years later... Is this a tiny remainder, on the verge of complete assimilation and extinction, or a "Little Remnant" on the verge of renewal? Neither mathematics nor sociology can answer this question!



*Bethlehem Church*

### Dismantled presbytery

Following the Islamic Revolution, 85% of the bishops, priests and Catholic religious were expelled. In Teheran today, all the ministers are foreigners, because no one has been ordained here for decades. The Chaldean Catholics have one bishop and three priests; the Armenians, one bishop (deceased, and not yet replaced) and a single priest; the Latins have a bishop and four priests, not counting the nunciature that has a Latin bishop and a priest. The disproportion between Latin and Oriental clergy, taking into account the importance of their respective communities, can come as no surprise, since this is common in the East. A further





anomaly, also common in the East, weakens still further our small, superimposed Catholic communities: three Catholic bishops for the city of Teheran alone, serving such a small flock (hardly six thousand Catholics). This is directly contrary to the regulations of the first councils and of the Fathers. However, the situation of the clergy seems to be improving slightly: we are anticipating a meeting of the priests and religious with our bishop. And ecumenism will probably make some progress thanks to the arrival of a new Armenian bishop...

### **Impossible fecundity**

Our Church, so marked by wrinkles and scars, like an old woman overcome by the weight of her years, is nevertheless about to give Life through baptism to quite a number of converts (at the time of this writing, some fifteen in all in Teheran among the Chaldean Catholics) whom it welcomes and accompanies in amazement and joy, like that of Elizabeth: will this stump amount to a "holy seed", the marvelous "sprouting" of a "root in dry land", a "Tiny Remnant" purified, faithful and fruitful?

### **Why do you strike me?**

This fecundity certainly takes place in a climate of trial and our interreligious dialogue could be summed up in this question of Jesus, followed by a long silence which has its own appeal, as true and pertinent in its own way as are the numerous discussions of the specialists who are sent here to us from abroad...

## **3. The Bible and Iran**

### **Persia in the Bible**

Here are a few headings that could suggest how vast a topic this is: the intuitions of Zarathustra, Balaam, Cyrus the Great, Darius, Esdras, Ecbatana, Susa, Daniel, Tobit, Esther, the Magi, Pentecost...

### **Translations into Persian**

Besides the ancient translations that were done in Iran and India, the existing translation of the Bible into Persian, the one normally used in the Churches, was completed more than a century ago. It was published by the Biblical Society of Teheran. It is a generally accurate translation, but in a very arabized language, rather difficult to understand today, and with a vocabulary that lacks consistency, which makes the study of biblical themes very difficult. But the diffusion of the Bible in Iran has been hampered since the closing of the Biblical Society and we other "People of the Book", as Islam calls us, can only procure this Book at a (very) high price, unless we get hold of it in a fraudulent way. I omit mention of the "explained" translation, not of the Bible, but of the "Living Bible", which has recently been published by the Pentecostals. Works of this kind risk giving

support to the arguments of the Moslems who claim that we Christians have falsified the original text!

At the Centre Saint-Jean, we have undertaken a new Bible translation that will include the Deuterocanonicals and that will be accompanied by the notes of the TOB (Traduction œcuménique de la Bible) adapted to the Persian text. The work will progress at a very slow pace, given our paucity of means and the absence of biblical scholars who know the Persian language and literature. This translation seeks to render the original text as faithfully as possible. The result will be neither a simple text suitable for catechesis, nor a text well-suited for the liturgy. Our intention instead is to provide animators and pastors with a very accurate text that can help them in their pastoral work. In addition, we have published a liturgical translation of the Psalms and the biblical hymns which seeks to convey the beauty of these poetic texts. Moreover, we have published in Persian some hundred and sixty works, most of which have as their aim to provide biblical formation for different levels of readers: catechumens, advanced students and ministers.

### **Bible and Ecumenism**

Our Churches are too poor to be able to pretend that each can suffice to itself, without dependence on the others. For example, the biblical formation and continuing education courses of certain pastors and priests of the various Churches are given at the Centre Saint-Jean in common formation meetings. Our books are of service to all the various ministers for preparing meetings and homilies.

### **Bible and Oriental Churches**

The ancient liturgical languages often remain incomprehensible to the faithful. Moreover, liturgical readings from the Old Testament are often omitted because they prolong already lengthy services and make allusions to Israel, to the Assyrians and to the Chaldeans that are not easily understood, allusions which, applied to the present situation, cannot but be badly misinterpreted.

### **Bible and Koran**

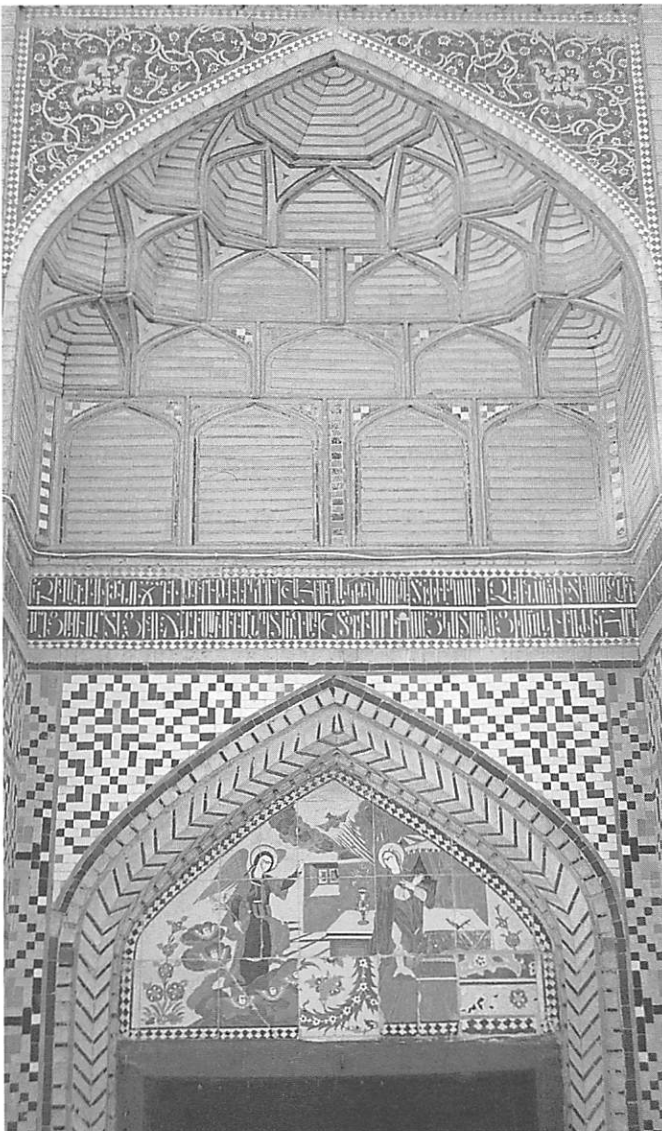
I do not intend here to launch into either a theoretical or a technical discussion. I would simply like to allude to a phenomenon, namely, the influence of the Moslem milieu on Christians, in particular in what pertains to the reading of the Scriptures. The quarterly examinations in secondary schools and the questions asked at University entrance exams are a mark of this influence: the examiners (Moslems) expect Christians to learn the Gospel as others learn the Koran, by heart. Examples of questions put to Christians for the exam:



- what happened after the sounding of the third trumpet in the Apocalypse?
- what was the name of Jesus' great grand father?
- how many chapters are there in II Corinthians?
- how many fish were found in Peter's net at the miraculous catch of fish?

And the oral exam is even more pernicious:

- where did you acquire the Bible in Persian? (forbidden)
- what does the Gospel say of the coming of Mohammed? (Paraclete = Ahmed?)
- what do you think of the Gospel "of Barnabas"?



Entrance to Vank Cathedral

### Bible and Icons

Ancient oriental icons can be a rich catechetical support adapted to our traditions, especially since their highly evocative symbols are taken from Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

### The Acts of the Apostles read in Iran

First of all, the Acts of the Apostles is in no way a history of the apostolic Church but rather the contemplation of the mystery of the Spirit in the Church on mission. If this were not the case, as I already pointed out, what did the other Apostles do? And how *did* the Gospel penetrate so rapidly to the East from Palestine? Could it have been through those less Hellenized Jews who stayed behind in Persia after the exile, but with strong connections with the Jerusalem community (Acts 2:9)?

I serve within an Oriental Church that has been very much marked by persecutions and massacres, from the beginning right down to today. Now that it has become a tiny minority, our community sometimes has characteristic reflexes that witness to wounds that have been hard to heal. Its attachment to the Chaldean language, ancient and modern, the reputed "language of Jesus", is reminiscent of the attachment of some Jewish Christians in Acts with respect to their cultural and religious traditions. With us, this emotional reaction poses a question about acculturation to the Persian civilization which is perceived as a risk of assimilation to the Moslem milieu. In spite of a few, very discreet experiments, the liturgy in our Church normally employs only Chaldean, to the exclusion of Persian. This means that the mission of our Church becomes problematic, as does the reception of Persian catechumens who are certainly not ethnic Chaldeans: can they enter into this Church through baptism after being catechized in accordance with the tradition of our oriental Church, but without necessarily learning the language of this ethnic group? Will the converts be able to feel at home among us? Will they be rejected because they are not Chaldeans? Or will they be perceived as dangerous by the very fact of their conversion which risks provoking brutal reactions from the Moslem milieu or authority? Will they not sometimes even be suspected of being nothing more than "false brothers", come in to spy on us? Will we be able to see in them the work of the Spirit who precedes our witness and our welcoming embrace, a fact which should allay our fears and calm our hesitations (Acts 11:17)?

The fact is that we ought not impose on these converts "anything beyond the necessary" (Acts 15:28). Far from becoming assimilated to Chaldean ethnicity, they ought to remain very Persian and very Christian so that they will be, to paraphrase a beautiful expression of Paul, those "first-fruits which Iran has offered to Christ". They will then discover a new language, ripened by the fire of the Spirit, in Persian culture: a specific way of reading Scripture, of viewing Christ and of expressing his mystery in new theological formulations: a new song to sing his praise and to witness to his mystery



(Acts 2:9-11; Rv 7:9; 21:19-21). In this way, our local Church will increasingly take on its specific quality and will be able to sound its particular and complementary note within the symphony of the Churches. These Churches will then become ever more Catholic, "according to the whole" of humankind and of the divine mystery...

As for the Trial, which is inevitably latent in the phenomenon of these conversions, will we be able to deepen our Faith so as to regard persecution as the normal milieu of our mission (cf. Acts 4:24-30), as a quasi sacramental actualization - through the Holy Spirit - of Christ on the Cross (Acts 7:59-60; 9:5), for the salvation of our country? Will this Spirit be our Unique Advocate? And may not this continual focus on martyrdom have the power to heal the emotional reactions that result from the accumulated wounds in the course of centuries of persecution and may it not help us to discover in these still painful scars the precious stigmata of our Church that make it fruitful? Finally, instead of allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by our minute numbers in the face of an often hostile world and allowing ourselves to be carried away in the flood of emigration to the pseu-

do-paradise of the West and its illusions, will we hear, as did Saint Paul when he was in prison, the appeal to constancy in the mission: "I have so many people on my side in this country" (cf. Acts 18:10), and, discovering the richness of the Persian civilization, will we learn to view these as so many "seeds" of the Word (Acts 17:22-28) and accept to remain, for the sake of Jesus, in the place of our incarnation, and hence of our mission? Another migration is set before us: to follow Christ outside the camp "bearing abuse for him" (Heb 13:13).

Without claiming to have done any exegesis at all, I have recalled here but a few aspects of my reading of Acts in connection with my apostolate among the catechumens and neophytes in the Church of the Orient which I have been serving now in Iran for the last thirty years.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Bible and Icons: Silent Catechesis for Evangelizing our Imagination* by Pierre Humblot, *BDV 55/56 (2-3/2000)*, p. 13-17.





## Iraq and the Bible

*Paul Féghaly, Middle East Subregional Coordinator of the CBF, Lebanon*

When one speaks of contemporary Iraq, one thinks of Mesopotamia or the country situated between the two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. These two rivers have their source in Turkey and they run all the way through Iraq before emptying into the Persian Gulf, and then into the Indian Ocean. In antiquity, this country knew one of the most flourishing civilizations: Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Akkadians, Arameans. It then passed into the hands of the Persians and the Arabs. There are many points of contact between this country and the world of the Bible. This is what we will attempt to expound in the following paragraphs, which could certainly be developed further.



*Ashur on the Tigris*

1. In its initial moments, the story of Abraham, father of believers, took shape in Iraq. One tradition locates the incident in Ur of the Chaldeans (Gn 11:28). This is the priestly tradition which received its final form in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, in the milieu of the exiles in Babylon. These exiles considered themselves the true descendants of Abraham, as opposed to those who had stayed behind

in Palestine and who were referred to as the “people of the land”. Ur was the great city of Mesopotamia occupied in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC by the Aramean clan of the Chaldeans. Occupied by the Sumerians, it had known a period of splendor at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. But another tradition situates the departure of the “father of believers” at Haran, in the northern part of present-day Iraq. In fact, in the table of the nations presented in Gn 10, only three cities of Mesopotamia are mentioned: Babel, Erech, Accad (Gn 10:10). It is at Haran that Isaac will take a wife (Gn 24:1ff). And Jacob will spend a good part of his life at Haran with his uncle (Gn 27ff).

2. This brings us to a discussion of the sojourn of the Hebrew people in Mesopotamia: they came from the north of Palestine (kingdom of Israel – with its capital Samaria) and from the south (Judah – with its capital Jerusalem). The Assyrians (8<sup>th</sup> century BC) deported the population of Samaria and replaced them with peoples from Babylon, Cuthah, etc. (1 K 17:24). The Babylonians deported the officialdom of the population of Judah to Babylonia (1 K 25). Jeremiah announced to them that they were not to think of a speedy return. They were to build houses, they were to cultivate the land. And we have that famous Psalm that decries the suffering of the exiles: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept” (Ps 137:1). The return, for those who had decided to return home, took place thanks to the Persians in 538. But a large number of Hebrews remained in Mesopotamia and worked their way up into good positions there.

3. The departure into exile was viewed as a kind of anti-Exodus. Moses had led the Hebrew people from Egypt into the land of Canaan. God had demanded that they be faithful. Their infidelity had for a consequence that they were sent into exile, far from the Promised Land. The people had been slaves in Egypt and God had liberated them. But now, God was delivering them over to the enemy. It was in this new context of slavery that the voices of the prophets began to resound, especially that of Isaiah who viewed the return from Babylon into the land of Canaan as a new Exodus.



4. This experience of exile gave rise to a religious reflection that left its traces in the whole Bible. God appears as a God of anger and of vengeance. If he comes to visit his people, it is to punish them. Water, which was a benevolent element in Egypt, was for Mesopotamia, as well as for the Hebrew people, a destructive element. The yearly flooding of the Nile left a covering of silt behind on the land as it receded, and with this a rich fertility, but the Tigris and the Euphrates had been the source of a deluge that destroyed every living creature (Gn 6:13) with the exception of Noah, his family, and those close to him. One can see the influence of Mesopotamian thinking on the Bible.



Uruk, Cuneiform script

5. In this climate, we can consider Gn 1-11 as a re-reading of the traditions of ancient Iraq. Enuma Elish (when on the heights) speaks of the victory of Marduk over Tiamat. The Bible shows that the Tehom (perhaps an echo of Tiamat) is in fact the depth of the water which will be “hovered over” by the spirit of God. It is from this deep that every living creature will come forth.

For Atrahasis, the creation of man has for its purpose to relieve the minor gods of their heavy labors. The Bible, in contrast, speaks with love of the creation of man, then of woman, and of marriage where the two become one flesh. The deluge becomes a dialogue between sinful humanity and the all-holy God. The tower of Babel is a condemnation of the ziggurats, the multi-layered temples: this kind of building project is not how we reach God in heaven.

6. In this context, the image of God takes on a new coloration. In the Canaanite world, with the importance here attached to rain and to fertility, these functions tended to be associated with Baal. In Mesopotamia, they were attributed to Marduk who had put order into a world that resembled chaos. Gn 1 draws on this idea: God organizes the creation in six days. Isaiah will say: “You who spread out the heavens, and laid the earth’s foundations” (51:13).

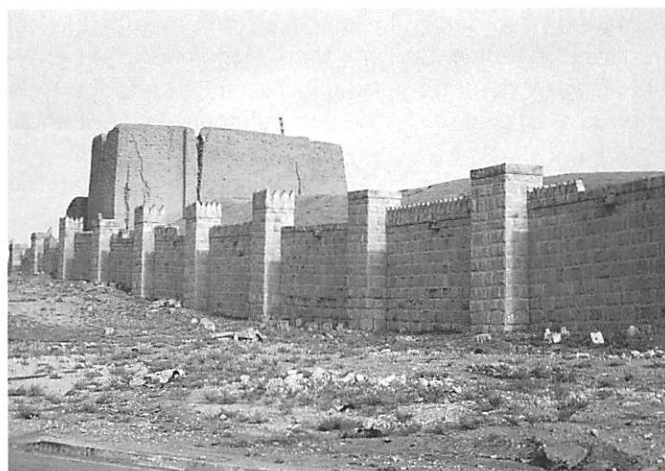
7. There were prophets in Mesopotamia. If legend links Balaam to the Aramean world of Iraq and of the Euphrates (Nb 23:7), the prophet Nahum is said to be from Elkosh, in Mesopotamia. A work of religious piety sends Jonah off to Nineveh to preach conversion to God to bloodthirsty pagans. Jerusalem had not returned to God, but the entire city of Nineveh (near Mosul in Iraq) puts on sackcloth and ashes. Jonah is furious and is eager to take revenge. But God speaks to him of his compassion toward that pagan city, which must of necessity be the first stage of the return of pagans to God. But it is Ezekiel who is truly the prophet of the people in exile in Iraq. He is found near the river Chebar, which was really a canal that paralleled the Euphrates all the way from Babylon to Erech. Finally, the story of the Book of Tobit is situated between Nineveh and Ecbatana, which corresponds to present-day Iraq and Iran. This “sage” of the Jewish diaspora, who continued to practice the Law, even though living far from Jerusalem, is a biblical “reprise” of the story of Ahikar whose wisdom was widely acclaimed in the oriental world and even passed to the West with Esop. The book of Judith speaks of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who will be vanquished when his forces arrive at



Bethulia, and will thus be unable to reach Jerusalem. God is stronger than all, as Ps 2 puts it: he won the victory thanks to the faith of a widow woman and not by strength of arms (cf. Zc 9:9-10).

8. Mesopotamia is mentioned very often in the Bible: Aram (Nb 23:7), Aram Naharaim (Gn 24:10; Dt 23:5; 1 Ch 19:6), Paddan or Paddan-Aram (Gn 28:2; 48:7). It is the same area that is sometimes referred to as the country of the Chaldeans. The cities that are found in contemporary Iraq are: Ashur, Nineveh, Harran, Babel or Babylon, Nippur, Shuruppak, Uruk, Ur, Eridu. They are all located on the banks of the Euphrates. Others, like Calah, are found on the Tigris (Diglat in Akkadia), so called by the Greeks because of its vineyards.

This has been no more than a brief survey of the relations that exist between Iraq and the Bible. We are in the presence of ancient texts which we read not in a political framework, but in a cultural and religious one. It is true that Iraq, through the Babylonians and the Assyrians, was to dominate the countries located to the west of the Euphrates. But the Bible prefers to draw on the richness of a thought and a wisdom which influence its own way of expressing Revelation in human language. If Egypt allows the Bible to discover the image of



*Walls of Nineveh*

God the Savior, Iraq helped the Hebrews to discover God the Creator. These two ancient powers were two fountainheads from which the sacred writers drew abundantly to express a religious thought dominated by monotheism.

(Transl.: L. Maluf) ■



## Jordan in the Bible

*Pietro Kaswalder, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum – Jerusalem  
(Associate Member of the Federation)*

Present-day Jordan is the guardian of numerous biblical traditions that have become familiar memories to believers. These extend from the Old Testament into the New and are all of great historical and theological significance.

In some cases, the biblical traditions were fixed by Christian holy places that have perpetuated their memory till our own times. Among these, the most notable are the memorial of Mount Nebo, dedicated to Moses, the sanctuary of Deir Ain Abata dedicated to the Patriarch Lot, the sanctuary of Mar Elyas in the Wadi Yabis which commemorates the prophet Elijah, and the sanctuary of Wadi el-Kharrar memorializing the Baptism of Jesus.

Other shrines of biblical origin have converged with Islamic tradition, such as the sanctuaries of Moses and Aaron in the Petra region, that is to say, the Wadi Musa and Jebel Harun.

At the time of the New Testament, south-central Jordan was occupied by the Nabataeans, a people who descended from Nebaioth, the grandson of Ishmael. Biblical experts claim that the Magi kings who arrived in Bethlehem on the occasion of the birth of Jesus (cf. Mt 2:1-12) were of Nabataean origin. Some of the most beautiful archaeological testimonies of Petra, Khirbet el-Tannur and numerous other sites are remains from the Nabataean people.

The relics of a glorious Christian past are many. First place goes to the famous mosaic of the church of Saint George in Madaba which describes the Holy Land according to Christian criteria. Jerusalem, the Holy City of the redemption, is placed at the center of the biblical lands.

Moreover, numerous churches, cathedrals and monasteries of the Byzantine era have been discovered at Aila, Petra, Tell Dhiban, Umm er-Rasas, Madaba, Mount Nebo, Tell Hesban, Amman, Gerasa, Pella, Gadara, etc. The various expressions of Christian life found today in Jordan regard themselves as the continuation of the first communities whose roots go back to the Apostolic era of the primitive Church.

### The historical geography of Jordan

Jordan occupies the Eastern side of the Jordan depression, including the whole area from the river Yarmuk in the North to the Gulf of Aqaba in the South. The Jordan River, called in Arabic *esh-Sheriat el-Kebireh*, originates in Mount Hermon and dies in the Dead Sea, after having formed the Huleh Valley and the Lake of Tiberius. The mid-section of the valley, between the Lake of Tiberius and the Dead Sea, is called in Arabic, *al-Ghor*. The broadly expansive desert valley that links the Dead Sea with the Gulf of Aqaba is referred to as the Arabah, a name that indicates a steppe.

The Transjordanian region is marked by gorges formed by a few rivers which originate on the east side of the mountain range and descend toward the Jordan, namely the Zered, the Arnon, the Jabbok and the Yarmuk. In antiquity, these rivers each marked the border between the various peoples who settled on the high Transjordanian plateau.

In biblical times, Jordan accommodated the peoples of Edom, Moab and Ammon, who were regarded as brothers of Israel because of genealogical connections that go back to the time of the Patriarchs Abraham, Lot and Jacob (cf. Gn 19:36; Dt 2:4-5, 8, 9, 18-19).

Moab and Ammon trace their ancestry to the Patriarch Lot (cf. Gn 19:30-38). Edom, on the other hand, is synonymous with Esau, and so a brother of Jacob (cf. Gn 25:19-34; Jg 5:4; Am 1:9-11). In Gn 28:9 the story of the marriage of Esau with Mahalat, daughter of Ishmael, is told, while in Gn 36 the genealogies of Esau and the list of the first Edomite kings are recorded. In this way, the sacred author underscores the affinities between this people of Jordan and the people of Israel. In particular, Eliphaz, son of Esau, is the father of Teman, Amalek and Kenaz (cf. Jos 14:6-14; 15:17; Jg 1:13). Alongside Edom lived also Madian, another son of Abraham and Keturah (cf. Gn 25:2).

Shortly before 1000 BC the peoples of Edom, Moab and Ammon became independent and developed a history parallel to that of Israel, the result of connections at var-



ious levels. These peoples also shared a common political fate with Israel, being subjugated, between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, first by the Assyrians and finally by the Babylonians.

In their place were born new civilizations and cultures that were more adapted to the Hellenistic world. The Nabataeans, *Arabia Petraea*, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Gileadites and the cities of the Decapolis continued in the tradition of economic and political independence, until the time when the region became part of the Roman Empire in 106 AD.

### Edom

The Zered gorge, called in Arabic Wadi al-Hasa, marked the border between Edom and Moab (cf. Nb 21:12; Dt 2:13). South of the Zered lies the mountainous region of Edom which in the past has received the names Seir, Gebalene (al Jibal) and al-Hisma (ash-Shara).

Edom means red and it is probable that the name derives from the reddish color of the mountains of Petra and of the Wadi Ramm. One of the most striking poems of Isaiah, where the red color of blood blends with the reddish color of Edomite rock, is strictly devoted to Edom:

***Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save. (cf. Is 63:1).***

The historical capital of Edom was Petra, also called Sela and Rekem (cf. Jos 13:21). Other important Edomite centers in the course of history were Aqaba (Aila), Ezion-geber, Tawilan, Buseira (Bozrah), Teiman, Feinan (Punon) and Gharandal (Arindela).

In the Hellenistic period the region of Edom was called *Arabia Petraea*, as distinct from *Arabia Deserta* (Saudi Arabia) and *Arabia Felix* (Yemen). But its principal name was Nabataea, because the kingdom of the Nabataeans, which lasted from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC to 106 AD, originated in Petra. Nebaioth was the firstborn of Ishmael (cf. Gn 25:13).

The principal god of the religion of Edom was Qos, a name that has been found in inscriptions and on Edomite seals. Edom was subjugated by David in a bloody campaign that was never forgotten: see Am 1:11, which speaks of Edom's enduring hatred for Israel.

Edom remained subject to Judah till the time of Jehoram (845 BC) when it became independent. First the Assyrians with Adadnirari III (800 AD) and then the

Babylonians with Nebuchadnezzar (605 BC) received tribute from Edom, which remained their faithful ally till the end. In 552 BC Nabonidus undertook the military campaign against Arabia, and at this time Edom ceased to exist (cf. Is 34:5-6; 63 1-6.)

In the Persian and Hellenistic periods the Edomites were known as the Idumaeans who inhabited the Negeb and southern Judea, where they were displaced in the course of various migrations (cf. Ob 19; 1 Esdras 4:50 LXX). The old Edom gave way to the Nabataeans who gave birth to one of the most interesting cultures of antiquity.

### Moab

The Arnon gorge, called Wadi el-Mujib in Arabic, originally constituted the border between Amorites and Moabites (cf. Nb 21:13, 24, 25-26; Dt 2:24). After the victory of Israel over Sihon the king of the Amorites (cf. Nb 21:21-31; Dt 2:26-37), the Mishor became Israelite and remained subject to the king of Samaria till the rebellion of Mesha (cf. 2 K 3:4-27).

The Moabite capital was Kerak, also called Kir-hares (Is 16:4), Kir-heres (Jr 48:31; Kir-hareseth (2 K 3:25; Is 16:7), Charash Moba in the Greek sources. Other important towns were Dhat Ras, Ader, al-Lejjun, Khirbet el-Medeyneh, Rabba (Aeropoli), al-Kasr, Balua.

The war of Mesha, king of Moab, against Jehoram, king of Israel, extended the kingdom of Moab toward the north to Heshbon in the territory formerly inhabited by the Reubenites and the Gadites (cf. the inscription of Mesha and 2 K 3:4-27; Is 15-16; Jr 48).

Dibon, the city of king Mesha, Aroer, Jahzah, Bezer, Mefaat (Umm er-Rasas), Ataroth, Main, Madaba, Nebo, Diblathaim and Heshbon were the principal towns of Moab. In the Madaba mosaic certain unidentified towns are assigned to Moab, among others Tharais, Betomarsea or Maiumas, and Ai which corresponds to Iyeabarim of Nb 21:11.

The chief god of Moab was Chemosh (Nb 21:29; 2 K 23:13; 2 K 24:2; Jr 48:13, 46) who was worshipped together with Ashtarte (or Asherah), as the Mesha stele says:

***Chemosh said to me: "Go, take Nebo against Israel!" I went in the night and fought against it from dawn till mid-day. I took it and parceled out everything: seven thousand men, adults and children, women, adults and children, and slaves, because I had vowed it to Ashtar-Chemosh (Moabite stele, lines 14-17)***



The end of Moab's independence was caused above all by the conquests of Tiglath-pileser III in 732 BC and finally by the conquests of Nebuchadnezzar in 582 BC. The Moabite kings Salamanu, Kammusunadabi, Musuri and Kamashaltu regularly paid tribute to Nineveh. Moab remained a faithful subject of the Babylonians until the rebellion organized by Zedekiah, king of Jerusalem. But in 552 BC the Nabataeans subjected the kingdom of Moab for the last time and took away its independence. The poem of Is 15 could possibly be referring to this page of history:

***Dibon goes up to its temple,  
to its high places to weep;  
Moab wails over Nebo and Medeba  
Every head is shaved  
and every beard cut off.  
In the streets they wear sackcloth;  
on the roofs and in the public squares  
they all wail,  
prostrate with weeping.  
Heshbon and Elealeh cry out,  
their voices are heard all the way to Jahaz  
Therefore the armed men of Moab cry out,  
and their hearts are faint  
My heart cries over Moab;  
her fugitives flee as far as Zoar,  
as far as Eglath Shelishiyah.  
They go up the way to Luhith,  
weeping as they go;  
on the road to Horonaim  
they lament their destruction (cf. Is 15:2-5).***

After the formation of the Persian Empire, the land of Moab became one of the eparchies of the fifth satrapy, beyond the river (cf. Ezr 2:6; 8:4; 10:30; Ne 3:11; 7:11). In the Hellenistic era the Moabite territory was reconquered in part by the Hasmoneans with John Hyrcanus and kept under the control of Jerusalem till the death of Herod the Great. Thereafter it became an integral part of the *Arabian Province*.

### **Ammon**

The land of Ammon consisted of the central Jordan region, tightly surrounding Rabbah, the capital of the Ammonites. It is not easy to define the exact contours of the kingdom of Ammon for lack of natural borders. To the South, it had common borders with Moab and Israel, to the North, with the Aramaeans and with Israelite Gilead. The Wadi Hesban could be the southern border of the Ammonites, cf. the text of Jr 49, which suggests the extension of Ammon to the Heshbon in the course of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.

The most important Ammonite towns are known through literary texts as well as through excavations, towns like those at Tell el-Umeiri, Sahab, Iraq el-Amir, Tell el-Mazar, Tell Safut, Tell Siran, the Beqaa Valley. In the Hellenistic era the cities of the Decapolis experienced a revival, among others Gerasa, Capitolia, Abila, and Gadara.

The Jabbok gorge or Wadi ez-Zerqa, divided Gilead into two sectors which were inhabited in part by Israelites and in part by the Ammonites. Life in common was not always easy, as is shown by the wars against the Ammonites that took place in the time of Jephthah (Jg 10:6 - 11:40; Am 1:13), of Saul (1 S 11), and of David (2 S 10-12). But acts of cooperation and political alliances between the Israelites and the Ammonites were also numerous. For example Naama, one of Solomon's wives and mother of Rehoboam was Ammonite (cf. 1 K 11:1). Ammon and Judah formed a mutual alliance more than once against external oppressors (Jr 7:3; Ez 21:25-33).

The national god of Ammon was Milcom, a name that signifies "king of the gods". The name Milcom is known both from OT texts and from inscriptions and seals (1 K 11:7; 2 K 23:13; Jr 49:1-3). Baal, El, Ammu, Adon, Yareah (the moon) were the other divinities worshipped by Ammon. This has been deduced from the names of certain Ammonite kings found in inscriptions (Baalis, Hissalel, Amminadab, Adoninur, Yerahazar).

The end of Ammon was contemporaneous with that of Moab, under the assaults of the Babylonian repression. Nebuchadnezzar in 605 and in 582 BC, and Nabonidus in 552 BC put an end to the independence of Ammon (cf. Ez 21:25-32). In the course of the fifth century BC the Ammon territory was inserted into the fifth Persian satrapy, and this administrative unit remained functional for the whole of the Hellenistic era (cf. Ne 2:19; 4:1-2; 1 M 5:6-7). In 250 BC Ptolemy II Philadelphus conquered Rabbatamana of the Ammonites and changed the name to Philadelphia, in honor of his sister Arsinoe Philadelphia. The Ammonite capital was known by this name till the end of the Byzantine period.

In the Persian and Hellenistic periods, to the West of the capital Philadelphia an autonomous district was established, called BIRTHA or Tyros, which was governed by the family of the Tobiads. Ne 2:19 names Tobiah "the Ammonite official" and Nehemiah numbers him among his own enemies alongside Geshem the Arab and Sanballat the governor of Samaria. The geographer Zeno of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus describe in extenso the vicissitudes of Joseph, of Tobiah and of Hyrcanus, patrons of Iraq el-Amir (Qasr al-Abd), a





region rich in water which is found in the Wadi es-Sir. The excavations of the fortress have revealed a unique example of Hellenistic architecture.

North of the mountains of Aijun, the imposing Yarmuk Valley, or Sheriat el-Menadireh opens up. In times past it formed the boundary between Gilead and Bashan, while today it separates Syria from the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan.

In Bashan once lived the Amorites of Og, a king defeated by Israel (cf. Nb 21:33-35; Dt 3:1-7). In Bashan some Manassite groups settled, that is to say Jair, Machir and Nobah (cf. Nb 32:39-42; Dt 3:8-17; Jos 13:29-31). Almost immediately Bashan fell under the influence of the Aramaean kingdom of Damascus, cf. the Aramaean wars in the time of Ahab, and then of the other kings of Samaria (cf. 1 K 20-22; 2 K 6-7).

#### **The tribes of Transjordan: Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh**

Israel had conquered the land of the two Amorite kingdoms, Sihon king of Heshbon, and Og king of Bashan. According to the theology of the land articulated by the Deuteronomic historian, these Amorites had to be annihilated, because their land was destined for the Israelites. Moses assigned the land of the Amorites, the territory between the Arnon and Mount Hermon, to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

Reuben and Gad settled in Moabite Mishor and in southern Gilead, in the towns of Aroer, Dibon, Mephaat, Bezer, Jahas, Ataroth, Qiryataim, Main, Madaba, Nebo, Beth Peor, Heshbon, Beth Haran, Beth Nimra, Jazer, Mahanaim, Succoth, Saphon, etc. (cf. Nb 32:3, 34-38; Jos 13:15-28).

The Manassites emigrated into northern Gilead and into Bashan, into the towns of Ramoth-Gilead, Argob, Nobah, in the settlements of Jair, at Ashtaroth and Edrei (cf. Nb 32:39-42; Jos 13:29-31).

#### **Esau and Jacob, brothers and reconciled enemies**

Two significant episodes of reconciliation are located on the mountains of Gilead, that between Laban and Jacob (Gn 31) and that between Jacob and Esau (Gn 32-33).

The bonds between Esau and Jacob/Israel are described with pages that are particularly dense with surprises. The people of Edom are identified with Esau, the older brother of Jacob. As if to say that Edom and Israel are brothers, but also adversaries. Jacob had succeeded, with the help of his mother Rebekah, in removing the birthright from his older brother, as well as the blessing of his father Isaac (cf. Gn 25:29-34 and 27). For these reasons Esau was seized with hatred for his brother and wanted to kill him.

The meeting of reconciliation between Esau and Jacob had been preceded by that between Laban and Jacob (cf. Gn 31). Jacob had married the daughters of Laban, Leah and Rachel, and had had his first eleven children from them.

The journey of Jacob into Mesopotamia had been concluded by or with the meeting that would change Jacob's destiny. First of all, he had been reconciled with his uncle Laban. He had then been reconciled with God, at the end of a mysterious and terrible wrestling match on the bank of the Jabbok (cf. Gn 32:23-33). In the course of this episode Jacob had his name changed and became Israel. Now nothing was left but for him to be reconciled with his brother Esau.

In order to save himself from the wrath of his brother Esau, Jacob had gone up out of the Jabbok valley to take refuge in the country of Aram, with his uncle Laban (cf. Gn 28-29). On his way back by the same route toward Canaan, he was followed by Laban because Rachel had stolen his teraphim, his household gods. The meeting between Jacob and Laban took place on the mountains of Gilead, north of the Jabbok. After a long dispute, the two came to an agreement and made a covenant. The meeting suggests an agreement of good neighborly terms between the Israelites of Gilead and the Aramaeans of Laban (cf. Gn 31:22-54). In fact, from that time on the Aramaean descendants of Laban and the Israelite descendants of Jacob did live in territories marked by well-defined and secure borders. The story of Jacob walking along the river Jabbok constitutes a juridical justification for the possession of Gilead by his descendants, the Manassites and the Gadites.

For his part, Esau had securely settled in the land of Seir, or Edom (cf. Gn 32:4). The reconciliation between the two eponymous brothers took place on the banks of the Jabbok, the Wadi Zerqa which has its source in Amman.

Jacob acknowledges the rights of his brother Esau, he declares himself his servant and so overcomes his desire for revenge:

***He himself (Jacob) went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept (cf. Gn 33:3-4).***

Esau returned to his country Seir/Edom, while Jacob/Israel resumed his journey toward Succoth and Bethel in the land of Canaan. The borders between





Edom and Israel are thus established: Edom will inhabit the land to the East, Israel the land to the West of the Jordan Valley (cf. Gn 33:12-17).

#### **The itineraries of the Exodus in Jordan**

Israel preserves limpid memories of its passage through the steppes of Jordan during the period of the exodus from Egypt (cf. Nb 20-21; 33; Dt 1-3; 34).

The encampment of Punon is localized in the region of Feinan, a vast copper mine which is found in the eastern sector of the Arabah (cf. Nb 21:4-9; 33:42-43). The rebellion of the Israelites was punished by the bite of serpents, but, through the intercession of Moses, the Lord granted a sign that would heal, the snake held high on a pole. The symbol became saving reality in the words of Jesus:

***Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (cf. Jn 3:14-15).***

During the sojourn of Israel in Transjordan, the pagan prophet Balaam had been invited by King Balak. But instead of cursing, Balaam prophesied in favor of Israel from the heights of Bamoth Baal (cf. Nb 22-24). It would be well to recall that at Tell Deir Allah, situated in the Jordan Valley, a sanctuary has been excavated from the 8th century BC which has on the wall fragments of Aramaic inscriptions of Bileam, Ben Peor. The discovery implies that the traditions of Balaam had been fixed in the memory of the Transjordanian peoples and had been transmitted for several centuries in the local shrines.

#### **The memory of Moses on Mount Nebo**

The Exodus of Israel from Egypt came to an end on the east bank of the Jordan, in the steppe of Moab, facing Jericho. The final stage of the journey towards freedom marks also the loss of the great leader and prophet Moses. After Miriam at Kadesh-barnea and Aaron on Mount Hor, Moses also must die in order to allow the people to make their entrance into the Promised Land. Only Joshua will be able to enter as guide of a purified and well-disposed people. In fact, at the foot of the slopes of Pisgah, otherwise known as Mount Nebo, Israel receives the "second law", that is to say, the book of Deuteronomy, which follows and deepens the first Law, that given at Sinai (cf. Dt 4:44-46; 28:69 [29:1]).

The death of Moses on Mount Nebo concludes that glorious page of the liberation from Egypt and prepares for the entry of Israel into the Promised Land (cf. Dt 34:1-7). From the top of Mount Nebo, which extends like a bal-

cony above the Jordan Valley, Moses had taken a close look at the land of the promise. He had so desired to enter into it, but this was not allowed him:

***At that time I pleaded with the Lord: Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan – that fine hill country and Lebanon. But because of you the Lord was angry with me and would not listen to me (cf. Dt 3:23-24 and especially 25-26).***

Because of his sin and because of his solidarity with the people entrusted to his leadership, Moses was not able to enter into the land. His body was taken into custody by the angels and was buried in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but no one knows where his tomb is to be found.

The memorial to the Prophet Moses, erected by Christians of the Byzantine era at Ras Siagha, is a suggestive reminder of the journey of Israel toward the promised land.

#### **Ruth, the Moabitess, grandmother of King David**

The Davidic dynasty had its roots in the people of Moab; it was precisely from this country that the grandmother of David, Ruth, had originally come (cf. Rt 1:4; 4:10). The book of Ruth relates how Elimelech of Bethlehem, with his wife Naomi, was forced to emigrate to the land of Moab because of an extreme shortage of food. After her husband's death, Naomi's two sons had married the Moabite women Orpah and Ruth.

Upon the death of their respective husbands, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. Ruth left with her, and Orpah returned to her Moabite family. Once in Bethlehem, Ruth began to glean in the fields of Boaz, who noticed her and took her for his wife. From Ruth was born Obed, who begot Jesse, the father of David.

In a moment of danger, David asked the king of Moab, his friend, to guard his parents who were being threatened by King Saul:

***Would you let my father and mother come and stay with you until I learn what God will do for me? (cf. 1 Sam 22:3-4).***

#### **The wars of David against the Ammonites**

The wars of expansion of King David are enriched by the episodes that took place during the siege of Rabbah of the Ammonites, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Ammon (cf. 2 S 8; 10-12). In the course of the siege, David fell in love with Bathsheba, the wife of his general Uriah, who was of Hittite origin, and for this reason he had Uriah killed (cf. 2 S 11).



The sin of David was disclosed by the prophet Nathan, who was sent to announce the divine punishment. David repented of the crime he had committed and paid for with the death of the son born to him by Bathsheba. The second son born to Bathsheba is Solomon, who will be the heir to the throne of Jerusalem.

By a cruel fate, another son very beloved to David, Absalom, whose mother was Maacah princess of Geshur, met his death at Gilead (cf. 2 S 15-18). The rebellion of Absalom had compelled David to take refuge beyond the Jordan, in order to find support with the Israelites of Gilead and with his allies the Ammonites and the Aramaeans. The battle took place in the forest of Ephraim, where Absalom got stuck with his long hair in the branches of a terebinth. David's general Joab ran three javelins through his heart (cf. 2 S 18:14-15).

### **The war of Mesha, King of Moab**

An episode that reveals the relationship between Moab and the kingdom of Israel is described both in the OT (cf. 2 K 3:4-27) and in the inscriptions of the Moabite King Mesha. The Moabite stele was found at Tell Dhiban in about 1868 by F. C. Klein, a Protestant minister:

***I am Mesha, son of Kemosh [yatti], the king of Moab, the Dibonite. My father was king over Moab for thirty years, and I became king after my father. And I made this high place for Kemosh in Qarcho bm[...]s' because he has delivered me from all kings, and because he has made me look down on all my enemies. Omri was king of Israel, and he oppressed Moab for many days, for Kemosh was angry with his land (Mesha Stele, lines 1-6, trans. of KC Hanson, with some alterations).***

The stele, presently kept in the Louvre Museum in Paris, recounts how Mesha had rebelled against the (grand)son of Ahab, Jehoram King of Samaria, and had occupied the Mishor all the way to Madaba. The inscription confirms both the submission of Moab to the kings of Samaria which lasted till the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, and its independence obtained with the war of Mesha. The Moabite text reports the names of several towns of the territory included between the Wadi Mojib (the Arnon) and the town of Madaba.

Among other things, the inscription speaks of the route of the Arnon, which means the Via Regia which cut longitudinally through all of Jordan, from the Aqaba to Syria. In Moabite territory the Via Regia reached Aroer, the town on the bank of the river, Dibon, Madaba, Heshbon, the main cities of the Mishor (cf. Nb 33:44-49).

In the Roman era, this international thoroughfare was called *Via Nova Traiana*, in memory of the annexation of the kingdom of the Nabataeans which took place in 106 AD.

The Mishor, called al-Qura in Arab geography, had been a point of contention between Moab and Israel since the time of Moses. In Nb 21:27-30 we find a very ancient poetic text which describes the conquest of Heshbon by the Israelites:

***That is why the poets say:  
Come to Heshbon and let it be rebuilt;  
let Sihon's city be restored.  
Fire went out from Heshbon,  
a blaze from the city of Sihon  
It consumed Ar of Moab,  
the citizens of Arnon's heights.  
Woe to you, O Moab!  
You are destroyed, O people of Chemosh!  
He has given up his sons as fugitives  
and his daughters as captives  
to Sihon king of the Amorites.  
But we have overthrown them;  
Heshbon is destroyed all the way to Dibon.  
We have demolished them as far as Nophah,  
which extends to Medeba (cf. Nb 21:27-30).***

The Mishor which is a high plateau, fertile and suitable for grazing, was later a cause of contention between the Ammonites and Israel at the time of the Judge Jephthah (cf. Jg 10:6 - 11:40), and finally at the time of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests.

After the fall of the Moabite kingdom at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BC, the Mishor was occupied by the Ammonites. The oracle of Jeremiah speaks against this expansion, which decreed the extinction of the Israelites in Transjordan:

***Why then has Molech taken possession of Gad?  
Why do his people live in its towns?  
But the days are coming,  
Declares the Lord,  
when I will sound the battle cry  
against Rabbah of the Ammonites;  
it will become a mound of ruins.. (cf. Jr. 49:1-2).***

### **Elijah, the Tishbite**

Elijah the indomitable prophet defender of Yahwism came from Tishbe, a city of Gilead (cf. 1 K 17:1-6). Called by the Lord, Elijah took refuge in the ravine of Kerith, which is East of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread in the morning, and meat in the evening. The Kerith ravine is identified as Wadi Jabis, which preserves the biblical name of Jabesh Gilead (cf. 1 S 11:1-9; 2 S 2:1-7).



The term Gilead recurs in a number of geographical expressions of the OT, with a signification that varies according to the eras. One notes a progressive expansion of the geographical sense of the term Gilead. Above all, it indicates the mountainous region located to the South-West of Rabbah of the Ammonites, then it can refer to the whole Israelite territory between the Wadi Hesban and the Wadi Zerka. Finally, the term comes to denote all the Israelite territories located to the East of the Jordan, from the Arnon all the way to Bashan. Gilead had been assigned by Moses in part to the Gadites and in part to the Manassites (cf. Nb 32:3, 34-38; Dt 3:12-17; Jos 13:8-33).

The principal city of Gilead was Ramoth-Gilead, capital of the administrative district (cf. 1 K 4:13). Ramoth-Gilead is mentioned in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, at the time of the Assyrian annexation.

#### **The death of John the Baptist at Machaerus**

During the Hellenistic era, Transjordan was divided into several administrative regions which had the following names: Nabataean Kingdom, Moab, Perea, Ammon, Gilead. In 63 AD the Decapolis was added, established by Pompey to safeguard the Hellenistic character of certain cities, among which Philadelphus (Ammon), Gerasa, Pella, Gadara, Abila. In the Herodian era Perea was joined to Judah, but at the death of Herod the Great, it had been assigned to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee.

The martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist for the sake of the truth took place at Machaerus, the Herodian palace and fortress which is found on the Northern side of the Wadi Zerka Main, at the southern border of Perea. The fortress of Machaerus protected the borders of the territories of Herod Antipas, particularly against the Nabataeans.

The report of the death of John the Baptist is given in all the Gospels, but the place of his death is not specified (cf. Mt 14:3-12; Mk 6:17-29; Lk 3:19-20).

***John had been saying to Herod: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife". So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.***

***When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl: "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask, I will give you, up to half my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist", she answered (cf. Mk 6:18-24).***

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus inserts the report about the martyrdom of John the Baptist in the context of the war between Aretas IV, king of the Nabataeans, and the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, Herod Antipas. The outbreak of the war had among its causes the repudiation of the legitimate wife of Herod Antipas, Shaudat, daughter of the Nabataean king, in favor of Herodias.

Flavius Josephus, like the Gospels, reports John the Baptist's reputation as a just man with all the people. For this reason, according to Josephus, the defeat of Herod was interpreted as divine retribution on him for having put to death an innocent man.

The place of the martyrdom of the Baptist has been identified as the fortress of Jebel Mishnaqa, located at some distance from the town of Meqawer which recalls the ancient name Machaerus. The excavations of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum of Jerusalem have brought to light the phases of the Hasmonean and Herodian fortress, and in particular, the triclinium, the presumed scene of Salome's dance before the dinner-guests of Herod Antipas.

#### **The Baptism of Jesus: Bethany beyond the Jordan**

At the time of Jesus, one who wished to go from Galilee to Jerusalem could pass through Samaria, but only with certain risks (cf. Jn 4:1-24). The more usual route to follow was that through Perea, which offered a more easy and secure passage. When one reached Jericho, one could cross the Jordan and ascend along the route maintained by the Herodian and Roman administrations

***The New Testament locates various journeys of Jesus and his Apostles in Perea, a name which derives from the biblical expression "beyond the Jordan", as in Mt 19:1, which uses precisely this expression. On the occasion of the last journey to Jerusalem, both Mark and Luke follow precisely the route from Galilee, through Perea and to Jericho (cf. Mk 10:46 and Lk 18:35). According to Mt 3:1-17 John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing in the area around Jericho:***



**People went to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River (cf. Mt 3:5-6).**



*Madaba Mosaic showing Jerusalem*

Jn 1:28 specifies that John the Baptist was active also in “Bethany, beyond the Jordan”. In the Byzantine era, as the Madaba mosaic suggests, a sanctuary had been constructed on the spot of the Baptism. The legend of the mosaic says: “Bethabara, the holy place of the Baptism of John”. This was a place of pilgrimage during the first Christian centuries, as Saint John Moschus and the pilgrim Theodosius affirm.

Bethabara, or Sapsafas, has been identified in the Wadi el-Kharrar, slightly to the East of the Jordan opposite Jericho, and it became one of the stops of John Paul II’s pilgrimage to Jordan (March 2000).

### **The first Church took refuge in Pella, in the Decapolis**

The last mention of Jordan going back to Apostolic times concerns Pella, today Tabaqat Fahl. Eusebius of Caesarea recalls that on the eve of the siege of Titus against Jerusalem in 70 AD, the first Christian community took refuge at Pella in the Decapolis. So it was that the early Church separated its own fate from that of Judea.

Pella shows imposing signs even today of the Christian presence in the Byzantine era. The remains of two great basilicas, partially excavated, damaged by the earthquake of 749 AD which destroyed all the principal towns of Perea and of the Decapolis.

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(Transl.: L. Maluf)



## The Evangelical Church in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey

*Habib Badr, Pastor of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut, Lebanon*

The Evangelical Church in Lebanon and Syria is part of the worldwide communion of Churches which have their roots in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century in Europe. Early in the nineteenth century, missionaries belonging mostly to the Reformed family of the Reformation tradition (i.e., Presbyterian and Congregational Churches) came mostly from the United States of America (as well as Great Britain, Germany and Scotland) to the Middle East to spread the central message of Reformation. Soon they established several centers within the domains of the Ottoman Empire, of which Beirut, a minor seaport at the time, proved to be one of the most strategic and important locations for their future missionary operations.

In 1823, the missionaries bought a small house in the *Zqaq al-Blat* district, then outside the Beirut city walls. Gradually they bought and built new premises in and around that area which became known as "the Mission Compound".

The missionaries soon commenced their efforts in the direction of the Lebanese and Syrian coast line, towards Mount Lebanon and the major portions of the Syrian interior. In 1830, a branch of the mission in Beirut was moved to Istanbul and started work amongst the Armenians of Turkey. It proved to be extremely fruitful. As of the mid-1840s, local converts emerged and Evangelical congregations began to form in several locations. The first of these was the Armenian Evangelical Church in Istanbul (1846) followed by the Beirut parish, in 1848. These were followed by other congregations in Turkey and in Lebanon and Syria.

Early in their work the missionaries felt a need for establishing elementary and secondary schools in order to educate those members of the community who inquired about, or were influenced by their evangelical teachings and life style. Reading, studying and preaching the Bible are central for the life and work of any Evangelical community. Everywhere the Protestants settled, they established (at least) an elementary level school alongside the church. One of the most significant achievements in this regard was the

founding in 1833 of a girls' school near Istanbul and another in 1835 located on the Mission Compound in Beirut. These were the first of their kind in the whole Middle East. Many such schools were founded all over Lebanon, Syria and Turkey during the next 150 years. The original school for girls in Beirut of 1835 still functions today as a coeducational institution; and is now relocated in Rabiya, north of Beirut.

The literary endeavors of the Mission required a printing press in order to meet the literary needs of a growing reading public. In response, the Arabic department of the "American Press," situated then on the island of Malta was transferred to Beirut and set up on the Mission Compound, and the Armenian section to Istanbul, in 1834. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these presses served as one of the most influential publishing establishments in the whole Arab and Armenian world. They greatly contributed to the budding Arab as well as to the Armenian religious and literary renaissances of the mid-nineteenth century. Their most lasting achievements were Arabic and Armenian translations of the whole Bible from the original languages, published in the mid 1860s in Beirut and Istanbul. They are still in use in the Evangelical Churches of today.

The need soon emerged for academically well trained local pastors and church workers who were steeped in the *Reformed* tradition. These men and women would eventually take over the pastoral and educational responsibilities from the foreign missionaries. Thus, in 1844, a decision was made to found a theological seminary in Bebek, Turkey, and in 1846 in the town of 'Abaih in Mt. Lebanon. At the beginning of the twentieth century, several of the Armenian seminaries in Turkey were closed down because of Turkish persecution of Armenian Christians. Their resources were brought to Beirut and joined hands with the seminary in Beirut to form *The Near East School of Theology* in 1834. The new institution was moved to the Mission Compound in *Zqaq al-Blat* where it remained until the early 1970s. Today it is located in a fairly modern building in Ras Beirut.



The worship life of the missionaries and their few converts during the early period was an authentic but indigenized expression of the traditional *Reformed* liturgical practices and forms of the sixteenth century. At the beginning worship services were held in Arabia and Armenian in the homes of the missionaries. The growing number of converts, however, necessitated the building of sanctuaries where the faithful could gather on a regular basis for the services of the word and sacrament. By mid-century, the coastal cities of Lebanon in particular were beginning to witness a phenomenal population growth caused by the great waves of migration from the countryside into the cities. Compounded by the waves of Armenian migration from Turkey into Syria and Lebanon, the number of local Evangelicals in the Syrian and Lebanese cities increased significantly. Accordingly, several projects were launched to build churches to house growing congregations, especially in Beirut itself.

In the mid-nineteenth century the formal recognition of a "*Protestant Millet*" was granted by the Ottoman authorities and thus the community began to enjoy the political and socioeconomic privileges and responsibilities of other Christian Millets. As a consequence, the Evangelicals perceived that a fully developed society within the confines of the Ottoman Empire required the preparation and training of a generation of competent professionals and a class of educated men and women who would live as good citizens. Thus, the idea of *Robert College of Istanbul and the Syrian Protestant College* in Beirut was born and saw the light in 1864 and 1866 respectively. With the waves of an Armenian exodus from Turkey Robert College lost much of its original attractiveness, while in the early 1920s, the name of the College in Beirut was changed to the *American University of Beirut* (A.U.B.), and the University continued to grow in stature and prestige. Today, the University's administration and policy are totally independent of the Evangelical community, but it still ranks as the top university in the Arab world. In 1924, a Junior College was started by the Presbyterian Church of America dedicated to the education of women. It chose as a location a hill top overlooking the

old Beirut lighthouse where the campus remains standing today. At a later time, the College was transformed into a largely secular institution, much like A.U.B., and its name was changed to *Beirut College for Women*. Today, with its two additional campuses in Byblos and Sidon, it is called the *Lebanese American University*.

In addition to churches, schools and universities several hospitals were established by the Evangelical community in Lebanon. *The American University Hospital*, with its impressive compound in Ras Beirut, stands out as a monumental achievement. *The Asfourieh Hospital* (for the mentally handicapped) was at one time an Evangelical institution, *Hamlin Hospital* in Hammana, Mt. Lebanon, is still operating and is run by the local Presbyterian Church. The Anglican community operates the *St. Luke's Center for the Mentally Handicapped* (in Mansourieh). Other social institutions such as orphanages (in Kirbet Qanafar, in Mansourieh, and in Theopolis), and the Evangelical School for the Visually Handicapped (in Jdeidet Al-Metn) are also examples of the concern of the community for the welfare of society in Lebanon.

With the dawn of the twentieth century new Evangelical mission agencies from western Churches have entered the field of service in Lebanon. Like their predecessors, all these Churches have sought to offer their educational, medical, social and cultural services alongside the spreading of the Reformation faith. Of these, the *Society of Friends (Quakers)*, the *Baptist Church*, the *Church of God*, the *Alliance Church*, the *Church of the Nazarene* and the *Church of the Brethren* ought to be named. Most of these denominations own and operate high schools and one seminary each for the training of its workers and pastors.

It is also worth mentioning that since the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), a number of Protestant Christians, mostly from the *Anglican (Episcopal) Church*, took refuge in Lebanon and established for themselves a small parish where they now worship in a sanctuary by the bay of St. Georges in Beirut.



The presence of such a multiplicity of Evangelical denominations is an authentic expression of the basic Reformation principle of the freedom of the Christian with regards to the structure and policy of the historical-visible church. The variety of these Churches and groups, however, did not fit well or correspond properly with the organizational reality of eastern Christianity – it being more hierarchical and mono-organic by nature. In response to this state of affairs, the Evangelical Churches in Syria and Lebanon formed for themselves in 1937 *the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community on Syria and Lebanon* which is the official representative body and the only dialoguing partner with the Lebanese and Syrian states as well as with all the other religious bodies in the two countries. Today, it is headquartered in Rabiya, El-Metn Lebanon, and is presided over by the *Rev. Dr. Salim Sahiouny*.

The Evangelical Church in Lebanon has played a pioneering role in the launching of the ecumenical movement in the Middle East, and in the establishment of the *Middle East Council of Churches*. The Evangelical Church, therefore, perceives its identity in its present situation in this part of the world, from this fundamental ecumenical perspective. It eagerly and hopefully awaits the day when all of Christ's Churches here in the East will be united in their testimony to one faith in the one Lord, through one baptism and one communion of the body and blood of God incarnate in Christ Jesus.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)





## A Short History about the Bible Society Movement in the Middle East

*Tom Hoglindet, Nuha Melhem*

The modern Bible Society movement started in England and Wales; the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) was founded in 1804. We also find early roots in the Middle East. In one of the earliest letters of Mr. Benjamin Barker (a representative of the BFBS), Aleppo, March 11, 1824, we find the following report:

“On the 30<sup>th</sup> of January last, just before I quitted Smyrna, I had the satisfaction to address you. I am now happy in informing you of my safe arrival at Aleppo, after a short but boisterous passage from Smyrna to Lattakia.

The day I embarked on board a French store-ship on my departure from Smyrna, I received the thanks of the captain and officers for the present of a French Bible made to each. They said that they were the more indebted to me for that book as it was a work which they had long wished to possess. I learned at Lattakia that about 112 volumes of the Holy Scriptures in Armenian, which I had transmitted from Smyrna, had been disposed of.

The only place of any note between Lattakia and Aleppo is Gissershoghn, a small town situated on the Orontes. This place was entirely destroyed by the late earthquakes: a few huts only are now to be seen on its ruins. A Greek who lost in the dreadful night of the 13<sup>th</sup> August, 1822, all his family consisting of his mother, wife and three children, reminded me of my promise to give him an Arabic New Testament. Although the earthquakes have not entirely ceased in this neighbourhood, yet the shocks are much slighter, so that the inhabitants of Aleppo have taken courage and nearly all reentered the city. I am arranging a room in a ruined house for the purpose of establishing a depot of the Holy Scriptures. I am very sanguine in my expectations of success in the disposal of copies of the Sacred Volume here, for I have already had many applications for them, and I am waiting with anxiety for the arrival of the cases which were to follow me to Syria. As soon as the depot here shall have been established with a proper person to attend it, I shall set out for the coast of Syria to visit the different towns where the Holy Scriptures have been left for distribution.

A few days back I received a visit from a Syrian bishop who came to Aleppo from Merdeen on his way to Damascus and Jerusalem. This prelate assured me that at Merdeen, Nisibin, Mosul, in short, throughout all Mesopotamia, the Holy Scriptures in the Carshun language (Arabic with Syriac characters) would prove a most acceptable gift to the Christians. I must not omit relating an interesting fact, tending to prove the utility of distributing the Holy Scriptures. The Syrian bishop above mentioned was accompanied by a member of his Church, who observed that he had purchased from me an Arabic New Testament, which proved a real consolation to his brother, long confined to his bed by an illness which has deprived him of the use of his limbs. He said: “My brother has read the New Testament again and again, and has found in it things of which he was before wholly ignorant.”

Aleppo, April 26, 1824

“On the 11<sup>th</sup> of March I had the pleasure to inform you of my safe arrival at Aleppo, and being now on the eve of my departure for the coast of Syria, the Mountain of the Druses, Damascus and Jerusalem, I take up the pen again to inform you of what has occurred since my last communication. Ten days ago I received three cases of the Holy Scriptures which, with the exception of about 20 Armenian New Testaments and two Bibles, proved to be all Syriac New Testaments.”

Beirut, June 29, 1824

“I have established a depot here, and have sent the Holy Scriptures to Jerusalem, Tyre, Sidon, Tripoli, Aleppo, and am now preparing two cases to take with me to Damascus. To Acre and other places the Holy Scriptures have been sent by the English and American missionaries. I was agreeably surprised to find at Beirut three respectable missionaries. These gentlemen, who have been residing in Syria for several months, have, by their united exertions, distributed a considerable number of the Holy Scriptures for account of the Bible Society at Malta.”



All of this shows that this modern movement found early expression in the Middle East where the Bible was inspired by God to prophets, poets, kings and shepherds etc. ... around 40 individuals during a period exceeding one thousand four hundred years. The written Revelation of God's Word and the description of activities similar to the ones of a Bible Society are found in the New Testament, for instance the Gospels, where scribes of the Holy Scriptures are mentioned. In other events of the Old Testament the law was read to kings and people and sometimes even translated after their exile. We also find an early written translation from the original text in Hebrew and Aramaic of the Septuagint Greek text prepared during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. This translation actually played an important role in the life of the early Church and is still very much the text on which many Orthodox translations of the Bible are based.

Today in our Bible Societies of the Middle East in the year 2000 we like to think that we find another expression of our roots in the Book of Acts, Chapter 8, where we read that an African Minister from Ethiopia gets a copy of the Holy Scriptures, the Book of Isaiah, in Jerusalem. This was, no doubt, the result of three main functions that we still find in our Bible Society today:

1. The original text translated into a language understood at that time by most educated people i. e. the Greek language.
2. The copying of it into the transportable manuscript readable in a chariot while travelling.
3. Only rich people could obtain such a book as a result of the distribution of this text in those days. Today with the printing press and all the other media, this precious message is available in many different formats to all people.

Since 1824, the efforts of spreading the Word of God were first organized from Malta, then later from several important cities of the Middle East such as Aleppo, Beirut, Damascus, Port Said, Cairo, Musul and Jerusalem, as well as Istanbul where depots of

Scriptures were established. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is also important in the translation work as we find four translations into Arabic of the complete Bible:

<b>Chidiac</b>	<b>1857</b>
<b>- published in London</b>	
<b>Boustany-Van Dyck</b>	<b>1865 - Beirut</b>
<b>Dominican</b>	<b>1878 - Mosul</b>
<b>Jesuits</b>	<b>1880 - Beirut</b>

In addition to these important translations of the whole Bible, we find earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Henry Martin in Calcutta, India, translated the New Testament in 1816. This translation was one of the first to be distributed by our newly started Bible Society movement.

#### **Bible Work in Arabia and the Gulf**

Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the work was better organized in the Middle East by delegations from England, with American missionaries also playing a role.

In 1921 there was only one correspondent for the Bible work in the Gulf area, Oscar Boyd, a missionary from the Reformed Church in America, calling themselves the Arabian Mission. This part of the Bible Society was called the Arabic Levant Branch.

In 1924 the ABS asked Bernard Hakken to write what he knew about the Bible situation in Arabia for their Annual Report.

In 1926 Dr. J. Oscar Boyd became the agent for the Levant Agencies of the Bible Societies.

Until 1957 there were two movements of Bible Societies in the Levant Countries (today: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and the Gulf States).

In 1937 the Levant was redivided into joint agencies between the American Bible Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society. Those two Bible Societies cooperated and divided responsibilities into: the Bible Lands Agency, North (BLAN) and the Bible Lands Agency, South (BLAS). Arabia and the Gulf were included in the



BLAN and administered to by ABS. After working five years with BFBS, Fouad Accad, the first Arab working for the BS Movement, was called to serve as a new sub-agent for Syria and Lebanon in the new Joint Agency, ABS and BFBS. His first organized trip to Iraq and Eastern Arabia in 1946 after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War was a help to all the partners.

In May 1946, during one of the trips, their chief difficulty was in maintaining supplies (such large sales). A lot could be said about this period 1937-1946 on establishing the work among and with the Churches of the Middle East.

1949 was the year of the first legal registration of the joint agencies which became the Bible Society of Syria and Lebanon in 1983, with a Board working on Constitution and Bylaws.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

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## The Middle East Council of Churches<sup>1</sup>

*Jean Corbon, Lebanon*

The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC, or CEMO, Conseil des Églises du Moyen-Orient) was created in 1974 and henceforth constitutes the principal organism for ecumenism in the Middle East. It brings together the Churches of the region extending from Iran and southern Turkey to the Sudan and the Arabian peninsula. The constitutive base of MECC is not the sum-total of the member Churches but their grouping into four "family" Churches. This term is pragmatic, because the member Churches do not all have the same way of conceptualizing their existence as Church, but it would be closely equivalent to the term "communion", because the Churches of each family are united in doctrinal, sacramental and sometimes even canonical communion.

Originally MECC was made up of three families: the Orthodox (Chalcedonian) family of the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and the autocephalous Church of Cyprus, the Oriental-Orthodox family of the Coptic Patriarchate of Alexandria, the Armenian Catholicate of Cilicia and the Syriac Patriarchate of Antioch, and the Evangelical family, which grouped together thirteen Churches of diverse affiliation (Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Methodist). It was in 1990 that the Catholic family was first admitted to MECC – the Maronite, the Greek Melkite, the Chaldean, the Armenian, the Syriac and the Latin Churches. Finally, the Assyrian Church of the Orient became a member of the Council in 1995.

The MECC is not a super-Church, nor is it a branch of the Ecumenical Council of Churches; rather it is a provisional structure on the way toward the unity in plurality willed by Christ. An indispensable facility for dialogue and cooperation between the Churches, its principal aims are as follows:

to promote communion and ecumenical awareness among the Churches, such that each Church may be able to share in the richness of the tradition and experience of the others through prayer, study and action; to use every possible means of a common search in view of mutual comprehension of the Churches' traditions;

to enlarge the field of cooperation between the Churches of the region so as to realize the essential mission of the Church which is to announce the Gospel; to organize and coordinate the appropriate services through which the common concern of the Churches for all people of the region can be expressed; finally, to be a regional reference point within the World Communion of Christian Churches, in particular for the relations with the COE, with the national and regional Councils of Churches and with the other ecumenical organizations.

Given the problematic relationships between the Churches of the Middle East during the last decades, it is easy to understand why the primary concrete objectives of MECC should be the following:

firstly, the continuance of a Christian presence in the region, especially by way of finding solutions for the causes of a tragic emigration; then, the renewal of the spiritual character of the Churches through, but also beyond, their socio-cultural identities and the confessional mentality that derives from them; next, and in pace with this renewal, a serious engagement for the service of Christian unity; finally – and this is the ultimate sense of the ecumenical movement – the common witness of Christians in their pluri-religious societies.

The General Assembly of MECC, which meets about every four years, is composed of 96 members (24 by family). It elects its four presidents, the general secretary and its three adjunct secretaries. Along with the 24 other elected members, the presidents and the secretaries general make up the Executive Committee, which is the true executive authority of MECC.

To accomplish these various tasks, MECC disposes of four departments, or subordinate units:

FAITH AND UNITY, for inter-ecclesial dialogue, Christian witness, inter-religious dialogue and theological formation (through ATIME, Association des Instituts de



Théologie du Moyen-Orient, Association of Middle East Institutes of Theology);

EDUCATION AND RENEWAL, with its specific programs for the youth, for women, for family, for school, and for collaboration in pastoral services;

LIFE AND SERVICE is the most highly solicited department because of the needs created by regional circumstances (such as in Palestine, in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Iran and in the Sudan), both on the humanitarian plane and in the area of development (reconstruction, agriculture) and that of culture (literacy);

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION. Besides handling routine relations with the media and the various news briefings, this department is responsible for the publication of three periodicals, one in Arabic (*Al Montada*), one in English (*MECC/News Report*) and one in French (*Courrier œcuménique du Moyen-Orient*).

Other programs are directly under the Secretary General, such as the edition of works on the Christianity of the Middle East, the rights of man, justice and peace, interreligious relations, dialogue with the missionaries, external relations, as well as the regional bureaus of MECC, its home base being in Beirut.<sup>2</sup>

At the dawn of the year 2000, the MECC is now twenty-five years old. As an organization in the service of the Churches, it is entering into young adulthood and sees itself as a facility of co-responsibility. Taking into account the legitimate disparity of beliefs of the Churches or of their "families", the facts show that its effectiveness will depend on the responsibility of each Church. On the one hand, each Church in fact remains autonomous in its decisions, but, on the other hand, the desired effectiveness cannot find expression except in communion with the other Churches. These two exigencies are in fact inseparable. There is interaction between the progress of communion between the Churches and the renewal that is taking place in each. The problem of the pluralistic East is such today that each Church can henceforth no longer exist without existing with the oth-

ers, nor can it operate without co-operating. For a quarter of a century now the MECC has been signaling the hope that this communion of Churches will some day be reality.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

<sup>1</sup> This text reflects the point of view of its author and he takes full responsibility for its publication.

<sup>2</sup> The address of the General Secretary of MECC is as follows: B. P. 5376, Beirut; Fax: 961.1.34.48.94, E-mail address: mecc@cyberia.net.lb



## The Oriental Prayer of the Heart or “Prayer in the Heart”

*Nadir Khayyat, Iraq*

The prayer of the heart is a form of prayer in the Oriental Church which consists in praying the Bible, first with the mouth, and then – little by little – the mouth becomes silent and it is the heart alone that speaks.

### Introduction

Living prayer is a world as vast as the sea. To pray is to sail on this sea which is none other than God. There are several forms this sailing toward the deep can take. In this article, we will limit our attention to one of these modes of prayer only: the prayer of the heart, such as is taught by the Syriac spiritual masters of the East.

In fact, prayer divides into two major categories: oral prayer (personal or liturgical) and silent prayer. The latter can take two principal forms: meditation (thoughts, ideas...) and the simple attending to God (a regard that rises from the “heart” toward God who is found in the “heart”). This “cordial” prayer is called by the Byzantines the “prayer of the heart”. Before explaining what Oriental prayer of the heart is and how it is engaged in practice we pause to reflect for a moment on the notion of the “heart”.

### 1. The heart in Oriental “prayer of the heart”

One must first of all avoid attaching any note of sentimentality to the word heart. The Bible and the Oriental strain of spirituality think of the heart as being the center of the whole human person, the center where thoughts reside and where the most profound decisions are made – whether for good or for evil. The heart is where the two dimensions of human existence, the carnal and the spiritual, meet.

### 2. What is the origin of this conception?

We find two ancient currents that link spiritual realities with carnal realities. Plato posits a fundamental distinction between the carnal and the spiritual. The Semitic current (the Bible), on the contrary, insists rather on the vital unity of man. The same is true of the Oriental Syriac tradition of spirituality, which assumes a solid link between the carnal heart and the “heart of the soul”.

It is important to note that the expression “heart”, even in the corporeal sense, could have a symbolic significance. Among those who practice the prayer of the heart, some focus their attention on the carnal heart (literal sense); while others focus on the center of the body (to the right of, and a little above the heart).

### 3. The spirit that prays in the heart

We speak in this section of the spirit of man that prays within him, even if it is true that the Spirit of God also prays in our hearts. What is this spirit of man and what is its role in the practice of “prayer in the heart”? If the heart is the place of prayer, the spirit is the driving surge that wells up from the heart; it is the profound dynamism of the inner person. It is the spontaneous movement of faithful love which is the heart’s expression of everything that is great and beautiful.

The spirit then is like a bird that can always freely rise toward heaven. This transcendental movement takes place in two directions: the ascending direction, towards God above the soul, or the descending direction, towards God in the depths of the human heart. This spirit dynamism is the foundation for the practice of “prayer in the heart”.

### 4. The biblical foundations of the Oriental “prayer of the heart”

A question arises: “Why teach this kind of prayer, because Christ does not seem to have practiced it, and the Bible never alludes to it at all?” The fact is that the Bible, like the Kingdom, is a seed destined to become a tree. The word of God grows through and in the life of the Church, under the impulse of the Spirit.

In the Bible, prayer is based on the ascending dimension which considers the fact that God is above man (in heaven). But the dwelling place of God in the heart is also a leading idea of the New Testament, an idea that only gradually came to influence Christian prayer.

To show how the “prayer of the heart” is rooted in the New Testament, we could begin with two Pauline verses (2 Co 3:18; 4:6). These statements of Paul insist on





the experience of the Risen One in the depths of the human heart, an experience perceived as fundamental for the Christian mission. Likewise, the author of the Second Epistle of Peter speaks of the interior transfiguration that takes place in the heart of the believer (2 P 1:16-19). We could also pause on the notion of the Temple (*naos* or *hieron* in Greek) to illustrate this process of interiorization.

#### **5. The spirit looks at God at the center of our being**

To look at God within oneself makes us enter into the notion of the interiorization of prayer, which is perhaps something specific to the Orientals. Actually, there are two degrees of interiorization of prayer. The first consists in withdrawing from the external, sensible world to direct one's attention to God alone. This interior attitude manifests itself through the closing of the eyes. It is the interiorization practiced by the West, usually in the context of silent prayer (cf. Teresa of Avila).

This kind of interiorization that results from separation from external influences is found among the Oriental spiritual masters. But what really characterizes their conception of interiorization is the effective access to the interior. This second degree, proper to the Orient, enables one to enter into the "heart"; it is the shortest path to union with God.

#### **6. Interiorization through the soul and through the body**

The step of access to the inside presupposes in fact a bodily support. The soul cannot have access to its center (its heart), unless the body itself is concentrated on its inner being, inside the chest, near the heart. One must accordingly assume a bodily position which enables one to achieve this goal (sitting down, with head inclined, or kneeling with forehead facing the ground).

#### **7. The different stages of the practice of "prayer in the heart"**

The practice of "prayer in the heart" for short periods of time is useful in order to learn how to maintain this level of prayer. The act of going inside is relatively easy, but to stay at "the door of the heart" is more difficult

(cf. John of Dalyatha). Four stages govern the progression of this kind of prayer.

The first stage consists in making the "plunge" inside, with the help of an appropriate bodily posture. It constitutes the foundation of all "prayer of the heart"; it is the entry into the heart. To remain "inside" is effected according to the stages developed by John of Dalyatha.

The second stage corresponds to the moment when the one who prays experiences difficulties in keeping his spirit turned toward the inside.

In the third stage, reached after a period of struggle, the spirit finds a support and a repose, even if it sees nothing at all. Then comes the appearance of "the morning star" in the heart, and it is this fourth stage that is characterized by the highest mystical experiences.

We note the existence of two kinds of practice of "prayer in the heart": the long prayer and the short, repeated prayer, even if the Orientals did not explicitly expound this distinction.

#### **8. The short, repeated "Prayer in the heart"**

John of Dalyatha and the spiritual masters of the Syriac East insist first of all on the long form of "prayer in the heart", because they are monks and live lives apart, in the calm of permanent retreat from the world. But John of Dalyatha also alludes to the "prayer in the heart" that lasts only a few moments, and whose purpose is a brief and intense union with God. The repetition of such a prayer renders it beneficial and fruitful. This brief form of prayer can be suitable for any believer and is above all ideal for lay persons.

Practically speaking, the "prayer of the heart" can be nothing more than the silent movement toward the interior to find God there for the space of a few moments. Adding a few words to this movement toward God will strengthen this movement.

The habit of repeating short prayers is very ancient. But before the spiritual masters of the Syriac East it was not



linked to the prayer of God present in the heart. It was Brother Laurence of the Resurrection (a French Carmelite of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) who gave it a definitive form.

### **9. The long “prayer in the heart”**

In its Oriental sense, “prayer in the heart” means “addressing oneself to God inside the soul for a long period of time, while repeating a short prayer and employing a respiratory rhythm”.

Distraction is the chief difficulty encountered when practicing the long silent prayer. Accordingly, this prayer should include moments of brief and intense prayer and moments of conversion when we become aware of distractions.

Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Orthodox tradition, whether Greek or Russian, likewise speaks to us of this form of prayer. It links together the three elements just mentioned: addressing oneself to God interiorly, repeating short prayerful formulas, and following a respiratory rhythm.

### **10. “Prayer in the heart”, a mystical encounter**

Prayer in general is not a request for assistance, a meditation, an examination of conscience before God or even an act of praise or thanksgiving; in all of these prayer should be a personal and vital relationship with the living God. Such a relationship is achieved through a focus on God and a union with him, and not merely through thoughts or ideas. The “prayer of the heart” is a short and direct way to achieve this kind of union, this kind of encounter. The stages of the “prayer in the heart” expounded by John of Dalyatha take up this movement toward mystical encounter: after the inevitable difficulties of beginnings, the procedure eventually opens into the experience of a profound peace, and finally into the radiant vision of the “the morning star”, that is to say, of the Risen Christ.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)



## Glossary

### Arianism

Doctrine of the Alexandrian priest Arius, who argued that Christ is not equal to God and eternal, but rather the first of God's creatures and as "Logos" occupies an intermediary position between God and the world. Arianism was condemned at the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381).

### Armenian Church

The Christian Church of the Armenians, which acquired permanent form around the year 300 A.D. through the work of Bishop Gregory the Illuminator (hence also called the Gregorian Church) and the translation of the Bible by the Armenian Church Father Mesrop Mashtots (5<sup>th</sup> cent.). Its doctrinal position (which has developed since the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. as a distinct doctrinal tradition) was traditionally described as a form of "Monophysitism", but is described by the Armenian Church itself as "miaphysitic" (one united nature of Christ). The liturgical language is ancient Armenian. The head of the greater part of the Armenian Church is the Katholikos ("universal bishop") with his seat in Ejmiadzin (since 1443); under him come the Patriarchates of Jerusalem (since 1311) and Istanbul (since 1438); besides these there has been an independent Patriarchate in Cilicia since the 11<sup>th</sup> cent. (Sis; transferred to Antilyas near Beirut in 1921). World-wide there are about 5 to 6 million Armenian Christians. A small segment of the Armenian Church has entered into union with the Catholic Church (Uniate Armenians, with the seat of the Catholic Armenian Patriarch in Beirut), but these have their own church order (Mechitarists).

### Ethiopian Church

1) (Earlier the Abyssinian Church). The National Christian Church of Ethiopia. Dating to the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> cent., the Ethiopian Church became a state church under King Ezana (341) and continued as such without interruption till the military revolt of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1974. The head of the Church was the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria till 1959. Since that time (when they became autocephalous) the Ethiopian Church has been led by a Patriarch-Katholikos of their own, although as a daughter church of the Coptic

Church it recognizes the primacy of honor of the Coptic Patriarch. The latter released the Eritrean Orthodox Church from under the jurisdiction of the Ethiopian Patriarch in 1998 and placed it under a separate Eritrean Patriarch. Theologically, the Ethiopian Church developed a doctrinal tradition of its own, following the Council of Chalcedon (451), whose decisions it did not recognize. Its teaching has traditionally been regarded as "monophysite", but the Ethiopian Church describes its own doctrinal position as "miaphysite" (one united nature of Christ). Liturgically, the Church has retained many ancient practices, including circumcision.

2) (Uniate Ethiopian Church), the ecclesial community of Ethiopian Christians who are in union with the Catholic Church; originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. (after earlier attempts at union) as a Catholic Oriental Church of the Alexandrian rite; jurisdictionally constituted as a metropolitan see in Addis Ababa with suffragan sees in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

### Chalcedon

A city founded in 675 B. C. at the point where the Bosphorus exits into the Sea of Marmara. In Chalcedon the fourth Ecumenical Council met in 451. The faith confession or creed that emerged from this Council – which affirms that in the person of Christ the divine and the human nature are united in an "unmixed" and "indivisible" way (the so-called Chalcedonian Formula) – remains binding even today.

### Jacobites

A term denoting Syrian Christians whose ecclesial structure was reorganized in the 6<sup>th</sup> cent. by the Syrian monk Jacob Baradaeus and who have traditionally been regarded as Monophysites. Today the term designates the members of the West Syrian Church (Syrian Churches).

### Coptic Churches

The National Church of Egypt. In the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. after the rejection of the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (451), it developed its own doctrinal tradition, traditionally described as "monophysite", but which the Copts



themselves understand as "miaphysite". The Coptic Church traces its tradition back to the Evangelist Mark and claims to be the authentic Orthodox Church of Egypt, which includes world-wide approx. 10-12 million Copts. The head of the Coptic Church bears the title "Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the Chair of Saint Mark" with its seat in Cairo. The liturgical languages are Coptic and Arabic.

### **Latin Church**

Designates the part of the Church in the Roman Empire which belongs geographically and politically to the Western half of the Empire and which owes its distinctive character to the influence of Roman-Latin culture. Until the Eastern Schism (1054) part of the one Roman-Imperial Church, the Latin Church, now as a canonically independent Church under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome (as patriarch of the West), included all of Western Christianity up until the time of the Reformation. Threatened first by the Great Western Schism (1378-1417), the unity of the Latin Church was broken up after the consolidation of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> cent. Since that time, on the one hand the Protestant Churches that broke away from communion with the Latin Church constitute an independent branch of Western Christendom; on the other hand, the Latin Church, through the world-wide Catholic mission which likewise began in the 16<sup>th</sup> cent., has experienced an expansion far beyond the borders of what was originally the Western-Roman cultural domain and it embraces today the overwhelming majority of Catholic Christians in the whole world, as a world-wide Catholic Church which still retains a distinctively Latin and Western character.

### **Melchites**

(Melkites) [from Syrian Malka "Emperor"], originally those Egyptian, Syrian, and Palestinian Christians who accepted the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (451) against the Monophysites; they were called "the Emperor's men"; in the 17<sup>th</sup> cent. under the influence of Catholic missionaries the break-up of the Melchites (definitively in 1724) and the creation of a new Patriarchate of Antioch in union with the Catholic Church; since 1838 called the Melchite "Patriarchate of Antioch and of the whole Orient, Alexandria and Jerusalem"; the residence of the Patriarch is Damascus, the rite is Byzantine; today approx. 1.7 million Uniate Melchites as opposed to 1.1 Million Orthodox Christians in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem.

### **Maronites**

The members of the "Syrian-Maronite Church", the only self-contained Eastern Church that has always been in union with the Catholic Church. Its origins go back to

the Syrian monastery of Saint Maron (before 423); today world-wide there are approx. 2.2 million Maronites, above all in Lebanon and in the Near East; numerically significant Maronite diaspora in North America.

### **Monophysites**

The adherents of a Christological conception (Monophysitism) going back to the Alexandrian School of theologians and according to which in Jesus Christ there were not two distinct natures (one divine and one human) but only the one divine nature of the Logos become flesh; after their condemnation at the 4<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon 451) the Monophysites broke away from the Imperial Church and developed Churches of their own (the Armenian Church, the Ethiopian Church, the Jacobites, the Coptic Churches). According to their theological self-understanding these Christians represent a pre-Chalcedonian theology best described as "miaphysite" (one united nature of Christ), as opposed to "monophysite".

### **Nestorians**

Followers of the doctrine of Nestorius (\*approx. 381; from 428-431 Patriarch of Constantinople). In opposition to the Alexandrian theology the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ are kept separate according to this doctrine. Nestorius objected to referring to Mary as "Mother of God"; in 431 the condemnation of Nestorianism and the removal of Nestorius by the Council of Ephesus; the emigration of the Nestorians to the Sassanian empire; in 484-486, the split from the Imperial Church and the founding of the Nestorian Church (also the East Syrian or Assyrian Church); in the immediately following period a widespread missionary activity in India (Thomas Christians), China, Mongolia, Tibet. Today the East-Syrian Church (which calls itself "the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East") has about 150,000 members in the Near East (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria), in India, Australia and the United States. It is thus numerically the smallest of the Oriental Churches. The Chaldean Church, a part of the East-Syrian Church that has been in union with the Catholic Church since the 16<sup>th</sup> cent., has approx. 270,000 members.

### **Oriental Churches**

A general term for all the Christian Churches that belonged to the Eastern half of the Empire after the definitive break-up of the Roman Empire (395): the Churches that originated in this part of the Empire as well as those founded through the missionary activity of the Oriental Churches. The following Churches and church groups are distinguished: the Orthodox Churches that originated in the realm of Byzantine culture; the ancient Oriental National Churches which originated in the aftermath of the theological controversies



of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries; the parts of the different Oriental Churches which are under the Pope and which constitute the Uniate Churches of the Catholic Church. 1) *Orthodox Churches*: a general term for the autocephalous and autonomous Orthodox (national) Churches which for the most part go back historically to the post-Constantinian Imperial Church, especially its Eastern half. At present there are fourteen autocephalous and nine autonomous Churches (the latter being those Churches that are independent in matters of internal administration, but have canonical links to an autocephalous [mother]-church). These Churches regard themselves as equal members of the "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ of the True (Orthodox) Confession", grounded in a common theological, liturgical and spiritual tradition. For all, the decisions of the seven Ecumenical Councils according to Orthodox understanding (325-787) constitute a common doctrinal foundation and the basis of their Canon Law. The ecclesial understanding is synodal. The governing body of an Orthodox (national) Church is the Synod, within which the primacy of honor goes to the first hierarchs (Patriarch, Metropolitan, Archbishop). Similarly, the highest court of appeal for deciding questions at the level of the Orthodox world as a whole is thought to be an Ecumenical Synod, which since 1961 has been prepared for by a number of pan-Orthodox conferences. Within Orthodoxy as a whole the primacy belongs to the Ecumenical Patriarch. Theologically the Orthodox Church understands itself as the earthly image of the heavenly Church. Heart and center of ecclesial existence is the Eucharist; the basic liturgies are those of Basil and John Chrysostom. Central importance has been attached to (an often ascetically marked) monasticism and to monasteries within the Orthodox Churches; these are regarded as bearers of spiritual authority and spiritual life and the monasteries are centers for the preservation of religious, cultural and national identity. As a rule, bishops are chosen from monastic circles. Worldwide, the Orthodox Church numbers approx. 150-170 million believers. The largest national Orthodox Church is the Russian Orthodox Church which is thought to have as many as 100 million members. 2) *Ancient Eastern National Churches*: Oriental Churches. 3) *Uniate Churches*; many dating back to the Middle Ages, Churches of ancient Eastern or Orthodox origin. The Uniate Churches acknowledge the primacy of jurisdiction and the teaching authority of the Pope, but they retain in ecclesiastical language, liturgy and spirituality the self-understanding, the peculiarities of canon law and the traditions of their ancient Oriental and Orthodox mother churches. The only Oriental Church which is in its entirety in union with the Catholic Church is the Maronite Church. Partial unions exist with various Churches of the Armenian, Ethiopian, Byzantine, Coptic, East-Syrian and West-Syrian rites.

### Schisms

The two most consequential schisms of Church history are the Eastern Schism, the separation of the four Eastern Patriarchates (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem) from the Latin Church, which exists till today in spite of renewed efforts of reconciliation that have taken place (most recently in 1995, with the publishing of a common declaration of the Ecumenical Patriarchs Bartholomaios I and Pope John Paul II) and the Great Western Schism (1378-1417, settled by the Council of Constance), when two (and for a short time three) individuals simultaneously laid claim to the papal office.

### Syrian Churches

A common designation for the Christian Churches which originated in the ancient Syrian cultural domain with centers in Antioch and Edessa. To the Syrian Churches belong the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch (with its seat in Damascus), the East Syrian (Nestorian, also called Assyrian) Church which originated in the aftermath of the theological controversies of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, the West Syrian (Jacobite) Church, the autonomous Syrian Orthodox Churches of the East in India (Thomas Christians) which sprang from the missionary activity of the Jacobites, the Melchites and the Oriental Churches of Syrian tradition which are united (in whole, or as parts of larger church communities) with the Catholic Church: of Maronite Rite: the Maronites; of the West-Syrian Rite: the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch (with its seat in Beirut) and the Syrian Malankar Churches in India (which in 1930 broke from the Syrian Orthodox Church of the East and united with the Catholic Church); of East-Syrian Rite: the Chaldean Church (actually the Chaldean-Catholic Patriarchate of Babylon, with its seat in Bagdad) and the Syrian Malabar Churches in India.

### Thomas Christians

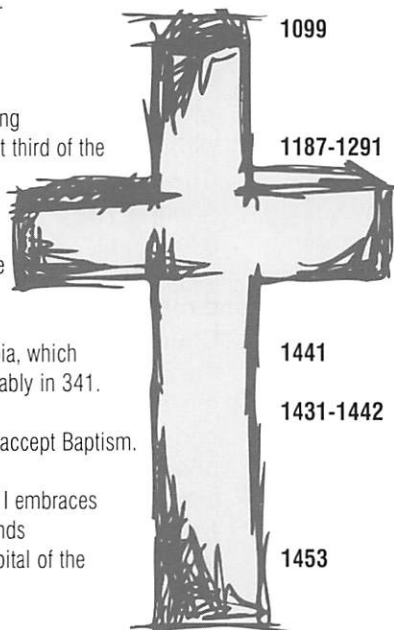
A general designation for Christians of various confessions on the Malabar coast (South-West India, State of Kerala) who trace their origin traditionally to a mission of the Apostle Thomas from the year 52 A.D. The tomb of the Apostle is venerated in Madras, although historical evidence for a missionary journey of Thomas cannot be established. The founding of the Christian Churches in India goes back to the Nestorian mission of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. The total number of Thomas Christians, who today are sharply divided confessionally (Syrian-Orthodox, "neo-Nestorian", Catholic-Uniate, Anglican, the Protestant "Thomas Church") is estimated at several million.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)



# Chronological Overview: The Development of the Christian Church in East and West

<b>Before 100</b>	Peter founds the community of Rome. Peter and Paul in Antioch. Mark the Evangelist in Alexandria. Thomas the Apostle founds the "Mesopotamian Church".	<b>1070</b>	Capture of Jerusalem by the Seljuq Turks. Christian pilgrims can no longer visit Jerusalem.
<b>2nd cent.</b>	Syrian preachers from Edessa bring Christianity to Armenia. In the last third of the 2nd cent. Christianity in Egypt comes to full bloom.	<b>1099</b>	The re-conquest of Jerusalem by the Crusaders and the subsequent establishment of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem
<b>4th cent.</b>	The Latin Church is present in the Holy Land from this time on. At the beginning of the 4th cent., the origin of the Church in Ethiopia, which becomes the State church probably in 341.	<b>1187-1291</b>	After the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin (1187), they transfer the Patriarchate to Akko. Antioch is captured in 1268 by Mamelukes. Akko falls in 1291; this ends the era of the Crusades. From 1291 to 1847 the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem is merely a titular seat without resident office-holder.
<b>301</b>	The Armenian king and his court accept Baptism.	<b>1441</b>	The Armenian Church is divided.
<b>325</b>	The Roman Emperor Constantine I embraces the Nicene Creed and in 330 founds Constantinople as the second capital of the Roman Empire.	<b>1431-1442</b>	The Council of Florence: it ratifies the (short-lived) union with the Greeks, the Armenians and the Jacobites. The expression "Chaldean Church" goes back to Pope Eugenius IV during this Council.
<b>380/381</b>	Under Theodosius I, the Great, Christianity becomes the official religion of the Empire.	<b>1453</b>	The end of the Byzantine (East-Roman) Empire, with the capture of Constantinople by the Turks.
<b>395</b>	The Roman Empire is divided between the two sons of Theodosius into a Western and an Eastern half. The Western Roman Empire comes to an end in 476 when the last Roman Emperor is deposed (Romulus Augustulus).	<b>1584</b>	Founding of the Maronite College in Rome.
<b>431</b>	The Council of Ephesus: The Nestorians break off. They later become the Assyrian (East Syrian) Church, which today is Orthodox and the Chaldean Church, which today is in union with Rome.	<b>16th cent.</b>	The East Syrian Church moves closer to Rome.
<b>451</b>	The Council of Chalcedon: The Copts, Ethiopians, Syrians (Jacobites) and Armenians reject the Council and go their own ways. The Maronites and the Melkites comply with the decisions of the Council.	<b>17th cent.</b>	Missionaries from the Latin West in the East. The Syrian Church splits into Syrian-Catholic and Syrian Orthodox
<b>5th-6th cent.</b>	The Nestorian mission to India ("Thomas Christians").	<b>1630</b>	Franciscan missionaries in Cairo; followed by the Jesuits in 1697; the effect is that the Copts move closer to the Roman Church.
<b>1054</b>	The Eastern Schism: the four Eastern Patriarchates, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem break from the Latin Church and attach themselves to the Church of Constantinople.	<b>1724</b>	The Melkite Church splits into Melkite-Catholic and Melkite-Orthodox.
		<b>1824</b>	The establishment of a Patriarchate for the Coptic Catholic Church.
		<b>1847</b>	Re-establishment of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem.







## Life of the Federation

### Peru: Zonal Meeting of the Bolivarian Countries in Lima

Participants from five countries (Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela) met in Lima, Peru, from September 3 to 7, 2001 in order to prepare themselves for the VI Plenary Assembly of the CBF. Theme and motto were "Word of God – A Blessing for our Bolivarian Countries" and "You show me ways of life (Ps 16,11; Acts 2,28).

Fr. Luis Castonguay  
Apartado 216  
Iquitos  
Peru  
Tel.: +51-94-25 03 41  
Fax: +51-94-25 19 22  
E-mail:  
castolui@meganet.com.pe

They also discussed the preoccupations they would like to be taken into consideration during the Plenary Assembly in Beirut:

- That the Word of God is a blessing for the humble; that, like Mary, they say yes to the Word.
- That the Federation might visit its members more often and make more of an effort to acquire and distribute the Bible at popular prices, making information available on how to obtain low-cost Bibles.
- That the Federation might further sensitize the bishops and priests to the importance of the biblical apostolate.
- The value of biblical hermeneutics and the significance of the new subjects who are reading the Word of God (children, women, native peoples, urban residents, blacks...)
- To stress the biblical dimension in every pastoral undertaking.
- To clarify the relationship between Bible and Life, to develop the aspect of its celebration.
- To encourage the exchange of experiences, issues relating to formation, materials and studies at the global level.
- That the Federation might assist lay people by supplying them with the necessary formation.
- The Federation, as a world organization, is called to ponder alternatives to the present global situation (capitalist-neo-liberal), using the Word of God as a springboard for reflection. ■

### Final Statement of the Lima Meeting (in Spanish original)

#### Documento Final

En la Ciudad del Callao, Perú, entre el 3 y el 7 de septiembre de 2001, nos hemos reunido las delegaciones de los miembros plenos y asociados, de la Federación Bíblica Católica de la zona bolivariana: Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú y Bolivia.

Desde el principio damos gracias al Señor por este encuentro, que lo experimentamos ya como una bendición para nuestros pueblos.

Hemos compartido nuestras experiencias en el caminar bíblico de nuestros países bolivarianos y constatamos con alegría y esperanza, que con nuestra humilde colaboración,



el Dios de la Vida nos dirige su Palabra, siendo la fuerza que anima y transforma la vida de nuestras comunidades, llevándolas a comprometerse y a participar activamente dentro de la Iglesia.

También hemos constatado algunos **logros** que queremos compartir con los que desde la distancia nos acompañan y apoyan.

- 1. La conciencia de la importancia y valor de la Sagrada Escritura en la pastoral y en la vida de la Iglesia, es un regalo de Dios, que ha llevado a múltiples actores a fomentar equipos bíblicos con fuerte presencia y protagonismo de laicos, que a su vez están respondiendo al creciente interés y a la sed de nuestros pueblos por la luz de la Palabra.
- 2. Respuesta ofrecida con la elaboración de variados y ricos materiales bíblicos, ya sea en función de la necesidad de formación bíblica pastoral y sistemática, así como para campañas nacionales apoyadas por nuestras Conferencia Episcopales, diócesis, parroquias y comunidades religiosas.

Pese a esto, también constatamos **necesidades y retos** comunes como:

- 1. Apoyar la lectura de la Biblia desde distintas hermenéuticas, dar mayor fuerza a la coordinación de nuestras iniciativas, promoviendo el intercambio y la búsqueda de recursos económicos.
- 2. Apoyar humildemente la comunión de la Iglesia, y encontrar en nuestros pastores su guía e incentivo para la pastoral bíblica.
- 3. Buscar incesantemente la unidad de los cristianos con una debida apertura ecuménica y fomentar la formación bíblica sistemática y progresiva de agentes de pastoral y del pueblo cristiano.

Desde nuestras realidades nacionales, logros, desafíos y fundamentalmente confiados en el auxilio del Espíritu, nos hemos planteado **proyecciones y compromisos**, entre los cuales queremos destacar:

- 1. La incesante búsqueda de que la pastoral bíblica sea reconocida y valorada como fundamento y ánimo de la vida y labor de la Iglesia, para la Nueva Evangelización, llevándonos al encuentro con Jesucristo vivo.
- 2. Fortalecer, ampliar y coordinar nuestras iniciativas y experiencias formativas, destinadas a agentes de pastoral y a nuestras comunidades, tratando de que sean cada vez más sistemáticas y progresivas; incluso buscando un aval académico.
- 3. Fortalecer la articulación de las experiencias pastorales en nuestra zona bolivariana, compartiendo su riqueza y la de nuestros materiales.
- 4. Incentivar el compromiso y la participación de los laicos en la pastoral bíblica.
- 5. Mantenernos abiertos al espíritu ecuménico.
- 6. Responder a nuestras realidades nacionales y zonales desde la lectura orante y fiel de la Palabra.
- 7. Fortalecer y apoyar la FEBIC bolivariana, y desde ya prepararnos para un nuevo encuentro en el año 2004.

No podemos terminar sin antes agradecer al Señor por la Iglesia del Perú, cuya compañía hemos tenido en la persona de Mons. Bernardo Khünel, y por todos aquellos que han hecho posible este encuentro, y han asumido la difícil labor de coordinar y animar esta zona bolivariana.

Ciudad del Callao, Perú, 7 de septiembre de 2001



### India: Biblical Activities of St. Paul's Bible Institute in Chennai

The St. Paul's Bible Institute is an organization of the regional Bishops' Conference of Tamilnadu, South India, having 15 dioceses. Fr. Peter Abir is the Director of the Institute as well as the General Secretary of the Bible Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Council of the region.

The Institute offers a one-year residential Bible course for lay people, this year for 24 lay girls. It also conducts a two-year Bible Correspondence Course in Tamil, the local language. The students receive 22 booklets, prepared by biblical experts, covering the whole Bible. 3,500 students follow this course at the moment.

The Institute conducts Bible exhibitions in parishes on weekends and runs a Bible Monthly in Tamil. The articles refer to each book of the Bible, thus the whole Bible will be covered in four year's time (in 48 issues). The monthly is very much welcome by people and priests. At the moment, 7,000 copies are printed.

The Institute conducts regular Bible seminars, every weekend in different centres. It also prepares and publishes books on biblical themes. All these activities are mainly in Tamil – in order to promote the biblical knowledge and life of the local people.

On 13-14 January 2002, Fr. Abir will conduct a Bible Convention in his function as General Secretary of the Bible Commission of this region (for the Catholic Bishops' Conference). It will be attended by many people, and Cardinal Lourdasamy (Rome) and some Bishops will also address the Convention.

The Institute is preparing for the first time the Concordance to the Tamil Bible. This big volume will be released by His Eminence Cardinal Lourdasamy on 14th January, 2002 – as a remembrance of his Sacerdotal Golden Jubilee.

Fr. Peter Abir  
St. Paul's Bible Institute  
Poonamallee  
Chennai (Madras) - 600 056  
India  
Tel.: +91-44-627 23 95  
Fax: +91-44-64 91 392  
E-mail:  
Peterabr@md.3.vsnl.net.in

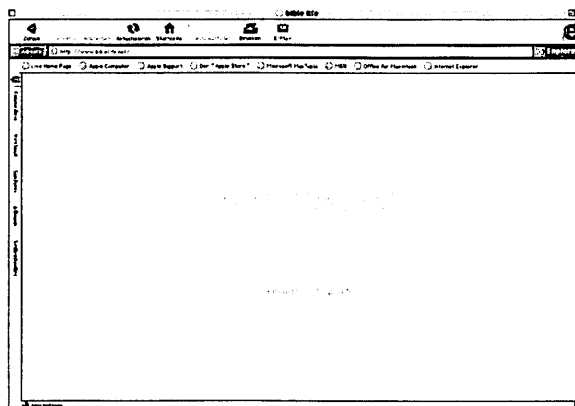
### Korea: Cyber Bible Apostolate of the Bible and Life Movement

Sr. Maura Cho of the Congregation of the Sisters of Perpetual Help (Associate Member of the CBF) reported on a project for the website which is called "Cyber Bible Apostolate (CBA)". She has worked with her team for a new network system in order to share among the CBF members by means of the Internet. The domain name of the Cyber Bible Apostolate is **www.biblelife.net**.

Sr. Maura Cho, solph  
177-8 Huksok-dong  
Dongjak-gu  
156-070 Seoul  
South Korea  
Tel: +82-2-817 40 72  
Fax: +82-2-822 01 28  
Email:  
srmcho@yahoo.co.kr

They have started in Korean language but would like to welcome other languages of the world. They are trying to find a simultaneous translation program aiming at the official languages of the CBF which are English, French, German and Spanish. Kindly refer to the intro-page, available in English, of **www.biblelife.net**, for more information.

One of the main purposes of this website is to share "the blessing for all nations" which is the theme of CBF's 6th Plenary Assembly 2002 in Lebanon. It also intends to build a bridge between "the ways of life" (Acts 2,28) and the world's Churches through the fellowship of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF).





Furthermore, Sr. Maura and the Bible Life Movement have prepared some audio-visual aids for the meditation of the Word, and prayerful dance with hymns for the vitality of the liturgy in preparation of the Plenary Assembly. □

Asociatia Catolica Biblica  
Maghiara (ACBM)  
Str. Mihai Viteazul Nr. 21  
2500 Alba Iulia  
Romania  
Tel.: +40-58-81 16 88  
Fax: +40-58-81 14 54

### **Romania: New Biblical Association in Siebenbürgen**

The Hungarians living in Romania today make up about 7% of the total population. Of these 1.6 million Hungarians about 1.1 million are Catholic. These Hungarians now have a Biblical Association of their own (KMB-Katolikus Magyar Bibliartarsulat). It was established in Tirgu Mures and was solemnly consecrated by Cardinal Schönborn in early September 2001. □

Mag. Anton Kalkbrenner  
Österreichisches  
Katholisches Bibelwerk  
Stiftsplatz 8, Postfach 48  
3400 Klosterneuburg  
Austria  
Tel.: +43-2243-329 38-0  
Fax: +43-2243-329 38 39  
E-mail: bibelwerk@utanet.at

### **Poland: Meeting of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mitteleuropäischer Bibelwerke in Krakow**

The leaders in charge of the "Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mitteleuropäischer Bibelwerke" (AMB) met in Krakow, Poland from September 2<sup>nd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> 2001. The theme of the conference was "You show me ways to life". Making use of scholarly work on the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:1-42), the participants focused their attention on the theme of the coming Plenary Assembly of the CBF. The exchange of experiences between the "old" Biblical Associations of western Europe and the new initiatives in the post-Communist countries is not only marked by the project-related support of the latter by the former, but above all serves as a kind of mutual enrichment and inspiration in the concrete work of the biblical apostolate. □

Dr. Mario Cifrak  
Hrvatsko katolicko  
biblijsko djelo  
c/o Kaptol 9  
10000 Zagreb  
Croatia  
Tel.: +385-1-48 13 265  
Fax: +385-1-48 14 171  
E-mail: mario.cifrak@ofm.hr  
Website: www.hbk.hr

### **Croatia: Founding of the Croatian Biblical Association in Zagreb**

Within the framework of a session of the Croatian Bishops' Conference in March 2001, the Croatian Biblical Association ("Hrvatsko katolicko biblijsko djelo") was founded. The newly established Institute is to carry on the work of the "Institut za biblijski pastoral", now renamed "Biblijski institut" (Bible Institute), which is attached to the theological Faculty. The two institutions will be working closely together in the service of the Bible. The Biblical Association will focus especially on the biblical apostolate, while the Biblical Institute will devote itself primarily to scientific work in connection with the chair for New Testament at the University.

Dr. Mario Cifrak, ofm, has been named new Director. □

### **Portugal: Annual Meeting of Subregion of Southern and Western Europe in Lisbon**

The "Latin European Subregion" of the CBF held its annual meeting in Lisbon, Portugal, from 4 to 7 October 2001. During the meeting it was decided to change the name into Subregion of Southern and Western Europe.

The participants sent a letter to the Tenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops which was held in Rome from September 30 to October 27, 2001 having as theme "The Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World". They drew attention to the work of the Federation and the challenges for present-day biblical pastoral ministry. The members of the Southern and Western Subregion were pleased to take note that the *Instrumentum laboris* for the Synod states as the prime task of the Bishops the spreading of the Word of God. The participants of the subregional meeting requested the Synod Fathers to propose a Synod on the Word of God to the Holy Father so that Acts 6:7 may be fulfilled, "The Word of God was spreading more and more".



One of the major results of the work of the Subregion was the publication of the Acts of the Biblical Colloquium "Biblical Pastoral Ministry at the Crossroads of Cultures" which was organized by the Southern and Western Subregion and which took place in Paris in October 2000. The book is published in French by Ed. Lethielleux in the collection *Bible et Vie Chretienne* (see "Books and Materials" in this issue of BDV).

### **Message of the Southern and Western European Subregion of the Catholic Biblical Federation to the Bishops who participate in the X Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod**

To their Eminencies and Excellencies at the Roman Synod on Bishops

The Southern and Western  
European Subregion  
of the Catholic Biblical  
Federation  
52, rue Jules Wilhelm  
2728 Luxembourg  
Tel.: +352-43 60 51-331  
Fax: +352-42 31 03  
E-mail:  
thomas.osborne@ci.culture.lu

At the same time as the Synod is gathered, the Southern and Western European Subregion of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) is holding its annual meeting in Lisbon, Portugal, (October 4-7, 2001), with the participation of Clara María Díaz, the General Secretary of the Federation.

The members of this meeting wish to take the opportunity to remind the Synod Fathers of the existence of this Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF). This body was created in 1969 under the auspices of the then Secretariat (now Council) for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome in order to put into practice among Catholics the recommendations of the Constitution Dei Verbum of Vatican II.

The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) is now spread throughout the world. Many Bishops' Conferences are themselves full members or are represented by institutions or persons devoted to the Biblical Apostolate which they have delegated. The Federation will hold its VI Plenary Assembly in Beirut (Lebanon) in September 2002.

Noticing with joy that the *Instrumentum laboris* for the present Synod gives as the first task of the Bishop the transmission of the Word of God, we would like to draw the attention of the Synod Fathers to the valuable fruits for evangelization which result from a dynamic and structured collaboration between Bishops' Conferences and institutions that are members of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) who work to develop in many ways the biblical animation of all aspects of pastoral work.

There has been much progress in various countries in increasing the access of the Catholic faithful to the Word of God, a development strongly encouraged just recently by the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*. We are happy to note: pastoral letters on the reading of the Word of God by the faithful; appointments of institutions or of persons responsible for promoting the reading of the Bible among Catholics; the introduction of courses on the biblical animation of pastoral work in theological faculties, seminaries and institutions of religious education and catechetics; promotion of Bible reading groups and of *lectio divina*; formation of qualified lay people to animate the biblical apostolate; celebration of a Sunday or a Week of the Bible; etc.

As members of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) we respectfully ask the Synod Fathers to consider the extension of this collaboration to all Bishops' Conferences and to all dioceses, and also to consider asking the Holy Father to devote the next Roman Synod to the spreading of the Word of God both inside the Catholic Church and to those outside who are waiting for it throughout the world, so that one can really say: "The Word of God was spreading more and more" (Acts 6:7).

On behalf of the Southern and Western European Subregion  
of the Catholic Biblical Federation

Thomas P. Osborne, coordinator, Lisbon, October 7, 2001

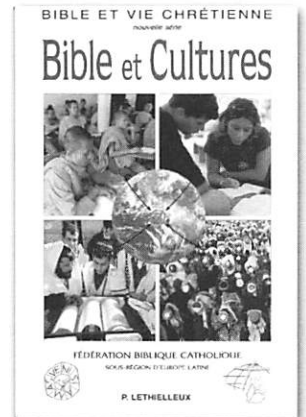


## Books and Materials

Subregional Coordinator of  
Southern and Western Europe  
Mr. Thomas P. Osborne  
52 rue Jules-Wilhelm  
2728 Luxembourg  
Tel.: +352-43 60 51-331  
Fax: +352-42 65 72  
E-mail:  
thomas.osborne@ci.culture.lu

**“Bible and Cultures”** – Acts of the Biblical Colloquium “The Biblical-Pastoral Ministry at the Crossroads of the Cultures”, Paris, October 6-8, 2000

One should not to read the Bible in the 21st century without embedding the lecture within the realities of our modern world and taking into account the globalization of communication networks and economic markets, the plurality of cultures and mentalities, the diverse forms of faith and spirituality... It is necessary to enter into dialogue with this very complex situation; the “Word of Life” proclaimed in the Bible otherwise runs the risk of degenerating into mere words of dust causing no resonance in this pluralistic, fun-and-action world.



In order to reflect on the challenges presented by the clash of cultures the Catholic Biblical Federation’s subregion of Southern and Western Europe convened in Paris in October 2000. Among the participants of this colloquium “Biblical-Pastoral Ministry at the Crossroads of Cultures” were: Pierre Babin, Philippe Bacq, Pierre-Marie Beaudé, Bettina Eltrop, Claude Geffré, Anne-Marie Pelletier and Jean Zumstein as well as others responsible for and working in the field of biblical pastoral ministry.

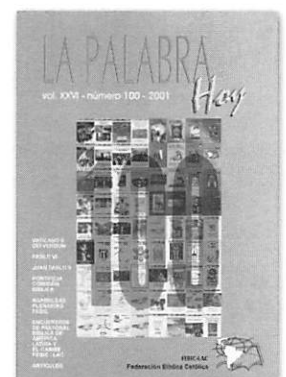
This volume with its collection of texts from the lectures and pertinent conclusions presents an edifying contribution for all those engaged in active reading and interpretation of the Bible with an open attitude towards contemporary times and complexities. ■

FEBIC-LAC  
Fr. Jesús Antonio Weisensee-Hetter  
Weisensee-Hetter  
Calle 65, No. 7-68 - Apto. 403  
Apartado Aéreo 51513  
Santafé de Bogotá  
Colombia  
Tel.: +57-1-347 01 18  
Fax: +57-1-210 44 44  
E-mail: febicla@unete.com

### LA PALABRA HOY – No 100

Fr. Jesús Antonio Weisensee Hetter, subregional coordinator of the FEBIC-LAC has completed the publication of No 100 of LA PALABRA HOY. In this issue of the review one finds a selection of texts that are very significant for the Catholic Biblical Federation.

May this commemorative issue inspire the readers of the review, as well as the members of the Federation in Latin America and the Caribbean, and enable them to catch a second breath and to continue on their way with renewed confidence. ■







### **Catholic New Testament with notes published in Korea**

A revised and annotated version of the New Testament in Korean has finally been published after 27 years of work by Catholic scholars on what originally was conceived as a 10-year project. Bishop John Chang Yik of Chunchon, president of the Korean bishops' Biblical Committee and member of the Executive Committee of the Catholic Biblical Federation said that the local Church had longed for a Korean New Testament more faithful to the original texts, as well as one with annotations "helpful to a deeper understanding of God's word and Christian life. Now part of those desires has been fulfilled," said Bishop Chang, who was a member of the translation team.

**Bishop John Chang-Yik**  
Diocese of Chunchon  
Hyoja 2-dong 400  
Chunchon-shi 200-092  
South Korea  
Tel.: +82-33-242 61 54  
Fax: +82-33-242 61 55  
E-mail: hamthon@chollian.net

In 1974 the Biblical Committee, chaired then by Bishop Vincent Ri of Chonju, convened Catholic scholars to work on a popular edition of the Bible in easy-to-understand Korean with complete references and a commentary. Raphael Son, osb, president of Benedict Press said that the translation project began in 1974 with four Biblical scholars approved by the Korean bishops. However, it was necessary to wait for scholars studying overseas to join the project, he said, noting that 11 scholars were eventually involved in producing the first New Testament translated purely by Catholic scholars from the Greek. He expected the new version to be very useful also for people studying exegesis.



The Catholic Biblical Federation (*CBF*) is a world-wide association of Catholic organizations committed to the ministry of the Word of God. At the present time, the *CBF* membership includes 90 full members and 219 associate members coming from a total of 125 countries.

The activities of these organizations include the preparation of Catholic and interconfessional Bible translations, the propagation of Bibles and in general the promotion of a deeper understanding of Holy Scripture.

The *CBF* promotes the biblical-pastoral activities of these organizations, provides a forum for the world-wide sharing of experiences in this field, searches for new ways of bringing the joy of God's Word to the faithful throughout the world. The Federation seeks collaboration with the representatives of biblical scholarship as well as with Bible Societies of various confessions.

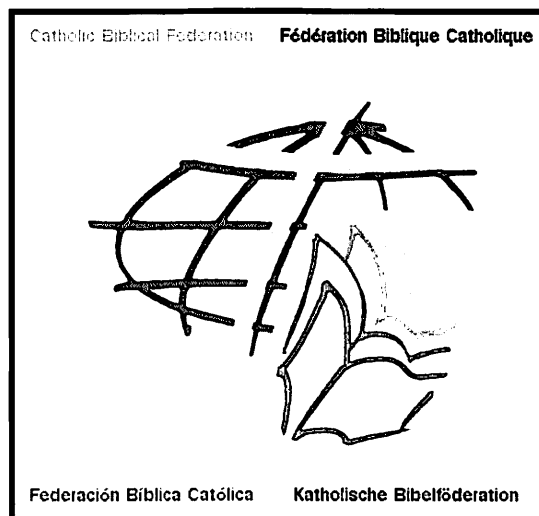
In particular, the *CBF* works towards the promotion of the reading of the Bible within the context of concrete life situations and the training of ministers of the Word in this direction.

The ministry of the Word of God is ministry to the unity of and communication between human beings. A world which grows together with the help of modern communication, and yet continues to show signs of hate and destruction, needs more than ever words of peace and of fellowship with God and with each other.

**Wilhelm Egger, Bishop of Bolzano-Bressanone, President of the CBF**

[www.c-b-f.org](http://www.c-b-f.org)

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