

« The Syriac Orthodox Community in Jerusalem and its Archives »

Project « Open Jerusalem », 8 April 2015

Flavia Ruani

1) The Syriac Orthodox Community / in Jerusalem / between 1840-1940

The Syriac Orthodox Church is one of the ten Syriac Churches existing nowadays in the world. Its origin goes back to the fifth century, when it separated from the Latin and Byzantine church after the council of Chalcedon in 451, along with Coptic, Armenian and Ethiopian Churches, for theological reasons, in particular the conception of the nature of Christ. It is not part of the Roman Church, then, as other Syriac churches are. Its name is: “Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East”. It has an independent hierarchy: the chief of the Church is called Patriarch and he resided first in Antioch, then, from 1959 in Damascus (after the beginning of the conflict in Syria, he stays in Beirut, Lebanon). Since the 31st of March, the Syriac Orthodox Church has a new Patriarch, Moran Mor Ignatius Ephrem the Second, the 123rd Patriarch.

The Church has 26 archdioceses and 11 patriarchal vicariates. Syrian Orthodox Church is widespread not only in Syria, but also in Southeastern Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Iraq and India; there are also communities in diaspora in Europe and the United States.

Jerusalem has always represented an attraction for Syriac Christians because it is the birthplace of Christianity. But due to their non-acceptance of the Council of Chalcedon, Syriac churches only had a marginal presence in Jerusalem. Still, there has been, at least from the 6th century onwards, a vicariate here: the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Michael the Great provides, at the end of the 12th century, a list of the Orthodox bishops in Jerusalem from the early 6th century to his days. The present-day Syriac Orthodox bishop of Jerusalem has the title of ‘Patriarchal vicar of the Holy land and Jordan’, and is, since 1996, Mar Sewerus Malki Murad.

Several buildings are associated with the Syriac Orthodox presence in Jerusalem, but only the Monastery of Saint Mark in the Old City is still in their possession, probably since 1500. The Syriac Orthodox can also celebrate in the Holy Sepulcher in the Chapel of Nicodemus.

Outside Jerusalem, Syr. Orth. presence is attested from the 14th century onwards in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is now the major community, and some families live also in Jericho, Ramallah and Nazareth.

Apart from the Syriac Orthodox Church, there is also in Jerusalem the Syriac Catholic Church in the Church of St. Thomas, in front of the French Ecole Biblique et Archéologique, outside Damascus Gate.

For the period which interests this project, 1840-1940, the major event which affected the Syriac Orthodox community in Jerusalem, at least as far as I know, is the Assyrian genocide in Southeastern Turkey by the Ottomans, which began in the 1890s and took place consistently from 1914 to 1918. This genocide is called in Syriac *Sayfo*,

which means ‘sword’. Following the *Sayfo*, a number of Syriac Orthodox families emigrated towards the South, mainly Damascus, Beirut, Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

2) Archives

About the archives of the Syriac Orthodox Community in Jerusalem, we have different kinds of archives.

➤ **Registers of St. Mark’s Monastery:** we have the register of baptisms, about which I will talk later in more detail -- what about weddings (we only have few recent wedding certificates), deaths, ordinations? Land property register?

G. Kiraz made a study on the bishops in Jerusalem, from 12th century until 1988: *‘Iqd al-juman fi akhbar al-Suryan* (1988).

➤ **Wall Inscriptions of St. Mark’s Monastery**

Collected and studied in the Article: A. Palmer, G. J. van Gelder, “Syriac and Arabic inscriptions at the Monastery of St. Mark’s in Jerusalem”, *Oriens Christianus* 78 (1994), 33-61.

There are several inscriptions (20) in Syriac, Arabic and Garshuni. Most of them are commemorative inscriptions which record the construction and renovation of some part of the monastery (rooms, cloister) in 1834, 1851, 1858, 1881, 1882, 1905, 1940. It is mentioned who paid these renovations (believers in Syria, for instance, but also from Kerala, India): this archive can provide information as regard to the Syriac community in Jerusalem and the one in India: exchanges. There are also epitaphs, and one can learn about the provenance of the monks dwelling in the monastery. Some obsequies are of Indian priests.

(see also the Syriac inscriptions in the Holy Sepulcher)

➤ **Manuscripts (Colophons and Notes) of St. Mark’s Monastery**

In the monastery are kept today around 450 Syriac manuscripts (a part was sent to Library of the Patriarchate in Damascus, before 1948; some manuscripts are now in St. Mark’s Cathedral, Taeneck, New Jersey.

- Many of them have been copied in St. Mark’s Monastery, Jerusalem, between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The colophons and the notes may provide insights into the community life as well as into the relations between Syrian Orthodox Community in Jerusalem and other Syriac communities elsewhere: many manuscripts are gifts or waqf from the Tur ‘Abdin region: Deyr-Alza’faran, for instance (mss. 22 copied on 12 feb 1897 at Dayr al-Zafaran: Waqf-note indicating that the book was granted to St. Mark’s by Gabriel b. Denho of Tur ‘Abdin on Sept 21, 1900; mss. 54, copied at Deyr-Alza’faran, waqf in 1910).

Sources are:

Catalogue: F. Dolabani, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in St. Mark’s Monastery* (1926, repr. 1994).

Website: Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (www.hmml.org) – description and digitized manuscripts.

➤ **Images**

In the monastery: I spoke with Shem'on the Librarian and he told me that they have photos and icons of bishops.

Online: Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection (American Colony):

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/colony.html>

Among the 5222 photos of this collection, some concern the Syrian Orthodox Community (maybe date-range 1940-46):

Exemple:

3 photos of the corpse of the bishop (who?) showed in the church of St. Mark's monastery.



3 photos in Calendar of religious ceremonies in Jer. [i.e., Jerusalem] Easter period 1941. Syrian Orthodox Palm Sunday procession led by Archbishop Jacob Filoxinos



➤ **Journal of the community**

Hekmtā (1° number published in 1913 in Mardin, 1926-30 in Jerusalem, 1990-today): old numbers in the monastery.

➤ **Club of Scouts**: since 1922, settled beside the monastery, in the Old City: register of membership? Or other types of archives?

➤ **School (no extant since 1948)**, settled in the area of the municipality, Ha-Navim street: registers of students? Teaching program?

People to contact

- People in St. Mark monastery: the Librarian Shem'on, the Archbishop Sewerios Malki Murad, the monks.
- George Kiraz (Beth Marduto, Gorgias Press): in Jerusalem (*Polis*), June 30 - July 25 (Syriac lessons for beginners).
- Club of Scouts.
- Community in Bethlehem.

3) The Register of Baptisms

- Material Description

Middle format (A4 ?), red parchment for the cover, on paper. Written in Garshuni (Arabic in Syriac alphabet), and only few pages in Arabic; numbers are Arabic numbers (dates and serial numbers); running titles with decoration (stating more or less the same thing: « register of the

monastery of St. Mark of the Syrians, in Jerusalem »): on the center top of the page, in garshuni, in every page; on the center bottom of the page in Syriac, only on the left page. The register is organized in seven columns, which are stamped, then filled by handwriting.

- Content

From 1831 to 2013: total 3348 names, according to the serial numbers (more, in fact, there are added lines throughout the register).

The columns are the same all along: serial number / name of the child, of his parents and his town / name of the godfather and godmother, their parents and their town / name of the priest (preceded by the title: actually “priest” is rare, more often is the metropolitan bishop of the monastery, and the monks) / date of birth / date of baptism / year.

There are some marginal notes: someone has indicated when a new bishop arrived: we can reconstruct a chronological list since 1831.

Not record every year: in 1865 nobody, for instance.

The cities of the parents of the babies are interesting: the population comes mostly from South Turkey, Tur ‘Abdin (region of Syriac Orthodoxy): Mardin, Isfis, Midyat, all along the register. Al-Quds appears only few times.

Very present is the city of Idil (in Syriac Azak): it was one of the villages that fell victim to the *Seyfo*. This village appears for the first time in the register in 1860 (photo 5541). In 1890s, a lot of attestations; in the 1920’s too a lot, along with Midiyat.

In 1939/40, some people come from Haifa, if I understand well the writing... (foto 5589/90).

Starting from photo n° 5666 (last pages), it is not anymore the register of baptism, the serial numbers start again; the order is not a chronological one (the dates are completely random). Several times is mentioned a priest in Beirut. Many empty cases in comparison with the previous pages.

There is another register with black cover, horizontal shape, printed in the Nederland: it is the register of baptisms of Syriac Orthodox believers in Western Europe (first page in Syriac and German). Content: from 1846, 1877 – 1995; written in Arabic, by the same hand (copy?). Same number and category of columns as the other register, but printed (text in black, tables in red). Cities of the parents: Colonia, for instance.