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## Moving Syriac Literature into the Digital Age

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## Moving Syriac Literature into the Digital Age

The mother tongue of Jesus and his disciples was not Greek or Latin or even Hebrew, but Aramaic, the language of Israel's Babylonian captors. Aramaic, and in particular the dialect of Syriac, has continued to be spoken by many Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere down to the present time. This Semitic language became the vehicle for a vast body of early Christian literature that expressed Christian theology in singularly Semitic forms. For example, just as the Hebrew prophets expressed themselves primarily in poetry or rhythmic prose, rich with symbolism and analogy, so also early Syriac teachers composed didactic hymns and even their sermons in poetic meter. In contrast to the philosophical theology of western churches, Syriac Christians articulated a symbolic theology that drew on images from nature and scripture to express the Christian mysteries.

The unique literature of the early Syriac churches is now the focus of much historical, linguistic and religious research. Great manuscript discoveries during the 19th century resulted in large amounts of Syriac publications, but these important books are now very often rare and difficult to access. One of the richest collections of such works is the Semitics/ICOR Library at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, DC, which is based on the personal collection of the distinguished orientalist, Fr. Henri Hyvernat. The Maxwell Institute and the Harold B. Lee Library at BYU collaborated with CUA to image over 60,000 pages of rare Syriac printed books and related studies. The *BYU-CUA Syriac Studies Reference Library* became available online in 2007 as part of the Lee Library's Digital Collections (<http://www.lib.byu.edu/dlib/cua/>). These valuable works are now freely available and easily accessible to both scholars and members of the Syriac churches. (See *Insights* 27/5.)

This digital collection has received a substantial amount of usage, with as many as 6,000 visits

per month. Not only is this resource being used by scholars in such places as Russia, Syria, Lebanon, and India, where Syriac scholarship is active and resources are rare, but even scholars working in or near major research libraries are finding the collection invaluable. Dr. Ute Possekel, a Syriac scholar working in Boston, wrote us to say, “Just wanted to add my thanks for the online Syriac books. I'm delighted to hear about having Baumstark's *Geschichte* available. It's been always such a hassle to hunt down a copy to check something or other—and I live in the Boston area that is generally well supplied with libraries! Great work, we are all very grateful.” Dr. Sebastian Brock of the University of Oxford observed, “How frustrating it is that important literature on Syriac studies is scattered over so many periodicals and books, with the result that even a good library like Oxford University's

Bodleian Library does not cover anything like the whole range—and if this is so, how much more for any other university and academic libraries.”

In its brief lifetime, *BYU-CUA Syriac Studies Reference Library* has become an important part of a growing collection of Internet resources for scholars of early Christianity and Syriac. These resources include relevant titles available on omnibus archives such as Gallica, Google Books, and the Internet Archive. Most important is a sister project to that of BYU, the *eBeth Arké Syriac Studies Collection* ([www.hmmml.org/vivarium/BethArke.htm](http://www.hmmml.org/vivarium/BethArke.htm)). When complete, this collection will contain approximately 650 items, also scanned from the collections of CUA. Whereas the BYU-CUA collection primarily serves the needs of scholars, eBeth Arké is oriented to the Syriac Christian churches.

The success of *BYU-CUA Syriac Studies Reference Library* has been gratifying to all involved and is catalyzing further action. Plans are now being made to extend the collection to include more of the treasures conserved at CUA, for the further benefit of scholars and Christians of Syriac heritage worldwide. ♦



This woodcut of Ephrem, the most important Syriac author, is taken from the title page of the 1603 Roman edition.

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