

Introduction to the Gorgias Reprint

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The present volume is a facsimile edition of the Gospels portion of the *editio princeps* of the Syriac New Testament, published originally in 1555, and coincides with the 500th anniversary of Johannes Albertus Widmanstadt (1506–1559), without whose support and efforts the edition would have not appeared.

The story of printing the first Syriac New Testament began in Mesopotamia. In 1521, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal See of Antioch became vacant when Patriarch David II of Ma'dan (1519–1521) passed away. He was succeeded by Patriarch 'Abdullah I (1521–1557), who would be the first person to play a role in the printing of the 1555 Syriac New Testament. Only two facts are known about the life of 'Abdullah I prior to his consecration as Patriarch: he was born in the village of Qal'at Marah (modern Eski Kale), outside of Mardin near the Patriarchal See at Deir al-Za'farān; and his father's name was Steven. Little is known about his Patriarchate as well. He held a synod in 1519 to discuss a schism that arose in the village of Sadad, near Homs, Syria, as a result of a local marriage. We also know that he temporarily moved the Patriarchal See from Deir al-Za'farān to Amid (modern Diyarbakır).¹

When 'Abdullah I heard of the possibilities of printing in the West, he decided to print the Syriac New Testament for the benefit of his people. He had a learned pupil called Moses, who at the time was a monk and an ordained priest. Moses was the son of a priest called Isaac and was from the village of Şawro, near Mardin. 'Abdullah I sent Moses on a long journey to Europe, armed with two manuscripts of the Syriac New Testament and letters of recommendation.

The details of Moses' journey are unknown, but he arrived in Rome sometime before 1549 and had an audience with Pope Paul

¹ For a biography of 'Abdullah I, see Yuhanon Dolabani, ܘܚܢܢ ܕܘܠܒܢܝ *Die Patriarchen der syrisch-orthodoxen Kirche von Antiochien* (Glance-Losser: Bar-Hebraeus Verlag, 1990), 204-205.

III (1534–1549). Isaac Armalet,² whose reports on contacts between the Syriac Orthodox Church and Rome are sometimes polemical and must be read critically, reports that Paul III sent Moses back to Mardin with a letter addressed to ‘Abdullah I, who in turn sent Moses back to Rome with his confession of faith. When Moses returned to Rome, Paul III had already died and been succeeded by Julius III (1550–1555). According to Armalet, Moses presented his Patriarch’s confession of faith to Julius III. This initiated later correspondence that took place between Julius III and ‘Abdullah I.

According to Brock,³ Moses probably stayed in the Ethiopian monastery of San Stefano near the Vatican, as that is where he wrote a manuscript now in the British Library,⁴ in which he composed a Syriac translation of the Roman Mass. It is on the basis of the colophon of this manuscript that we know that Moses had already arrived in Rome in 1549. Moses kept busy studying Latin and some Italian, at the same time teaching Syriac. He had two students to whom he taught Syriac: Andreas Masius and Albertus Widmanstadt. In his later correspondence with his pupil Masius, written in Syriac, he included glosses in Latin and Italian to indicate what he actually meant.⁵

Moses must have begun researching how to set up a Syriac press to print the Syriac New Testament soon after his arrival in Rome. The project seems to have interested the Vatican librarian Cardinal Marcello Cervini, and on December 3, 1552, Moses received 13 gold scudi from the Vatican to fund the project, but not

² Isaac Armalet, تاريخ الكنيسة السريانية *Histoire de l’Eglise Syriacque*, edited by Behnan Hindo (Lebanon: Edition Beth Zabdai-Azech, 1996), 384–85.

³ Sebastian Brock, “The Development of Syriac Studies,” in *The Edward Hincks Bicentenary Lectures*, ed. Kevin J. Cathcart (Dublin: University College Dublin, Department of Near Eastern Studies, 1994), 94–113.

⁴ W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1870; repr. Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2002), 214–16. See also J. Leroy, “Une copie syriacque du Missale Romanum de Paul III et son arrière-plan historique,” *Mélanges de l’Université St. Joseph* 46 (1979), fasc. 23.

⁵ Jan Wim Wesselius, “The Syriac Correspondence of Andreas Masius: A Preliminary Report,” in *V Symposium Syriacum 1988*, ed. René Lavenant (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1990), 21–29.

enough to underwrite the whole enterprise.⁶ Around 1553, Moses seems to have had some problems in Rome. He was offered reordination as a Catholic priest, which he refused. He then left Rome with one of the two manuscripts, apparently the one he intended to use for the printing of the New Testament. He asked for further financial assistance from his pupil Masius, but without success.

Moses' search for printing firms led him to Germany, and on his way there he was introduced by Guillaume Postel, a French humanist, to another humanist named Widmanstadt, who held the appointment of chancellor of Lower Austria. Back in 1529, Teseo Ambrogio (1469–1540), an ecclesiastic of Pavia and the first European to learn Syriac, had given young Widmanstadt a manuscript of the Syriac New Testament with instructions about the Syriac language. Further, Ambrogio charged young Widmanstadt to devote himself to “the language hallowed by the blessed lips of Christ”.⁷ Widmanstadt began studying Syriac under a Maronite bishop called Simeon, and in 1533 he managed to transcribe a second manuscript of the Syriac New Testament from the library of the Tolomei at Siena. Widmanstadt had a parallel interest to that of Moses in having the Syriac New Testament printed.

Widmanstadt took Moses with him to Vienna in hopes of raising funds. Widmanstadt's position in the government allowed him to secure funds from Ferdinand, King of Hungary and Bohemia, Archduke of Austria, and Duke of Burgundy. Ferdinand became emperor in 1558.

Special types had to be made to print the text. Moses, with his elegant handwriting, made drawings of the Serto letters used in the main text.⁸ The preparation of the types was done under the direc-

⁶ Giorgio Levi Della Vida, *Ricerche sulla formazione del più antico fondo dei manoscritti orientali della biblioteca vaticana* (Rome, 1939), 145; J. F. Coakley, *Typography of Syriac: A Historical Catalogue of Printing Types, 1537-1958* (New Castle, Delaware and London: Oak Knoll Press and The British Library, 2006), 32, n. 15.

⁷ T. H. Darlow and H. F. Moule, *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture in the Library of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London, 1903–11), vol. 2, part 3, p. 1528.

⁸ The edition also included a larger Serto type used only on an errata leaf, and an Estrangela type, probably based on a manuscript, used for headings. The larger Serto type is used in the *Elementa*, reproduced in this edition. See J. F. Coakley, *Typography of Syriac*, 31.

tion of Postel who imitated Moses's handwriting. The specimens were cast in tin. Kaspar Krafft, a Swabian artist from Ellwangen, engraved the steel punches for striking the matrices. The printing was carried out by Michael Zimmermann (Cymbermannus).⁹ Postel seems to have played a role in the execution of the printing, although what the role actually entailed is not clear.¹⁰

The printing did not take a long time, according to the colophons which appear in a few places. Matthew was completed on February 14, and the remaining gospels on May 18th. The Pauline Epistles were printed on July 18th, and Acts on August 14th, with the Minor Epistles in September. The final colophon bears the date September 27, 1555.¹¹

The text was bound in different configurations. Some copies, such as the one from which this edition is made, consist only of the Gospels, while others include the entire New Testament. Some copies were bound together with Widmanstadt's small Syriac primer, the *Elementa* (1555–56), which was printed with the New Testament at the same press. The Gorgias Press edition maintains this tradition and includes the primer as well.

Moses did not get all the credit he deserved in the publication; especially overlooked was that it was he and his Patriarch who initiated the project, and that he had traveled to a foreign continent to fulfill his dream. He is merely mentioned in the Latin preface and in the colophons. In fact, it seems that objections were made when Moses included himself in the colophon in a place more prominent than that of Widmanstadt. The colophon to the Gospel of St. John reads,

The holy Gospel of the four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, was printed in Syriac characters and in the Syriac language with accurate endeavour, being corrected from two other old Syriac copies, through the agency of the priest Moses, son of the priest Isaac, from Mesopotamia, from the region of Şawra, adjacent to the town of Mardin, the disciple and legate of Mar Ignatius Patriarch of Antioch to the blessed Fathers Mar Paulos III and Mar Ju-

⁹ Darlow and Moule, *Historical Catalogue*, 1528.

¹⁰ J. F. Coakley, *Typography of Syriac*, 32.

¹¹ For a detailed description of the types used in the edition, see J. F. Coakley, *Typography of Syriac*, 31–34, 156–157.

lios III, Popes of Rome; and with the assistance and thoughtful care of the blessed believer Johannan Albertus Widmanstadius, skilled in knowledge, endowed with intelligence, lover of learning, teacher of Roman law, counselor to the Emperor ..., who has a special love for the Syrians since he knows the Syriac language, ... who persuaded and got permission from the Emperor to print these books.¹²

The Gospels were completed on May 18, 1555, and the Epistles in the middle of July. During this period, Widmanstadt must have complained, and in the remaining colophons Widmanstadt is mentioned first and more prominently, but Moses manages to slip in at the end “I labored a great deal over these books.” It is in acknowledgement of Moses’ labor that the Gorgias edition attributes the books to both Widmanstadt and Moses.

One thousand copies were printed, 500 of which remained in Europe, 300 were set aside for the Syriac Orthodox and Maronite patriarchs, and 200 were given to Moses. On August 1, 1556, Moses wrote to Masius that he had arrived in Vienna with copies of the 1555 edition which he planned to take to the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch, the “Nestorian” [*sic*] Patriarch, and for himself. In the same letter he informed Masius that he had sold the manuscript of the New Testament to count Otto-Heinrich of the Pfaltz, a Protestant. Moses returned to Mardin sometimes after August 1556 or as late as 1557.

Moses may have sold some of his copies en route to the Middle East. It is known that he sold at least one copy at Famagusta, Cyprus, on October 18, 1556 (known from a note in an antiquarian catalogue). Writing in 1929, Dolabani states that “copies are preserved to this day in the library of the monastery of Mar Ḥnanya and elsewhere.”¹³ I did not find any copies in that monastery when I worked in its library in the summer of 2005, though if copies remain, they may have been moved to the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Mardin. I personally have not encountered any copy in any of the Middle Eastern libraries.

¹² Translation from Brock, “Development,” 97 [Brock’s ellipses].

¹³ Yuhanon Dolabani, *ܩܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܩܝܫܐ ܕܩܝܫܐ ܕܩܝܫܐ* *Die Patriarchen der syrisch-orthodoxen Kirche von Antiochien* (Glane-Losser: Bar-Hebraeus Verlag, 1990), 205.

After his return to Mardin, Moses was consecrated bishop either by his mentor Patriarch ‘Abdullah I, or more probably by his successor Ni‘matallah (1557–1576), who consecrated nineteen bishops during his tenure.¹⁴ The latter mastered the sciences and the arts, especially astronomy, medicine, philosophy, and painting. He abdicated, or was forced to abdicate, in March 1576 under peculiar circumstances. Dolabani¹⁵ states that the governor of Amid, a close friend of Ni‘matallah, announced to the local Moslem notables who wished to execute the Patriarch that Ni‘matallah had adopted Islam. Ni‘matallah, fearing for his life, kept silent, abdicated, and escaped in disguise to the west. He arrived in Rome, coming from Venice, sometime between the end of 1576 and early 1578 carrying a recommendation from the Patriarch of Aquileia and was received in audience by Pope Gregory XIII (1572–1585) on January 30, 1578. Moses, now a bishop, accompanied Ni‘matallah and may have taken part in helping Ni‘matallah communicate in foreign Rome, especially when Ni‘matallah was invited to join the papal commission on calendar reform. When on September 14, 1580, Ni‘matallah signed the final report of the commission with his colleagues, his signature, in Syriac and Arabic, was interpreted not by Moses but by the translator Leonardo Abel. However, Moses seems to have been active in Europe until 1592.¹⁶

This reprint is based on the exemplar in the possession of the Bibelmuseum Münster. Gorgias Press is grateful to Prof. Dr. Holger Strutwolf, the director of the Bibelmuseum, for kind permission to reproduce it. The *Elementa* is based on the exemplar from my private collection.

Finally, it is indeed commendable that the parish of St. Andreas, Nellingen/Alb, Germany, is holding celebrations to honor Widmanstadt on September 17, 2006, which coincides the 500th anniversary of Widmanstadt.

¹⁴ Ignatius Aphram I Barsoum, *The Scattered Pearls: A History of Syriac Literature and Sciences* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2003), 513. This is the English translation of اللؤلؤ المنثور في تاريخ العلوم والآداب السريانية (Aleppo, 1956), 571.

¹⁵ Dolabani, *Die Patriarchen*, 206.

¹⁶ Levi Della Vida denies that this Moses is the same as our Moses who printed the 1555 Syriac New Testament. H. Kaufhold argues rightly that this is the same Moses (*Oriens Christianus* 70 [1986]: 207 f.).