



George Anton Kiraz

The Syriac Dot: A Short History

Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2015. Pp. 232. Hardcover. \$42.00. ISBN 9781463204259.

Jerome A. Lund
Accordance Bible Software
Kviteseid, Norway

George Anton Kiraz, a well-respected scholar of Syriac, serves as director of the Beth Mardutho Research Library. His informed contribution about the Syriac dot makes a fun read for anyone working in Syriac Bible and belongs in every research library. This popular study grew out of his earlier *Orthography*, volume 1 of *Türrāš Mamllā: A Grammar of the Syriac Language* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2012). This study contains nineteen chapters, five appendices (Script Guide, Kenoro Dotless Experiment Data, Chronology of Events, Manuscripts Consulted, and Comments on Plates), plates of texts relevant to the study, notes, works cited, an index of words discussed (Arabic, English, Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac), and a general index.

According to Kiraz, the dot serves as a diacritic and originally functioned to disambiguate homographs, both to disambiguate single letters (*dālath* and *rēsh*) from each other and also to disambiguate identically looking forms from one another, such as singular from plural—the *syāmē* (double dot) marks the plural. These innovations came about prior to the fifth century, as a manuscript dated to 411 attests these uses of the dot. He posits that scribes subsequently began using the dot above the line to indicate one form as opposed to the dot under the line to indicate another reading of the same consonants. Hence, according to Kiraz, they distinguished ܗܢܘܢ *henūn* ‘these’ (masc.) from ܗܢܘܢ *hānūn* ‘those’ (masc.), ܗܢܢ *henēn* ‘these’ (fem.) from ܗܢܢ *hānēn* ‘those’ (fem.), ܗܒܠܐ *hablā* ‘cord’ from ܗܒܠܐ *hbālā* ‘corruption’, ܩܒܠܐ *qabā* ‘news’ from ܩܒܠܐ *qabā* ‘good’, ܡܠܟܐ *melkā* ‘advice’ from ܡܠܟܐ *malkā* ‘king’, ܫܦܪܐ *seprā* ‘book’ from ܫܦܪܐ *sāprā* ‘scribe’, ܥܒܕܐ *abdā* ‘slave’ from ܥܒܕܐ *bādā* ‘work’, and so forth. Kiraz uses the later Western vocalization of the masculine plural demonstrative pronouns (39). In Eastern Syriac and the language of the Old Testament in any case, the pronunciation would be *hennōn* ‘these’ (masc.) versus *hānōn* ‘those’ (masc.). Moreover, due to the short vowel in the first syllable, one should transcribe *hennēn* ‘these’ (fem., as in masc.

ḥennōn ‘these’) instead of just *ḥenēn* and *ṭebbā* ‘news’ instead of just *ṭebā*. Further, in practice, scribes often wrote the diacritic over or under the *beth* in distinguishing ܐܒܕܐ *‘abdā* ‘slave’ from ܐܒܕܐ *‘bādā* ‘work’.

Kiraz raises the interesting question of whether or not the scribes had some logic behind placement of the dot above or below a word. He answers the question in the affirmative. There was a vowel hierarchy as evident in the examples above, namely, the sequence [ā], [a], and [e]. The homograph with the thematic vowel [ā] will always take the dot above the word, while the homograph with the thematic vowel [e] will always take the dot under the word. The placement of the dot with a word having the thematic vowel [a] varies, depending on its counterpart. For example, since ܐܒܕܐ *‘abdā* ‘slave’ is paired with ܐܒܕܐ *‘bādā* ‘work’, it takes the dot below the word, but since ܡܠܟܐ *malkā* ‘king’ is paired with ܡܠܟܐ *melkā* ‘advice’, it takes the dot above the word.

From his ‘Kenoro dotless experiment’, Kiraz hypothesizes that the *syāmē* dots predate the dots distinguishing *dālath* and *rēsh*. However, as he is quick to point out, there are of yet no hard facts to support this.

The use of the dot became extended to mark silent letters with enclitics. To distinguish the forms, scribes placed a dot over the nonenclitic form but under the enclitic form, for example, ܐܢܝ ܢܐ ܪܐܝܢܐ ܬܒܐܢܐ *‘enā nā rā’yā ṭābā* “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). Nonenclitic ܐܢܝ is pronounced *‘enā* and so marked ܐܢܝ, as opposed to enclitic ܐܢܝ, which is pronounced *nā* and so marked ܐܢܝ. This was also the case with the pronoun ܐܢܝ *hū* functioning as an enclitic, as in ܡܠܟܐ ܐܢܝ ܕܢܐ ܡܠܟܐ *‘attū malkā* “you are the king” (Matt 27:11). To indicate its assimilation to the previous word and hence loss of the consonantal value of ܐܢܝ, scribes wrote ܐܢܝ. Later scribes replaced the dot of enclitic ܐܢܝ with a line (ܐܢܝ), since the form ܐܢܝ was also used to distinguish between ܐܢܝ ‘he’ and ܐܢܝ ‘that’ (masc. sing.).

Scribes also used dots to distinguish plosive and fricative pronunciations of the *bgādkpāt* letters. Even after short vowel deletion in Aramaic, fricatives remained fricatives in Syriac, as in ܟܬܐܘܒܐ *‘book*, pronounced *kṯāvā* < **keṯāvā* or **kiṯāvā*, and ܕܗܘܘܐ *‘gold*, pronounced *dahvā* < **dahavā*. To indicate the correct pronunciation, the scribes wrote ܟܬܐܘܒܐ and ܕܗܘܘܐ, respectively. Plosive pronunciation was indicated by an overdot, hence ܟܬܐܘܒܐ *‘concluding’* (Kiraz), pronounced *ḥuttāmā* in the East but *ḥūtāmā* west of the Euphrates. By the eleventh century, scribes in the West used red ink for the *bgādkpāt* letters.

By the eighth century, scribes developed a system of dots to indicate vowels. While the west Syriac scribes subsequently used the “Greek” vowel system, they also continued to use the dot system for vowels. In fact, “the dotted vowels are used more frequently in west Syriac Serto texts than the ‘Greek’ vowels” (135).

Dots were also used to indicate clausal stops and sentence breaks. Then, too, they came to be used as reading guides, whether to read with a rising tone or a falling tone. Some of these marks were used in pairs, the sequence of which is important, as in 1 Cor 11:13, where the combination *zawgā ‘elāyā* followed by *taḥtāyā* indicates a question as opposed to a statement: ܐܢܝ ܢܐ ܪܐܝܢܐ ܬܒܐܢܐ *‘enā nā rā’yā ṭābā* “Is it proper for a woman, when her head is uncovered, to pray to God?” The accents, indicated by dots, inform the reader that this is a question and not a statement (“It is proper for a woman, when her head is uncovered, to pray to God”).

Dotting was also used to mark corrections. The triple dot marked transposition of words, one triple dot being placed over each of the two words in question, while the single dot over a letter or a sequence of single dots over letters of a word or phrase marked deletion.

