



# ERADICATING THE ROOT OF HATRED

A Survey of Bar Hebraeus's Ecumenism

## ABSTRACT

Ecumenical discussions between Eastern Orthodox Chalcedonians and Oriental Orthodox Non-Chalcedonians have reached some major agreements in the last 30 years, but recently these talks have cooled. The 13th century Non-Chalcedonian bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Bar Hebraeus, established many of the main talking points between the Chalcedonian imperial church, the Non-Ephesine Church of the East, and his own church. Bar Hebraeus's encyclopedic knowledge came from a variety of sources, Christian and otherwise. He wrote on science, philosophy, theology, history, and more. He was a true polymath of the Syriac Renaissance. In this paper, I show the development of Bar Hebraeus's ecumenical sympathies through several of his works with an emphasis on his Letter to Catholicos Dehna, the Book of the Dove, and his poems "On Disputations." The Book of the Dove shows his irenic ecumenism at its height, where he began as more reserved in his attitudes towards other churches. Inter-communion was not established in the 13th century, nor has it been established since. I conclude this paper with an examination of the current state of discussion between Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian churches, with an aim to see how Bar Hebraeus's Christological opinions might add to the discussion. He addressed the Christological differences, and agreed statements have been issued on these questions. It is now the liturgical and ecclesiastical differences that remain.

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## INTRODUCTION & BIOGRAPHY

From my first youth burning with love of teachings, I was taught the holy scriptures with the necessary explanation, and from an exquisite teacher I heard the mysteries contained in the writings of the holy doctors. When I had reached the age of twenty, the then living patriarch compelled me to receive the dignity of a bishop. Then it was inevitable for me to engage myself in disquisitions and disputations with the heads of other confessions, interior and exterior. And when I had given my thoughts and meditations to this business during some time, I became convinced, that these quarrels of Christians are not a matter of facts but of words and denominations. For all of them confess Christ, our Lord, to be wholly God and wholly man, without mixture, nivellation or mutation of natures. This bilateral likeness is called by some nature, by others person, by others hypostasis. So I saw all Christian peoples, notwithstanding these differences, possessing one unvarying equality. And I wholly eradicated the root of hatred from the depth of my heart and I absolutely forsook disputation with anyone concerning confession<sup>1</sup>.

Thus reads a biographical note in Bar Hebraeus's *Book of the Dove*. Bar Hebraeus was a Syriac polymath, who left writings on theology, philosophy, law, history, grammar, science, and medicine<sup>2</sup>. His attitude towards other churches is the subject of this paper. The quotation above shows that he came to respect the opinions of the Church of the East and the Chalcedonian imperial church (both in its Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic forms), along with his own Syrian Orthodox church's Christology.<sup>3</sup> I will trace this theme through Bar Hebraeus's writings,

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<sup>1</sup> Bar Hebraeus, *Bar Hebraeus's Book of the Dove Together with Some Chapters from His Ethikon*. p. 60

<sup>2</sup> For a complete bibliography with lists of editions, translations, and secondary articles, see Takahashi, *Barhebraeus*.

<sup>3</sup> Each of these churches has been known by many names. I will try to be consistent, following Dinno, "The Syrian Orthodox Church: Name as a Marker of Identity." For the sake of clarity, the Syrian Orthodox Church has been

and show the softening of his views regarding the other two Christologies. I will examine his *Letter to Catholicos Denha*, the *Book of the Dove* and finally four of his poems "On Disputations," showing that his attitude started more rigid, before becoming more tolerant later in his career.

Mar Gregory Abū al-Faraj Barhebraeus, better known as Bar Hebraeus, lived from 1225/6 until July 30th, 1286. He was the son of a physician, born in Melitene under Islamic rule, first by the Rum Seljuks then by the Mongol Ilkhanids. He became a monk, and rose through the ecclesiastical ranks to the office of Maphrian of the East – the second highest office in the Syrian Orthodox church. During his maphrianate (1264-86), he wrote the majority of his works. He spent most of his time in Mosul and Maragha in modern-day Iraq. The Catholicos of the Church of the East also resided in Maragha, and was familiar to Bar Hebraeus, along with Muslims and Chalcedonians.<sup>4</sup>

Bar Hebraeus's hometown of Melitene flourished under the Rum Seljuks in the 12th and 13th centuries. This allowed a revival of Syriac culture among the Christians in that region, and the period is known as the Syriac Renaissance. Prior to this time, Syriac Christianity was in danger of dying out under Muslim rule. Bar Hebraeus became one of the best-known authors of the Syriac Renaissance, producing works on diverse topics including theology, Aristotelian philosophy, natural sciences, grammar, poetry, mysticism, and humor. Much of his work is compilations and translations of Arabic writings, but his capacity to take in information and

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variously called: Monophysite, Miaphysite, Jacobite, (one of the) Oriental Orthodox, West Syriac, etc.. The East Syriac Church has been called: Nestorian, Chalcedonian, Church of the East, Assyrian Church of the East, Ancient Church of the East, etc. The churches associated with the Roman/Byzantine empire are the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, who agreed to the decisions of Chalcedon and were known to Bar Hebraeus by their associations with the French and Greek peoples.

<sup>4</sup> Takahashi, *Barhebraeus*. pp. 3-26

present it to his Syriac audience in an understandable way is remarkable. Much of his work remains untranslated into English and unedited.<sup>5</sup>

Bar Sawma, Bar Hebraeus's brother, attached an account of his death to his brother's *Ecclesiastical Chronicle*. The "praiseworthy catholicos" Yahballaha III mourned his death along with "a crowd of Armenians and Greeks." According to Bar Sawma, only four Syrian Orthodox elders were present<sup>6</sup>. Such a funeral procession shows the fruit of Bar Hebraeus's proto-ecumenism. While it is anachronistic to refer to his opinions on other churches with the term "Ecumenism," his sympathies towards Christians of other churches may be seen as foreshadowing of the modern movement to reconcile churches of different denominations. While he did not bring about any reunion of the churches in his time, modern ecumenists have looked to his writings for inspiration and guidance in their conversations across the Christological divide.<sup>7</sup> Almost every recent biography or encyclopedia entry on him mentions his "ecumenism," but few discuss how it progressed through his career. This paper will show that he did not always have the same spirit towards other churches that he had by the time of the writing of the *Book of the Dove*.

First, it is worthwhile to look at the history of ecumenical dialogue within the Syriac tradition itself. The Syriac churches were intellectual battlegrounds for the fifth-century Christological debates surrounding the nature(s), hypostases, and person of Christ. The majority of Christians east of Constantinople disagreed with the Chalcedonian position held by the imperial church. A mark of Syriac Christianity is the nearness of Christians with opposing Christologies. Two bishops from the seventh century Church of the East are noteworthy for their

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<sup>5</sup> For a full biography, see Part 1 of Takahashi.

<sup>6</sup> Bar Hebraeus, *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle: An English Translation*. p. 470

<sup>7</sup> Hage, "Chambésy 1990 Und Zwei Syrische Stimmen Aus Dem Mittelalter."

acceptance by Christians of other traditions. Martyrius, also known as Sahdona, advocated only one person in Christ. This was a departure from his church's theology and cost him his bishopric. His writings found posthumous favor among Chalcedonians. Isaac of Ninevah was another Church of the East bishop whose writings found favor among Christians with different Christologies. His writings remain influential among Eastern Orthodox Christians in particular.<sup>8</sup> While these authors are not considered saints in the Syrian Orthodox Church, their influence did spread from the Church of the East to the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Within the Syrian Orthodox church, 'Alī ibn Dāwud al-Arfādī, who lived in the 11th or 12th century believed that the differences between Greek Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox Christians are merely different ways of speaking of the same belief. On the other hand, Dionysius BarṢalībī, a 12th century writer, sees anyone outside of the Syrian Orthodox church as outright heretics. Michael the Syrian, in 12th century, also had a low view of Greek Orthodox Christians, calling them "vicious and heretical,"<sup>9</sup> yet he showed some grace to the Franks who at least recognized those who "venerated the cross" as Christians. Writing only a few decades before Bar Hebraeus and in the same area, Jacob bar Shakkō shares the same exclusive views as BarṢalībī and Michael. Al-Arfādī seems to be Bar Hebraeus's only true predecessor in the Syrian Orthodox Church.<sup>10</sup>

Despite few other church leaders making any overt moves to extend fellowship to other churches, the period of the Syriac Renaissance was marked by peaceable relations between the various Christian churches and between the churches and Muslims. Bar Hebraeus himself was

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<sup>8</sup> Kitchen, "The Syriac Tradition." p. 73 refers to these authors and their reception

<sup>9</sup> Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel Le Syrien*. III, p. 222

<sup>10</sup> See Teule, "It Is Not Right to Call Ourselves Orthodox and the Others Heretics: Ecumenical Attitudes in the Jacobite Church in the Time of the Crusades." for further discussion of these other authors.

even asked by prominent Muslim leaders in Maragha to translate his massive two-part historical work *The Chronicle* into Arabic. He did so, abridging certain sections and slightly modifying the text to fit a Muslim audience instead.<sup>11</sup> This shows the cordiality between Muslims and Christians during his time. While there were certainly politically-motivated violent conflicts that took place,<sup>12</sup> it would be overly simple to think that Bar Hebraeus's ecumenical tolerance could be a plea for strength in numbers against a hostile Muslim majority.

### SURVEY OF HIS WORKS

#### *The Lamp of the Sanctuary*

Although this paper will specifically focus on three of Bar Hebraeus's works, it is worthwhile to survey his other works for indications of his sympathies towards the Church of the East and the Chalcedonian churches. One of his earliest works, the *Lamp of the Sanctuary*, focuses on 12 "bases" (*shetessē*) of dogmatic theology. In the fourth base, "On the Incarnation," he advances the Syrian Orthodox position that because the second person of the Trinity is a single hypostasis, Jesus can have only a single nature. Within his miaphysite Christology, there can be no actualization of a nature without a hypostasis.<sup>13</sup> He also affirms that Christ is one person, to a greater degree of unity than the Church of the East would affirm.<sup>14</sup> This base

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<sup>11</sup> For the original narrative of Bar Hebraeus being asked to translate *The Chronicle*, see Bar Hebraeus, *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle: An English Translation*; While most scholarship has accepted this view, others have seen the *Al-Muḥtaṣar fī l-duwal* as a separate work aimed at a Christian audience. For this position, and a survey of prior scholarship, see Conrad, "On the Arabic Chronicle of Bar Hebraeus: His Aims and Audience."

<sup>12</sup> For example, Hulagu Khan's conquest of the Middle East. For an overview of his reign, see "Hulagu Khan."

<sup>13</sup> Bar Hebraeus, "Le Candélabre Du Sanctuaire de Grégoire Abou'lfaradj Dit Barhebraeus. Quatrième Base: De l'Incarnation." pp. 22-25

<sup>14</sup> Bar Hebraeus. pp. 22-146, 2

concludes with a list of historical Christological heresies, which significantly does not include the Church of the East, the Greek Orthodox, or the Roman Catholic churches.<sup>15</sup>

### *Other Works*

Not only did he show tolerance towards the other Christian churches that he was familiar with, but he also had an appreciation for non-Christian works. It is unlikely he could read Greek himself,<sup>16</sup> but he was familiar with Aristotelian philosophy through Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī. He made use of Aristotle's "unmoved mover" cosmological argument in his *Cream of Wisdom*<sup>17</sup> and his poem, "On Perfection."<sup>18</sup> He also was deeply indebted to Muslim scholars for their own thinking. His *Laughable Stories* is mostly a translation of Abū Sa'd Maṣṣūr b. al-Ḥusain al-Ābī's *Kitāb nathr al-durr*,<sup>19</sup> and he translated Ibn Sīnā's *Kitāb al-Iṣārāt wa l-Tanbīhā* into Syriac, accepting much of his philosophy.<sup>20</sup> He reciprocated to the Arabic-speaking community by producing a summary of his *Chronicon* of world history at the request of Muslims in Maragha.<sup>21</sup> Despite this appreciation of the truths that can be found in Greek and Islamic authors, he did not accept their faiths, and refuted their theologies in several works.<sup>22</sup>

## LETTER TO MAR DENHA I

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Takahashi, *Barhebraeus*. 31-35.

<sup>17</sup> Bar Hebraeus, *Aristotelian Meteorology in Syriac*.

<sup>18</sup> Bar Hebraeus, *Bar Hebraeus's Mush'hotho Book*. 128.

<sup>19</sup> Marzolph, "Die Quelle Der Ergötzlichen Erzählungen Des Bar Hebräus."

<sup>20</sup> Teule, "The Transmission of Islamic Culture to the World of Syriac Christianity: Barhebraeus' Translation of Avicenna's *Kitāb Al-Iṣārāt Wa l-Tanbīhāt*: First Soundings."

<sup>21</sup> The account of this request is found in Bar 'Ebrāyā, *The Ecclesiastical Chronicle: An English Translation*; Most scholars accept this claim, so Takahashi, *Barhebraeus*; and Teule, "The Syriac Renaissance"; For an alternative view, Conrad takes this as being produced for a Christian audience that could read Arabic and not Syriac. For this, see Conrad, "On the Arabic Chronicle of Bar Hebraeus: His Aims and Audience."

<sup>22</sup> *inter alia* Bar Hebraeus, "Le Candélabre Du Sanctuaire de Grégoire Abou'Ifaradj Dit Barhebraeus. Troisième Base: De La Theologie"; Bar Hebraeus, "Ecclesiae Antiochenae Syrorum Nomocanon a Gregorio Abulpharagio Bar-Hebraeo Syriace Compositus et a Iosepho Aloysio Assemano in Latinam Linguam Conversus."

While his opinion towards other Christian churches was even more charitable, he was far from indifferent about the differences between them. In an undated letter to the Catholicos of the Church of the East, Mar Denha I, he refutes the legitimacy of the Catholicos and his church's Nestorian Christology. While this letter is undated, Denha served his church as Catholicos from 1265 – 1281, which overlaps with Bar Hebraeus's maphriante completely. Given the ecumenical tendencies present in his later works, this is likely to be from earlier in their terms of church leadership.

Bar Hebraeus shows great personal respect for Denha, praising him and comparing him to many heroic figures from the Hebrew Scriptures. However, after the long introduction of praise, Bar Hebraeus begins to dissect the Church of the East's separation of the divine nature of Christ and the human nature of Christ. He uses Scripture and patristic quotations to show that the second person of the Trinity is one, having perfectly united divinity and humanity.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the letter being mostly a refutation of Nestorian Christology, Bar Hebraeus's appreciation for Denha is evident. After the section that advocates Miaphysitism, Bar Hebraeus says, *ܐܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ*, "I trust, that you, o excellent one from the East, understand of this writing, that it is without contention."<sup>24</sup> He then describes the history of the catholicoi, showing how they were initially deceived by Nestorian doctrine, and urges Denha to agree with the majority of Christians in the Syriac world by forsaking Nestorianism in favor of Miaphysitism.<sup>25</sup> This letter is an example of the "disputations" that he would forsake by the time of the *Book of the Dove*.

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<sup>23</sup> Bar Hebraeus, "Une Lettre de Bar Hébréus Au Catholicos Denha I." pp.

<sup>24</sup> Bar Hebraeus. ll. 539-40 (p. 90). An alternative translation would be "...this writing is indisputable."

<sup>25</sup> Bar Hebraeus. p. 128



## POEMS "ON DISPUTATIONS"

The next texts that I will examine will be four poems that have been collected by Patriarch Philoxenos Dolabani in 1929. He grouped these poems and one other under the heading "On Disputations." The first poem, "An admonition and commentary of the divisions from those who love guides,"<sup>26</sup> praises "Theophilus" who does not love Nestorius or Cyril more than Jesus. Bar Hebraeus alludes to 1 Cor 3:4, chastising both his fellow Syrian Orthodox Christians and the Church of the East Christians. This seems to be the same attitude he demonstrated in the *Book of the Dove*; neither whole-heartedly endorsing the Church of the East's Christology, but neither pushing the issue to the point of dispute, and above all seeking peace.

The next poems in Dolabani's critical edition are not actually from Bar Hebraeus, but set the stage for a reply of his. They are a brief exchange between Khamis bar Qardahe from the Church of the East<sup>27</sup> and Daniel bar Hattab from the Syrian Orthodox Church.<sup>28</sup> Khamis asks whether, according to the "ten simple measures" (Aristotle's categories),<sup>29</sup> Jesus's divinity could be confined in a body of flesh. Bar Hattab replies that Jesus's divinity is not limited in bodily sense, although he does not fully explain the Miaphysite Christology beyond this.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> A partial translation appears in Takahashi, "The Poems of Barhebraeus: A Preliminary Concordance." 81.

<sup>27</sup> A poet and hymnographer who was a younger contemporary of Bar Hebraeus. See Mengozzi, "Khamis Bar Qardahe."

<sup>28</sup> A priest, canonist, and confessor who may have been a younger contemporary of Bar Hebraeus. Brock notes that these poems may represent a later interpolation into these collection, on the basis of a Daniel of Mardin who lived in the 14th century. With Bar Hebraeus's demonstrated interest in Aristotle, his ecumenical spirit, and his documented interactions with the Church of the East, I accept at least the last poem as authentic to Bar Hebraeus, as well as Khamis's poem. The reply of bar Hattab does seem to an addition, but the question of Khamis is clearly being answered in Bar Hebraeus's reply, so bar Hattab's reply is extraneous. For an overview of Daniel bar Hattab, and a brief discussion of this poem, see Brock, "Daniel of Mardin."

<sup>29</sup> Payne Smith, "ܩܪܕܗܐ."

<sup>30</sup> Bar Hebraeus, *Bar Hebraeus's Mush'hotho Book*. 157. Translated by me with the help of Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent.



## CONCLUSION

This section is marked by its candidness, giving readers a taste of Bar Hebraeus's personal thoughts. Despite Bar Hebraeus's voluminous corpus, the majority of his works are compilations of other sources. This section gives us insight into how he personally thought about Christology and theology. As Maphrian, Bar Hebraeus did defend his Miaphysite beliefs. However, his talk of having "eradicated the root of hatred" seems to be an exaggeration of his earlier views. Perhaps before the *Lamp of the Sanctuary* in his youth he held more polemic views, but from his election to the Maphrianate, "hatred" seems too strong a word to describe what his views towards other churches were.

It is evident from the texts discussed above that Bar Hebraeus saw the debates between Christians holding different Christologies doing more harm than good. This was evident from his earlier work, although it did develop more fully later in his life. Bar Hebraeus did not achieve a reunion of the Syrian Orthodox and Church of the East, nor is there evidence he sought to. However, in the last 70 years, modern ecumenists have reached significant conclusions about the compatibility of the views of different churches. The charitable spirit of fellowship and appreciation of such groups as the World Council of Churches and Pro Oriente are reminiscent of Bar Hebraeus's attitude 800 years ago. While not every Christological or ecclesiological difference can be explained as merely semantics, a spirit of humility and graciousness may yet bear greater fruit in the dialogue between these churches and each other and between other Christian churches in general.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the usefulness of Bar Hebraeus in modern Ecumenism, see Hage, "Chambésy 1990 Und Zwei Syrische Stimmen Aus Dem Mittelalter"; For a hopeful sign of Ecumenical fruit between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches, see Joint Commission Of The Theological Dialogue Between The Orthodox Church And The Oriental Orthodox Churches, "Second Agreed Statement"; For a counter-point to the agreement in Christologies,

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see Mount Athos, "Concerning the Dialogue Between the Orthodox and Non-Chalcedonian Churches: A Memorandum of the Sacred Community of Mount Athos."

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