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## Blossoming with Books: Syriac Manuscripts from the Egyptian Desert

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themselves what [substance] they had used to assassinate so-and-so, and their stories are well known. (*On Poisons* 2.4.83–84)

Such details collapse the centuries that separate us from Maimonides and allow us a glimpse, however mean, into the lives of the common people of his time. It seems that marriage could be a fraught enterprise in the Middle Ages, too!

*Maimonides: On Poisons and the Protection against Lethal Drugs* is the latest title to be released in The Medical Works of Moses Maimonides, a series of primary texts and translations prepared by Gerrit Bos at the University of Cologne and published under the auspices of the Maxwell Institute's

## Preview of Forthcoming FARMS Review

Readers awaiting this year's first number of the *FARMS Review* (vol. 21, no. 1) will be rewarded with a deep lineup of reviews and other essays on the Book of Mormon. Sure to heighten anticipation is a promised peek at Terryl Givens's in-press volume from Oxford University Press: *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*. Chapter 2, "Themes," will be featured in its entirety—a substantial excerpt from the 152-page work that will fill an important gap in Oxford's popular Very Short Introduction series. *Review* readers will enjoy other Book of Mormon-related fare as well: a literary interpretation of the death of Laban; a debunking of myths about the miraculous printing of the 1830 edition; a look at the record's literary sophistication in light of a biblical hermeneutic that grants legitimacy to repetition and allusion; and reviews of the seminal works *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, by

## Blossoming with Books: Syriac Manuscripts from the Egyptian Desert

The birthplace and spiritual heart of Christian monasticism is the Nitrian Desert of Egypt and the long, shallow valley of Scetis (Wadi el-Natrun). It was to here, from the fourth century onwards, that Macarius the Great and other of the sainted desert fathers retreated from the world, devoting their lives

to worship and prayer. While some monks chose to live in isolation as hermits, many others banded together to establish the first monasteries, building churches for worship and libraries for study. These monastic libraries collected many manuscripts and the dry climate of Egypt preserved them well. In fact, most of the premedieval Christian manuscripts we have today come from Egypt. While many texts were written in Greek or Egyptian (Coptic), monks of all nations flocked to Egypt and

Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. This volume also features the scholarly work of Michael R. McVaugh of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who has edited the Latin translations of *On Poisons* that were made in the centuries after Maimonides by Europeans seeking to preserve his knowledge for their own time. Angela Barrionuevo oversaw the production editing of this volume at the Maxwell Institute. The book will carry the Brigham Young University Press imprint and will be distributed by the University of Chicago Press. ♦

By D. Morgan Davis

Associate Director, Middle Eastern Texts Initiative

John W. Welch, and the six-volume *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, by Brant A. Gardner.

In the area of biblical studies are two responses to British biblical scholar Margaret Barker's recent book *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*. Like her previous studies, this one is attracting the attention of Latter-day Saints who have found much of importance to consider in her exploration of Christian origins and her reconstruction of a "temple theology" traceable to Solomon's temple. Rounding out the *Review* are an assessment of Hugh Nibley's economic views related to the law of consecration, a refutation of one antitheist's attempted demolition of the Bible, a reprinting of eminent historian Martin E. Marty's 1989 lecture at Westminster College on the usefulness of the religious past, an editor's introduction by Daniel C. Peterson, and other assorted offerings now taking shape for publication later this summer. ♦

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brought with them books in their own languages. Regrettably, Scetis suffered from violent incursions, and a series of five raids from 407 to 817 repeatedly plundered the monasteries of their few treasures, including books. Each time the monks rebuilt and, as best they might, refilled their libraries.

Notes added to manuscripts often explained their provenance and history. According to certain of these notes, in perhaps the eighth or early ninth century a wealthy and important Christian named Marutha visited one of the monasteries and asked to see monks from his homeland. Marutha's family was from Takrit in Iraq, a center of Syriac Christianity, and was prominent in a Takritan trade community located in Egypt. Marutha was disheartened to hear that the Syriac-speaking monks were scattered over many monasteries. In a pious act, he purchased for 12,000 gold dinars an unused monastery for these monks to have as their own. This became the Monastery of the Syrians (Deir al-Suriani).

If this account of the monastery's founding is correct,<sup>1</sup> Marutha almost certainly would have endowed this monastery with Syriac books. But if he did, none survived the fifth sack of Scetis in 817 by Arab marauders. In fact, so devastating were these raids that almost no Syriac manuscripts brought to Scetis before 817 survive. One exception is a copy of the homilies of Severus, patriarch of Antioch, who was greatly revered by many of the Egyptian monks. This manuscript was purchased by an abbot named Theodore, which "he bought together with others for the study, reading and spiritual progress of all those who shall read it."<sup>2</sup> It dates to AD 576 and is now preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Library (Vat. Syr. 142).

This manuscript somehow survived the Arab raids and made its way to the new Monastery of the Syrians. Many others were donated by Takritans like Marutha or brought by monks relocating from other monasteries. But the most ancient and valuable of the manuscripts in the monastery's great library were acquired through one monk's initiative and good fortune.

The abbot Moses of Nisibis was a great pastor and administrator who prospered his monastery. When a Muslim vizier tried to levy an onerous poll tax on bishops, monks, and infirm Christians in Egypt, Moses went to Baghdad to petition the caliph

for relief. For five years (927–32) he engaged in this appeal, and while waiting upon the caliph's good pleasure, he also toured extensively the monasteries of Mesopotamia and northern Syria.

Moses was a lover of books, so he employed these visits to acquire volumes for his monastery library. When at last he returned to Egypt, his appeal successful, he brought back with him great treasures of learning—250 manuscripts. Many were purchased, while others were gifts. As impressive as this number is, his acquisitions were important also for their antiquity. The great majority of surviving pre-eighth-century Syriac manuscripts, preserving many rare and important works, which once belonged to Moses's library. Their value to scholars today is inestimable.

Subsequent abbots continued to acquire manuscripts. The precise number is unknown. One early European visitor to Scete reported seeing a great library, quite likely that of the Syrians, containing about 8000 volumes. This is certainly an exaggeration, but even a tenth that number would have been an impressive collection. A 17th-century inventory reported 403 bound volumes, but many volumes would have contained multiple manuscripts. And this did not include fragments, which accumulated in considerable quantity. In 1837, Robert Curzon visited the monastery and found a neglected, stone-vaulted closet "which was filled to the depth of two feet or more with the loose leaves of the Syriac manuscripts."<sup>3</sup> While the exact number is not known, more than 1500 manuscripts have survived to today from the Monastery of the Syrians.

Western travelers and institutions acquired the majority of the monastery's Syriac manuscripts from the 17th to 19th centuries, at times by way of honest purchase and at times, sadly, by some measure of bribery and fraud. They are preserved today in Berlin, London, Paris, Rome, and elsewhere. By far the greatest number is in the British Library. Between 1835 and 1851, almost 550 complete and fragmentary manuscripts were acquired by the British from the Monastery of the Syrians.

But more than a century earlier, in 1707, the Vatican Library sent a young Lebanese Syrian (Maronite) priest named Elias Assemani to the Middle East in search of Syriac manuscripts. He first went to Egypt and succeeded in obtaining a number of manuscripts from the Monastery of the

Syrians. The precise number is uncertain, for while transporting them by boat to Cairo, a storm arose that capsized the vessel, sending all the manuscripts to the bottom of the Nile and drowning one monk. Elias hired divers to retrieve his treasures from the muddy river bottom, and dried them out as best he might, but our only account of the catastrophe reports that “many folios (pages) of them were lost.”<sup>4</sup> Thirty-three Syriac and one Arabic manuscript later arrived at Rome. Whether just portions of those manuscripts were lost, or some volumes in their entirety, is unknown.

While parts are rendered unreadable by water damage, those 33 manuscripts are some of the most ancient and valuable Syriac manuscripts surviving today. Clearly Elias was permitted to handpick gems from the monastery library. In 1715 his uncle, Joseph Simon Assemani, returned to the monastery and selected another 100 for purchase. However, negotiations with the monks failed and he was only able to purchase “a few.” Again, precisely how many is unknown, but of the estimated 50 Syriac manuscripts Joseph Simon acquired for the Vatican Library, nine certainly came from the Syrian Monastery. These include the only surviving copy of the earliest Syriac chronicle (ca. 540), among other rarities. Scholars have determined that yet others of the Syrian Monastery’s manuscripts were acquired by the Vatican Library, previous to the Assemanis, but precisely how is not always known.

In 2005, the Maxwell Institute’s Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts published *Syriac Manuscripts from the Vatican Library, Volume 1*, reproducing 33 Syriac manuscripts from the Vatican collection. These include 16 manuscripts known to be from the Monastery of the Syrians, and at least two others that may be. This DVD is still available for purchase at the BYU Bookstore. Further work on Vatican Library Syriac collection is now in the initial stages of planning. ♦

#### By Carl Griffin

Associate Director of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts

#### Notes

1. Its historicity was advocated by Evelyn White, but no corroborating evidence survives, and recent research by Van Rompay and Schmidt have called it seriously into question. See Hugh G. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi ‘n Natrûn*, ed. Walter Hauser (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art,

Egyptian Expedition, 1926–33), 2:312–18; and Lucas Van Rompay and Andrea B. Schmidt, “Takritans in the Egyptian Desert: The Monastery of the Syrians in the Ninth Century,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 1 (2001): 41–60.

2. As cited in White, *Monasteries*, 2:320.

3. As cited in William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1838* (London: British Museum, Dept. of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts, 1870–72), 3:ix.

4. This account does not come from Elias himself, but from his uncle Joseph Simon: J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliotheca orientalis Clementino-Vaticana, I* (Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719), preface, section VII; S. E. Assemanus and J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae codicum manuscriptorum catalogus, I, 3* (Rome: Typographia linguarum orientalium, 1759), 77.

## INSIGHTS

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