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Chapter One

Rescuing Syriac Manuscripts in Iraq
By: Amir Harrak

The so-called Islamic State invaded Mosul and the Plain of Nineveh in the north of Iraq in August 2014, destroying people, especially minorities, centuries-old religious and civil buildings, and cultural heritages, including collections of manuscripts owned privately or by institutions. The octagonal martyrion of Mār-Behnam built during the 6th century to commemorate this Christian man martyred at the hands of Zoroastrian Sassanians was dynamited, along with its lapidary art and Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, and Uighur inscriptions. In the nearby monastery which was renovated during the 13th century with the best late Abbasside art, all Christian symbols, along with human and animal sculptures, were defaced.

Over the centuries, the monastery of Mar Behnam amassed various Syriac and Arabic manuscripts, as well as books recording the names of royal and other historically important visitors. During the Islamic State’s more than two-year occupation of Mār-Behnam, there was great concern about the fate of these precious documents. The Islamic State is renowned for their fanatical destruction of churches, shrines, and at times even mosques, and so when the Iraqi army liberated the Plain of Nineveh, a surprise came concerning the Mār-Behnam manuscripts.
Yousef Sakat, a young Iraqi priest, who was among those expelled from the monastery by the Islamic State, sensing the danger of an invasion and occupation of the monastery, took the clever decision to hide all the manuscripts. He placed the manuscripts in large tin containers inside a long narrow storeroom, built a wall intersecting the middle, leaving the containers behind, and in the accessible space placed brooms and shovels to eliminate suspicion about the whole space.

Upon the monastery’s liberation a few months ago, Father Sakat returned and broke down the wall to find the hidden manuscripts unharmed. Prior to the invasion of the monastery, these manuscripts were digitized by the indefatigable Iraqi Dominican Father Nageeb Michael, who founded the Centre Numérique des Manuscrits Orientaux (CNMO), aiming at digitizing all manuscripts in Iraq. The CNMO works in partnership with the Hill Museum & Manuscripts Library, presided by Fr. Columba Steward, OSB, which provides equipment, technical support, financing, but also digital archiving online and placing in the vHMML Reading Room.

The Mār Behnam manuscripts date between the 13th and the 20th centuries, some exhibiting outstanding Syriac calligraphy and very attractive drawings and designs. Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, is the language of Middle Eastern Christianity with its
massive literature dated between the 2nd and the 20th centuries. The manuscripts comprise of bibles, liturgical texts, literary texts, lexicons, themes that fall within traditional areas of Syriac literature. One manuscript is dated “1962 of the Greeks.” This accords to the Seleucid dating system corresponding to the year 1651 CE. The manuscript, decorated with geometric designs, contains, among other details, the genealogy of Jesus.

Another manuscript, dated to 1552 CE, is an Arabic dictionary entitled the Ocean, copied with a beautiful Arabic script, a century and a half after the time of its author, the lexicographer Fayruzabadi (1329–1414). The oldest manuscript, dated to 1231 CE, contains acetic writings drawn from the early Coptic fathers. Among the monastery’s extensive library are hundreds of printed books dated between the early 18th and 19th centuries. Even these later-period books are very rare in Iraq, given the fact that education regressed in this country under Ottoman rule (15th to early 20th centuries). The registers record the names and comments of the monastery’s visitors, including the Governor of Mosul (1917); the Iraqi Kings Faisal I (1923) and ‘Ali (1926); and a wandering German soldier, D. Liebold, K.K. 501, who was just thankful to drink “fresh, cool water” at the monastery in 1917!

What is interesting in manuscripts are the colophons, inscriptions added at the end of a book, composed by scribes after completing their copying tasks, sometimes covering
the space of several folios. In these colophons the scribes record their genealogy, the names of reigning rulers, and those of administering patriarchs and bishops, in addition to details about current events, political, social, military, and seismic. Such historical details, in most cases local, cannot be found elsewhere, and thus the colophons, collectively, constitute rare sources of information even within obscure periods in which records are usually not attested.

Manuscripts belonging to ethnic and religious communities are tenaciously protected since they reflect their identities: religious and linguistic. The horrible scene of burning Christian Church manuscripts and other books in Mosul by the Islamic State in 2014, was a heavy blow to the Christian heritage of Iraq, and it must not be repeated. Unfortunately, international laws concerning antiquities are not meant to protect the heritage of minorities as such, but only of that of nations. It is a fact that minorities usually distrust majorities, especially when the distrust is based on religion. The 1970’s United Nations Environmental, Scientific and Cultural Organizations Convention considers it illegal to import, export, or transfer ownership of cultural property. Nevertheless, the only way to protect the cultural property of minorities in war-torn or politically unstable regions is to transfer such property to long-term safety, even if outside their countries; otherwise this property is prone to destruction. Although the manuscripts of the Monastery of Mār-Behnam were
transferred to a more stable area of Iraq, they still are endangered, and international laws must allow for their transfer outside of Iraq, to secure their survival.

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Chapter Two

The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul
In the second century BCE, the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes issued a decree proscribing the ancestral laws of Judea. The Jerusalem temple was taken over and renamed for Zeus Olympios. People were forbidden to practice traditional Jewish customs such as circumcision on pain of death. According to 2 Maccabees, chapter 6 “it was impossible either to keep the Sabbath, to observe the ancestral festivals, or openly confess oneself to be a Ioudaios.”

My new book takes up the question, what was it that one could not confess oneself to be? There has been debate in recent years as to whether loudaios should be translated “Judean” or “Jew.” Most people in the ancient world were designated by terms that indicated their homeland – Romans, Moabites, Egyptians, etc. Each had their traditional customs and ancestral laws, corresponding in part to what we would call religion. In the case of Judaism, the ancestral laws were identified as the laws allegedly given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. These were the laws proscribed by Antiochus Epiphanes. Their observance was indicated especially by practices that had symbolic value as ethnic markers, such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and religious festivals. It is clear
that Epiphanes was not forbidding people to say where they were from. The decree presupposed a normative understanding of what it meant to be a *Ioudaioi*: to observe the Law of Moses, at least in its distinctive practices. What Epiphanes tried to do was to suppress the distinctive identity of the people of Judah, by proscribing the traditional formulation of their way of life.

The Law of Moses was well established by second century BCE and for some centuries before that. According to Jewish tradition, the Law was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Modern scholarship places its development many centuries later. The first attempt to formulate a (somewhat) comprehensive Law is found in Deuteronomy, which appears to have originated in the late seventh century BCE, in the reign of King Josiah, although in view of its restriction of the power of the king it is unlikely to have been promulgated by Josiah. During the Babylonian Exile, Deuteronomy was expanded and combined with other traditional material, including the Priestly Laws, to make up the Torah as we know it. This Torah plays no part in the Judean restoration after the Exile. It appears to have been unknown in Judah prior to the arrival of Ezra, which is usually dated to 458 BCE. (According to the Book of Ezra, the people in Jerusalem were unaware of the festival of Sukkoth).
The Law was also unknown to the Judeans of Elephantine in the south of Egypt, although an attempt was made to inform them of the dates of the festival of Unleavened Bread, according to the Priestly legislation. Ezra secured the backing of the Persian king to establish the Torah as the official ancestral Law of Judah. He attempted to implement it by forcing people to divorce their foreign wives and observe the festivals. His reforms appear to have been short-lived, but he established the status of the Torah as the normative expression of the ancestral law of Judah. Even after the time of Ezra, however, the Torah plays no part in the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible (Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth), or in tales from the Diaspora (Esther, Daniel 1-6). Other corpora of literature, especially those composed in Aramaic, drew mainly on the narratives of Genesis and treated the Torah as a source of wisdom rather than law. The Enoch literature drew heavily on the early chapters of Genesis, but cast Enoch rather than Moses as the mediator of revelation, and paid little attention to the Law of Moses.

The official status of the Torah after the time of Ezra did not entail that it was closely observed. Rather, it had iconic importance, in the sense that people revered it even if they did not pay much attention to its content. This iconic importance can be seen in the Book of Ben Sira, in the early second century BCE. Ben Sira declares that all wisdom is the Torah of Moses, but he does not engage it in any detail.

Attitudes to the Torah changed, however, after the attempt by Antiochus Epiphanes to suppress it. The Maccabees, and their descendants, the Hasmoneans, were not especially pious, but they insisted on the observance of those aspects of the Law that had symbolic importance. During the century of Hasmonean rule, we see a “halakic turn” in the emergence of literature such as the Temple Scroll and Jubilees, that engages the legal aspects of the Torah in great detail. We also see the rise of sectarianism, fueled by disagreements over the details of the Law, as can be seen...
especially in the Dead Sea Scroll called the Halakhic Letter (4QMMT).

The archeological record also shows an increasing concern for purity in this period, attested by the spread of *miqvaot* and stone vessels. Scholars have rightly argued for a “common Judaism” in this period, based on the observance of the distinctive aspects of the Torah, but this must be qualified by the rise of sectarianism, as can be seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Moreover, even Jews who accorded basic importance to the Torah often felt the need to supplement it by appeal to a higher revelation. This, too, can be seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and also more generally in apocalyptic literature. 4 Ezra, written after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, has Ezra restore 24 “public” books (those we know as the Hebrew Bible) but also 70 others, in which is “the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge.”

The Greek-speaking Diaspora, primarily in Egypt, does not show a “halakic turn” of the type found in Jubilees or the Scrolls, but it certainly accords central importance to the Torah of Moses. Usually, however, the literature of the Diaspora focuses on
matters where Jews could hope to find common ground with enlightened Gentiles. So it focuses on monotheism, avoidance of idolatry and certain issues related to sexuality, but seldom dwells on the more distinctive laws, such as the food laws or circumcision. When Diaspora authors address these subjects, as in the Letter of Aristeas or the writings of Philo, they interpret them allegorically, as symbolizing virtues that a philosopher could appreciate. Some scholars have argued that the Torah was recognized as the practical law in Jewish communities, but this claim is not supported by the papyri.

The early Christian movement related to the Torah of Moses in various ways. The Gospel of Matthew has Jesus say that not one jot or tittle of the Law will pass away. The apostle Paul, in contrast, takes a polemical attitude towards “the works of the Law,” although he can also maintain that the Law is holy and just and good. Paul was not a universalist. He held that his Gentile converts were grafted into Israel, the “seed of Abraham.” But for Paul the “Israel of God” was not defined by the Torah of Moses. Rather it was a new creation, based on faith in Jesus Christ as the messiah of Israel. He did not object to the continued observance of the Law by those born Jewish, but he undermined its significance to a great degree. The Law survived, however, as the undisputed basis of Jewish identity in the rabbinic tradition.

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Chapter Three

Were YHWH and Dionysus Once the Same God?
By: Nissim Amzallag

If we look for a parallel deity to YHWH in ancient Greece, we think immediately of Zeus, the patron of the Greek pantheon whose representation was introduced in the Jerusalem temple in the Hellenistic period. The shared ancestry of the two has been well accepted from antiquity, for example by Josephus Flavius (Jewish Antiquities 12.22), to modern times.

Troublesome evidence, however, reveals a much closer relation of YHWH to Dionysus than to Zeus. The first point is the broad diffusion and popularity of the cult of Dionysus in ancient Israel, the deity being worshipped even in priestly cities in the cult of YHWH, such as Sepphoris. The second is the identification of the Nabatean god Dushara (Dusares) with Dionysus. The appellation DuSara (ze seir = the one from Seir) coincides with the origin of YHWH from Seir in biblical poetry (Judges 5:4; Deut 33:2) and DuShara was probably a late Edomite version of the worship of YHWH.

Mosaics from the house of Dionysus at Sepphoris.
The third is the syncretism observed in Thrace during the Hellenistic period, between the cult of YHWH and that of Sabazius (the Thracian Dionysus), in which Jews and pagans gathered in the same religious communities. Given the particularism of Jews, this singularity argues in favor of strong shared ancestry, if not identity, between the two gods. The fourth concerns the interdiction of the subversive cult of Dionysus-Liber in Rome as formulated by the Senate in 139 BCE. This edict led, in 133 BCE, to the persecution of the Jews, who were curiously accused of propagating the cult of Dionysus-Liber. All these observations plead toward an identification of Dionysus, Liber, and Sabazius with YHWH, extensively acknowledged both by Jews and pagans, during the last centuries preceding the Christian era.

**Similarities between Dionysus and YHWH**

The homology between YHWH and Dionysus is not as surprising as it may seem at first. Both deities exert the same subversive influence against the established pantheons and temples. Exactly as in the Exodus for the Israelites, Dionysus calls for deliverance from the tyranny of kings and gods who support their abusive authority. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Dionysus even calls on every one, slaves—freedmen and princes, young and old, and men and women—to partake of the ceremonies and musical processions of Dionysus-worship (verses 204-209):

*Depictions of Dushara at Petra*
Will anyone say that I do not respect old age, being about to dance with my head covered in ivy? No, for the god has made no distinction as to whether it is right for men young or old to dance, but wishes to have common honors from all and to be extolled, setting no one apart.

The same universal call for YHWH’s worship is expressed in Psalms 148:11–13:

*Kings of the earth and all peoples, Princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and maidens together, Old men and children! Let them praise the name of YHWH, for his name alone is exalted; His majesty is above earth and heaven.*

This is not the only parallel between the two gods. Choral performance (*dithyrambos*) is an essential component of the cult of Dionysus; indeed, it is the first stage of his knowledge. The same feature is encountered in ancient Israel, where the importance of choral performance in the cult and knowledge of YHWH is extensively attested (e.g. Samuel 6.5; Psalms 25:12; 68: 26-27; 1 Chronicles 16.4-7; 25.7). The parallel is even reflected by the similar antiphonal mode of the choral performance that characterizes their worship.

Plutarch (*Quaestiones Convivales* iv, 6.2) observed many parallels between the Dionysian banquet and the Israelites’ cultic festivities. Again, this is not surprising, because YHWH, like Dionysus, displays an essential relation to wine, Israel being even likened to His vineyard (Isaiah 5:7; Jeremiah 6:9). Abundant wine production reflects YHWH’s blessing (Jeremiah 31:5; Amos 9:13-14; Micah 4:4) and wine libations and
drinking were associated to his worship (Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 10:1-10; Numbers 15:5-10). The exudation of milk and honey from the Maenad’s staff (thrysos) was regarded in Greece as a theophany of Dionysus, exactly as YHWH's land of residence is termed a land flowing with milk and honey.

Beyond these observations, a similar subtle ethereal/windy nature is attached to both YHWH (see 1 Kings 19:11-12; Psalms 104:4) and Dionysus, the latter also called Bromius (= the rustling). They also act in similar ways. Dionysus has the capacity to modify human behavior in an ecstatic fashion defined as enthusiasm; this phenomenon finds a close correspondence with Saul's experiencing the spirit of YHWH possessing him (1 Samuel 19:5-6). The epidemic character of such ecstatic possession constitutes another parallel between YHWH and Dionysus.

Perhaps the most intriguing similarity between the deities is the similar doubt or incredulity, chronically expressed in Israel and in ancient Greece, concerning their powers and their genuine capacity to intervene on the worshipper’s behalf. This is one of the most recurrent themes in the Bible, expressed even by sincere believers such as Abraham (Genesis 18:14) and Moses (e.g. Numbers 12:23). The anomaly recurs in ancient Greece, where Dionysus’ divine powers and even divine nature are chronically challenged until he reveals his supernal powers (e.g., Bacchae 330–336). These similarities are too important to treat as a random feature. A linkage between the deities probably exists.

The Canaanite roots of Dionysus
Several Greek testimonies trace Dionysus’ provenance to Canaan. Herodotus specifies (II, 49) that this god was introduced in Greece by Cadmus, the Tyrian founder of Thebai and the personification of the Phoenician colonization in the Aegean. This is confirmed in the seventh Homeric hymn, which reports the capture of Dionysus by pirates who wished to ransom his parents and friends in the Canaanite eastern Mediterranean for his freedom. Dionysus’ Canaanite origin is reinforced by the Dionysian cortege or retinue, constituted of couretes, corybantes, cyclopes, telchines, and dactyls, all of whom are daimones frequently considered in Greece as originating in the eastern Mediterranean.

The first Homeric hymn traces Dionysus’ origin to “Nysa, a mountain most high and richly grown with woods, far off in Phoenicia, near the streams of Aegyptus…” In the seventh hymn, he first appears “on a jutting headland by the shore of the fruitless sea.”
The only “fruitless” that is to say, fishless, sea between Phoenicia and the Nile is the Dead Sea, and the tall forested mountain to its south is Mount Seir, the mountain of origin of YHWH. This transforms Dionysus into an Aegean version of YHWH, whose cult was probably propagated and adapted during the ‘Orientalizing revolution’ that followed the settlement in Greece of a population originating of east Mediterranean during the first half of the first millennium BCE.

Obviously, the cults of Dionysus and of YHWH also display important differences. These, however, seem to trace to the exclusivism that developed in the Israelite religion and, in diametric opposite, to the neutralization of Dionysus’ subversive power through his extensive association with wine, festivities, and other earthly pleasures. The syncretism among YHWH, Dionysus, Sabazius, and Liber (as well as another deities), however, reveals that this erosion process did not complete rapidly. This may help us to rediscover the subversive nature of YHWH, Dionysus, and the other commonly descended deities, beyond their “domestication” into official cults and festivities.

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Chapter Four

Sunlight and Shade in the First Cities: A Sensory Archaeology of Early Iraq
Sunlight and Shade in the First Cities: A Sensory Archaeology of Early Iraq

By: Mary Shepperson

There are two periods of about five days each, one in the Spring and one in the Autumn, when the weather in southern Iraq is quite nice. Outside of those brief pleasant interludes, it’s either cold, windy and rainy, or roasting, windy and dusty. In the past, before electric heaters and air conditioning, the only thing standing between human beings and great physical discomfort was architecture.

*Sunlight and Shade in the First Cities* explores the interaction of sunlight and architecture in the urban landscapes of Bronze Age Mesopotamian cities. Starting from architectural principles of climate adaptation and the specific sunlight conditions of the Mesopotamian plain, this volume shows that the urban architecture of ancient Mesopotamia relied on carefully applied principles of design to create buildings and settlements which were liveable and protected their inhabitants from the extremes of climate outside. <INSERT FIGURE 2>

Adaptation to regional sunlight can be directly linked to most of the characteristic features of
Mesopotamian settlements, from the distribution of courtyards and the positioning of doorways, to the density of housing and the orientation of roads. At a larger scale, sunlight can be linked to tell development and even the direction in which cities expanded.

The interaction of sunlight and architecture also has considerable influence over how people lived in these cities. The timing and location of activities is shown to be strongly related to how buildings provide shade to urban space through the day and at different times of year, providing insight into the schedules of daily life. The provision or exclusion of light is also deeply connected with visual privacy because it determines what can be seen and by whom. Lighting thus plays a part in defining the social character of architectural space and influencing how it’s used.

People make buildings, but buildings also make people, to trot out an architectural cliché. Climatically adapted buildings and cities created distinctive social and sensory environments which affected how people interacted with each other and their surroundings.

For instance, a house which is sealed against heat and dust by having few external openings will unavoidably limit both light access and human access, making it a very private space, with a rigid boundary between the house and the city outside. The adaptation of ancient architecture to climate can in this way be related to key characteristics of ancient Mesopotamian society, such as the importance and cohesiveness of households as society’s primary organisational unit.
Similarly, the high-density, close-packed housing of ancient Mesopotamian cities, which stimulated the need for sophisticated new legal systems and unprecedented levels of social complexity, also happens to be the ideal settlement form for Iraq’s hot-arid climate. A city in which the houses are clustered closely together reduces the total surface area exposed to the sun, and allows the buildings to provide mutual shading.

Sunlight itself was not simply a physical phenomenon in ancient Mesopotamia but was a substance filled with meaning. Textual sources indicate that sunlight was considered to be both a negative, destructive force and a manifestation of sacred power. Most celestial light sources were also major Mesopotamian deities, the sun being high among them as Šamaš, the god of justice and judgement. Brilliance and radiance were associated with the divine and sunlight was employed in ancient Mesopotamian architecture in highly symbolic ways.

In the sphere of sacred architecture, sunlight was used in both general and very specific symbolic ways. Sacred space was visually and sensorially very distinct from the domestic sphere. While domestic architecture aimed to reduce sunlight to a cool, comfortable dimness, sacred architecture dealt in the extremes.

Temple exteriors were bathed in light and heat; a physical embodiment of the shining and radiant temples described in sacred texts. In stark contrast, the sanctuaries of
temples were kept in near total darkness, often insulated from outside light with double sets of doors. These contrasts of brilliance and darkness were used as a complex theatre designed to invoke the presence of the gods.

Lighting seems to have been a major factor in a wider reorientation of temples that happened around the Ur III period at the end of the third millennium BCE. Most temples of the Early Dynastic period faced northwest, the orientation that receives the least solar radiation. But from the Ur III period on temples are overwhelmingly oriented towards the southeast, facing the morning sun.

As well as bathing temple façades in sunlight, this reorientation seems to have had at least one element of specific sunlit significance. Temple gateways were the location for legal judgements to be made, and by orienting these gateways towards the morning sun it allowed Šamaš, the god of judgement, to be physically present to oversee each case.

The architecture of palaces, just like that of temples, shaped a carefully contrived sunlit theatre. The aim was to manage the way in which the king or his representative was
presented to visitors through manipulating visibility, symbolism and sensory experience.

In outlining some of the key issues considered in Sunlight and Shade in the First Cities, I hope to give an idea of the multi-layered significance of climate and sunlight in shaping ancient Mesopotamian architecture, society and ideology. Sunlight is both a physical phenomenon that enables and restricts human activity, and a highly symbolic phenomenon rich in social and religious meaning. These divergent aspects of sunlight in human life are fundamentally interwoven in the ancient city, their relationship mediated through architecture.

*Mary Shepperson is a professional archaeologist currently working in Iraq.*

The sun setting behind the ziggurat of Ur.
Alex Joffe is the editor of the Ancient Near East Today. The publication features contributions from diverse academics, a forum featuring debates of current developments from the field, and links to news and resources. The ANE Today covers the entire Near East, and each issue presents discussions ranging from the state of biblical archaeology to archaeology after the Arab Spring.

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