

II. MIDDLE AGES

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ON BEHAVIOUR AT THE TABLE — INSTRUCTIONS BY BAR EBRAYA

Present Assyrians come from two parts: the Eastern (the territory of former Persia) and Western (the territory of the Byzantine Empire). After they adopted Christianity they were called Syrians. Beginning with the 5th c. A.D. the Assyrians have congregated into three Churches: “Nestorian”, “Jacobite” and “Melchite”. In the 7th c. a new, Maronite Church was formed, which during the crusades acknowledged the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. The “Nestorian” and “Jacobite” missionaries were the first to have brought the *Gospels* to India, China and Mongolia. There are about 4 million Christians in Southern India now. The “proselytism” conducted by the Church of Rome, in the 16th and the 18th c. gave rise to new denominations: “Chaldaeans”, “Syrian Catholics”, and “Greek Catholics”.

The history of Assyrian Churches abounds with names of scholars. Their work, dating back to the 2nd c. A.D., is almost unknown in Poland. Bar Ebraya was a clergyman of the “Jacobite”, i.e. West-Syrian Church, officially known as the Syrian Orthodox Church. In his lifetime this Church operated in large areas of the Middle East and beyond, commanding 160 dioceses. Without including India, its believers amounted to about 5 million. In the 10th c. there were over 2 mil. Assyrians in Syria alone¹. Bar Ebraya was one of the last great thinkers, since the

¹ Philip De Tarazzi, *Asr as-Syriān ad-dahabi (The Golden Age of Assyrian Christians)*, Aleppo: ed. Joseph Shabo, 1979, p. 16.

Assyrian community to this day has not made up for the enormous losses caused by the invasions of the Tartars and the permanent persecution by Kurds and Turks².

Gregorios Bar Ebraya, called Bar Hebraeus, was born in Malatia (Melitene) in 1226³. He was christened Yuhanon (John). He was the fourth of five children. His father, Ahrun, was a famous physician and one of the city's notables. When Gregorios was 17, his family left Malatia, harassed by the Tartars, and moved to a more peaceful Antiochia⁴, governed at that time (from 1098 onwards) by the Crusaders. Here, at the age of 19, Gregorios was appointed to the post of bishop. First he ministered to Gobas city, later moved to Laqabin, and finally settled at Aleppo. On Jan. 19, 1264, in the city of Sis⁵, he was nominated as *mafriono* (catholicos)⁶. From this time onwards he had governed the Eastern Church embracing ten dioceses⁷. He chose for his residence

² For more information on the Eastern Churches see A. S. Atiya, *Historia Kościołów Wschodnich (The History of the Eastern Churches)*, Warszawa 1978.

³ A city in southern Turkey. In its vicinity there were numerous Assyrian cloisters, which from 518 A.D. till the end of the 13th c. served as the seat of the West Syrian Church patriarchate.

⁴ A famous city in south-eastern Turkey, on the Mediterranean; a capital of Christendom, second only to Jerusalem (here the disciples were called Christians, and the first organizer of the community was St. Peter, the first Patriarch of the Church), till 518 the seat of the patriarchate of the West Syrian Church. In the 13th c. the city numbered about 100,000 inhabitants: Franks, Romans, Assyrians, Armenians, Jews; it had many churches, four of which belonged to the Assyrians.

⁵ Gobas, Laqabin and Sis must have been large localities near Malatia, since they were the seats of the bishops. Bar Ebraya ministered to the first for a year, and to the second for five years. They were probably destroyed by the Tartars. They do not exist on the map of modern Turkey. I located Laqabin and Sis with the help of a map published in the book *Journalismum bet den Assyren* by Gabriele Yonan, Berlin 1985, p. 6.

⁶ In the hierarchy of the West Syrian Church a person second to the patriarch. The city of Takrit (at present in central Iraq) was chosen as the seat of *mafrinat*, and Mor Ahudama (559) was the first *māfriono*. This office had existed up till 1859. All in all it was held by 81 archbishops; Bar Ebraya was the fortieth. He himself, however, said that the first *māfriono* of the East was St. Thomas the Apostle, who ended his days in India, while the capital second to the Indian was the city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (Arab. al-Madāin), the then capital of Persia (near the present Baghdad). Following a break of a hundred years, in 1964 the office of *mafrinat* was reactivated and again transferred to India. It embraces the local dioceses subordinated to the West Syrian Church.

⁷ In the 6th c. the *mafrinat* of Takrit encompassed 15 dioceses. Among the ten dioceses ruled in the 13th c. by Bar Ebraya were: Azerbaïjan, the Arabian Peninsula, the cities of Nisibis and Tabriz, and the mountain massif Sindjar. For more detailed history of those dioceses and their territorial range see: Paulos Behnam (Metropolitan), *Ibn al-ʿIbrī aš-šāʿir (Bar Ebraya the Bard)*, Kamishli (Syria) 1965, p. 26-27.

the ancient monastery Mor Matay, near Mosul; hence he paid ministerial visits e.g. to Baghdad (1265, 1277), Takrit (1278) and Tabriz (1279). He died in Maragha (east of Lake Urmia in Iran) on July 30, 1286. He was buried in the Mor Matay monastery.

Bar Ebraya engaged in many domains of scholarship. The experts on his work called him "the Encyclopedia of 13th c. Orient". The literature devoted to him calls him: "a world of wisdom", "the light of East and West", "the king of scholars", "the greatest sage", "the Holy Father", "the laurel of the Catholicos", "the *diabena* of men of genius"⁸. His work numbers 36 sizeable books; among them there are original medical, mathematical, astronomic, musical and philological treatises. He was an eminent poet. Especially valuable are his works on history, on the borderline of philosophy and ethics as well as canon law, which continue to be translated into many languages. He wrote in Assyrian, Arabic, Armenian and Persian⁹. He translated P t o l e-

⁸ Afrem Barsom (Patriarch), *Al-lu'lu' al-man'ūr fi tārīh al-^culūm wal-ādāb as-syrīāniyya* (The Pearls Scattered Over the History of the Learning and Culture of Assyrian Christians, 3rd ed. Bagdad 1983, p. 510; Faulos Behnam, *Ibn al-^cIbrī-aš-sā'ir* (Bar Ebraya the Poet), Kamishli (Syria) 1965, p. 18; "Dirāsāt fi al-ādāb wal-^culūm al-insāniyya" (Philological and Humane Studies), vol. 15, n^o 23, Beyrouth: The Lebanese University, 1988, pp. 13–25; T a r r a z z i, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁹ The author is in possession of the following titles (shortened supplementary information on the earlier editions comes from "Dirāsāt", pp. 13–25):

— *Hūdōye mēlūl qānūne ^citōnōye w nōmūse ^colmōnōye* [Introduction to Ecclesiastical Canons and Secular Law], ed. St. Ephraim's Monastery in Holland 1986, 335 pp. (the Assyrian original written calligraphically by bishop Y. Ç i ç e k);

— *Klōbo d-Šemhe* [The Book of Luminescence], pub. Syrianska Riksförbundet kultur Kommittee i Sverige, Södertälje (Sweden), 1983, 266 pp. (in Assyrian; this is a philologico-grammatical work; it was published in French by J. P. P. M a r t i n, *Oeuvres grammaticales de Bar Hebraeus*, Paris-Louvain 1872);

— *Klōbo d-tūnōye magehḥōne* (A Book of Hilarious Stories), pub. St. Ephraim's Monastery in Holland, 1983, 151 pp. (the Assyrian original written calligraphically by bishop Y. Ç i ç e k);

— *Tārīh muḥtaṣar ad-duwal* [A Shortened History of States], no date of pub. or name of publisher, 346 pp. (this is an Arabic summary of a general history written in Assyrian, accomplished during one month at the request of Bar Ebraya's Arabian friends; it was published in Latin by E. P o l o c h e, as *Historia compendiosa dynastiarum*, Oxford 1636, and in German by M. G. N o r e n z B a u e r, *Des Gregorius Abulfaradch Kurze Geschichte der Dynastien*, 2 vols., Leipzig 1783–1785);

— *at-Tārīh az-zamān* (General History), Beyrouth: Dār al-Mašriq, 1986, 420 pp., (translated from Assyrian into Arabic by Iṣḥāq A r m a l a; the part concerning the history of the Patriarchs and Christianity was published in Latin by J. B. A b b e l o o s, Th. L a n y, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*, 3 vols., Paris-Louvain 1872–1877).

my's astronomic–mathematical works, called *Almagest*, and some of Euclid's nondescript works from Assyrian to Arabic. His work is marked by a very critical approach; it abounds in controversial quotations of the statements and opinions of other authors, with whom he enters into bold polemics, looking for the confirmation of his exposition in Christian learning and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church. This fascinating achievement had arisen over the relatively short sixty years of his life in a very restless era, when the whole of the East was harassed by the Tartar hordes, the same that attacked Central Europe. He was admired and respected for his pioneering ecumenical activity which he conducted till the end of his days, as well as for his great learning. His funeral was attended by important personages, representing various religious denominations and nations.

In one of his works, entitled *Ethiqon*¹⁰, we find interesting instructions concerning the right diet and behaviour at the table.

More important works on Bar Ebraya:

— *Bār Ebrōyo*, pub. St. Ephraim's Monastery in Holland, 1985, 111 pp. (written calligraphically in the Assyrian original by bishop Y. Çiçek). A long poem in honour of the scholar, prepared in the year of his death by the parish priest of the city of Gozart (today Çizre in Turkey, in the Syrian–Iraqi–Turkish borderland);

— *Ibn al-ʿIbrī aš-šāʿir* (*Bar Ebraya the Poet*), Kamishli (Syria) 1965, 113 pp. The author is Paulos Behnam, the Metropolitan of Baghdad and Basra (in Arabic and Assyrian);

— “Dirāsāt fi al-ādab wal-ʿulūm al-insāniyya” (Philological and Humane Studies), pub. The Lebanese University, Pedagogical Department, vol. 15, no. 23, 1988, 185 pp. (in Arabic and French).

¹⁰ *Al-Ithiqōn-Falsafat al-ādāb al-huluqiyya* [*Ethics — Philosophy of Personal Culture*], Kamishli (Syria) 1967. The work was translated from Assyrian into Arabic by Paulos Behnam. This is one more of the many Arabic translations; the earlier ones, from the 14th, 15th and 17th c. have been preserved in MS form (“Dirāsāt”, pp. 18, 38). The worked saw its French edition (1898). On the 7 hundredth anniversary of the scholar's death the Pedagogical Department of the Lebanese University organized a learned session. The papers delivered there (8 in Arabic and 2 in French) were published on this occasion in fascicle form with the financial assistance of the Council of Middle Eastern Churches. The booklet does not include a lecture on what Bar Ebraya wrote about cooking (“Dirāsāt”: the French part 51 pp., Arabic — 134 pp.). Bar Ebraya is also the author of the book *Kiṭōbo d-yauno* [*The Book of the Dove*], which probably includes much information on food (“Dirāsāt”, p. 18). This work was also translated and published in Rome and Paris in 1898; it appeared in Arabic in Lebanon (1956, 1983) and Iraq (1974). There is also its English version: A. J. Wensinck, *Bar Hebraeus Book of the Dove*, Leyde 1919. I have not succeeded in obtaining it. At present *Ethiqon* is being studied by H. G. B. Teule (Belgium). Its first chapter in the Assyrian version was published in 1993 in Leuven: *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, vol. 534, *Scriptores Syri — Tomus 218*. This most recent printed edition (Introduction: XXVIII pp., text: 130 pp.) came into being following a detailed comparative analysis of the content of 26 MS mainly from the libraries of Western Europe

This work is a kind of dialogue between two people: a scholar and a theologian. It consists of four lectures (which number probably refers to the four seasons), each of which is divided into chapters (52 — the number of weeks in a year) and subchapters (365 — the number of days in a year). The lectures are entitled: 1 — The hardening of the human body, 2 — Character formation, 3 — Getting rid of bad habits, and 4 — The improvement of the soul. One of the chapters of the first lecture is completely devoted to fasting: its assets, kinds, degrees, the rules of canonical and individual fasts, as well as periods of fasting. The second lecture opens with a chapter on food. Information on food can also be found in other chapters and subchapters of the book. The norms suggested by the *Catholicos* have been more or less precisely observed by the communities of Middle-Eastern Christians regardless of their nationality to this day. In some respects, especially concerning hospitality, this behaviour is also typical of the Muslims. Until recently only a narrow circle of those familiar with Assyrian writing could be regarded as the readers of this work. Its publication in Arabic has considerably enlarged this circle.

How to behave during a meal (pp. 176–178)

Bar Ebraya thinks that every kind of food contains spiritual elements. This makes every man use reason in choosing his food and exercise his will so that his food can be subordinated to some humanistic rules. He insists that food be the product of the work of a man's own hands. He maintains that the feast table is supported by the hands of angels, therefore one should know how to behave at it. He instructs the members of the family who start a meal how to behave and what to avoid, and recommends observing the following principles:

- wash your hands before starting a meal;
- eat only when you feel hungry, but never to the full¹¹;

and the USA. H.G.B. Teule mentions the further 16 MS of *Ethiqon* that are in the possession of Assyrian Churches of the Middle East, to which, unfortunately, he had no access. The work is entitled *Ethiqon — Memra* (lecture I). Its English translation, provided with a rich critical commentary based on abundant source material, was published in 1993.

¹¹ To confirm this principle Bar Ebraya cites the opinion of physicians (without mentioning their names), who advise to divide the stomach into three parts, and to fill one part with dry food, the second with drink, and to leave the third for good digestion. This quotation could certainly not be found in the Bible (!).

— the members of the family should eat together, and leave some places at table for others¹²;

— before starting a meal they should recite the formula: “In the name of God Our Nourisher!”, and with the first morsel: — “See, how good is Our Lord!”, with the second morsel: — “Blessed are those who rely on Him!”, and with the third morsel: — “Those who pray to God will never lack food!”. If a meal and a prayer happen at the same time on Wednesday and Friday, the prayer may be postponed until after the meal¹³.

— do not eat in a reclining position, but sitting erect; you can lift the right knee;

— a place of honour is due to the oldest person and he or she is the first to start eating and should stay at table till the end. If one member of the company has had his fill earlier than others, he should not stand up, but keep them company till the end;

— do not blow at a hot dish, but wait patiently until it cools down;

— while reaching for the dish around which the company is gathered, each of them should stretch his hand in front of him, and not to the place of his neighbour;

— put small morsels into your mouth, and chew them well;

— do not take food from the middle of the dish, but from the side, without dipping your hand in it;

— do not put anything on a piece of bread, or wipe your hand with it;

— break your bread with your hand and do not cut it with a knife;

— after biting a piece of bread earlier dipped in a dish, do not dip it again. The bread broken should be of such size as to make one morsel;

¹² Bar Ebraya acknowledges the superiority of collective meals, however he sees nothing wrong in eating alone. Here he uses the example of St. John the Golden-mouthed. After being raised to the office of a bishop this saint was supposed always to eat alone. This practice of his was used by his opponents who said that he always ate alone because he was greedy and he made a wry mouth while eating.

¹³ In Bar Ebraya's days there was rigorous fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. Treating fasting as a prayer of the body which on these two days lasts from midnight till sunset, Bar Ebraya sees no need for double prayer at the cost of a meatless meal. Fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays continues to be observed by the Assyrians and other communities of Eastern Christians. The cooking on those days does not envisage any dishes with even a trace of animal products.

- the adults should behave at table so that none of the company should feel discouraged;
- while eating fruits, do not put the stones into the same dish with fruit, or keep them in your hand, or throw aside, but put them into another vessel;
- do not drink too much water while eating.

How to behave after a meal (pp. 178–179)

When the meal is over and before the company leave the table, Bar Ebraya insists on avoiding motions that do not become good society and on keeping neat. He recommends:

- to discreetly remove remnants of food from between one's teeth with one's left hand. This should be done with one's head bent and turned aside and with one's mouth covered. The rest should be wiped with a towel;
- to pick up crumbs and consume them out of respect for the Lord's gift itself;
- not to wipe one's hand against one's lips, or with one's tongue, and not to put it in one's mouth in order to lick it¹⁴;
- to utter the formula: "Thank God for these gifts!" And if this gift has been presented by somebody else and eaten in a new company, then one should say: "Let God bless the man who entertained me, and bestow his grace upon him and his dead and receive him in His Kingdom!";
- when washing, one should start with one's hands, and later wash one's teeth and mouth, and finally arms; then wipe them with a towel;
- the person serving water for washing should stand on the guest's left side;
- while washing, one should not spit on the ground or to the vessel which holds the washing water.

Invitation to a Party (pp. 179–185)

Bar Ebraya reminds his readers that they should visit their friends and acquaintances from time to time. It is best for such a visit not to overlap with meal times. However, if it is necessary to visit somebody at such a time, one should not then impose oneself on the company at table without an open invitation from the host. The latter should not ask the guest whether he would

¹⁴ Even now, it is not unusual in the Middle East to see a person wiping his mouth with a sleeve or licking his fingers. This is a frequent habit of some Bedouins.

like to eat something, but serve what he has got, even if it is merely bread and salt. The guest, on the other hand, should not demand anything particular, but consume with moderation what he is given.

One should do the opposite — Bar Ebraya stresses — when one is formally invited to a party. If the party is to meet Christian demands, its organizer should not forget the poor, the more so, because they are not able to do the same in return. If an invited person supposes that the invitation is not sincere, he should excuse himself and not take part; he should act alike, if he knows that the party is financed by dishonest means, or the food comes from theft. However, if the invitation is sincere, and the invited person does not come to the party, he commits a sin. Neither distance, nor an individual fast can be an obstacle. And if he participates out of curiosity or because of other motivations, he commits a double sin. The invited person should enjoy the presence of poor people at the party.

Where to sit? (pp. 183–184)

Bar Ebraya maintains that the organizer of the party should invite as many people as he is able to entertain well. The guest must be punctual. When he comes to the party he should not look for the best place to sit down. It is best for him to occupy some modest place at the end. The host, who knows the guest's rank, will himself appoint a suitable place for him; such a gesture will meet with the company's comprehension. The guest should not agree to change his place for a better one, if it is suggested by someone in the company. The host's will should be respected and accepted with thanks. Before starting a meal the guests should wash their hands regardless of whether they are still standing or have already sat down. The host is the first to do this.

Laying the table (pp. 184–185)

While citing "some worthy man" whose name he does not mention, Bar Ebraya emphasizes that one should not delay laying the table, burying the dead, giving one's daughter away in marriage, paying one's debts and repenting one's sins. Once the guests have sat at table, they should not wait long for the meal. Bar Ebraya's description shows that there were various views at that time on the order of serving food. Some thought that in the first place one should serve fresh fruit, which may soon rot. Others maintained

that the most tasty dishes should be served first. But there were still others who chose a different policy. Going on the assumption that a hungry person will eat with good appetite whatever he is served, they suggested that the most tasty dishes should come at the end. In this way all dishes would be consumed with equal appetite. While citing such examples Bar Ebraya thinks it best to serve all the dishes at the same time. Every member of the company may then choose what he likes best. However, one should remember to set apart earlier an adequate amount of food for the members of the family who do not take part in the meal. When it is over, the host is the last person to wash his hands.

Bidding farewell to guests (pp. 185–187)

While bidding farewell to his guests, the host should go with them outdoors and there thank them for coming and for their company. The guests, on their part, should express their satisfaction with the meal, even if there were some weak points about it. It is not fitting for the guests to complain to anybody about it. They should rather find arguments that would excuse the host. If there are some visitors from other localities, the host should invite them to stay for some time. If this proposal is accepted, the guest should by no means stay longer than three days.

Where and how much alcohol? (pp. 186–187)

Bar Ebraya mentions weddings and births as festivities where food is accompanied by *ḥamro*. Nowadays *ḥamro* is associated only with sweet wine, but then it could also signify other drinks, although home-made wine (made from grapes and figs) was and continues to be the most popular alcoholic drink of the Assyrians. *Ḥamro* can be served — as Bar Ebraya adds — also at other celebrations, not necessarily connected with a family holiday. A lay Christian may drink *ḥamro*, but with moderation. Every individual has some special boundary of his own that he should not cross. A small amount of *ḥamro* may add some flavour to a meeting, while a large dose can give rise to a quarrel. It is especially important for the members of the company to be well selected, balanced and full of respect for one another. One should definitely avoid the company of impetuous, over-excitable and talkative people. Conversation should be carried out in a low voice and quiet tone and not touch on serious matters; it should be light and witty, preferably such where all the company can take

part. The youngest person should rather listen than talk¹⁵. When somebody in the company feels unwell, he should stop drinking and not let himself be persuaded into drinking any more. And if the company insist, let him withdraw and leave this place. If he feels like vomiting, let him go outdoors and return only when he feels better, but he should not drink any more. Before and in the course of drinking one should eat, too.

Away with gluttony (pp. 144–153, 237–244, 348–349)

In the third chapter of the third lecture Bar Ebraya raises the problem of gluttony and the ways of overcoming this vice. At the beginning he cites a story which reflects upon a hermit's life-style as well as various opinions on gluttony. — An old man visited Abba Ishaya in his hermitage. He saw Abba dip pieces of dry bread in water, then put them into salt, so as to swallow them more easily. Having noticed it, the old man cried: "Behold Abba Ishaya relish his soup in an Egyptian desert!" This gave rise to a saying: "If you want soup, go to an Egyptian desert!"¹⁶ The scholar also cites other sayings: "A man may be as strong as a lion, but because of gluttony he falls into a net", as well as: "Unless gluttony impaired human minds, they would not surrender in their fight against Satan".

As the results of gluttony Bar Ebraya mentions dissipation, greed and a wish to domineer. On the other hand, temperance sets the psyche right, clears the mind, mildens the thoughts, and makes one sensitive to spiritual stimuli. It leads to modesty and to consideration of the poor, hungry and suffering. Temperance favours good health and allows one to share what one has with the needy. To those who want to reduce their daily ration from two loaves to one, Bar Ebraya suggests a one month gradual cure system. They are to divide a loaf into 30 parts, and leave uneaten one part more every day. Thus on the first day of the month he recommends eating one loaf and twenty nine parts of another. In the middle of the month it would be one loaf and a half. On the last day of the month there will be only one loaf. Bar Ebraya assures that such a system would do no harm to the body.

¹⁵A popular Assyrian aphorism runs: "Man was endowed by God with one tongue and two ears, so as to talk less and listen more".

¹⁶Bar Ebraya knew the apophthegms of the Egyptian Fathers of the Desert. In *Druga księga starców*, ed. Marek Starowieyski, Kraków: *Verba Seniorum*, 1994, pp. 34–35), we read that this Abba was called Isafah, and the one who visited him (in Sketis) was Abba Achilles (apophthegm 10:126).

The quantity and quality of food and the categories of hermits (pp. 179–181, 240–245)

Depending on the quantity of bread they eat, Bar Ebraya divides the hermits into four categories: the first one embraces those who eat a quarter of a loaf a day, the second those who eat half a loaf, the third those who eat two thirds, and the fourth — three quarters of a loaf. These categories also correspond with the type of bread: from sifted wheat flour, from unsifted wheat flour, from sifted barley flour and from unsifted barley flour. Apart from that Bar Ebraya mentions another criterion — that of the frequency of meals. Since loaves could be of different sizes, Bar Ebraya takes the size into account or converts it into the weight of coins. He says that a hermit in Alexandria used to break loaves into small pieces which he could put into an amphora with a small neck. To eat, he would pull out only one piece a day. There were also hermits who did not eat bread at all, but cooked pulses with or without oil. A lot of admiration was aroused by those who did not eat anything but vegetables. Bar Ebraya writes: It is a sign of permanent fasting to dip bread in water and salt, and the evidence of such a state is the fact that no flies gather round the spittle of such a person on the ground. He informs us that the diet of the monks in monasteries differs definitely from the model adopted by hermits. The monks eat eggs and fish as well as milk and its products.

The concluding phrase

Bar Ebraya ends his deliberations on food with the following words: “Health is a gift achieved through a complicated mechanism of the body. The body provided with the senses knows when and how much food it should call for. However, this should be decided by the will and reason, since the senses cannot size up divine miracles, but reason can comprehend them. Sight notices food, the nose senses smell, but consumption is determined by the appetite, and the quality of consumption is decided by the will, in accordance with the régime it adopts. The greedy lack the will that would signal to them when to stop eating. By eating too much, they ruin themselves and others” (pp. 29–330).

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

