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The Light from the East

Studia Humana nr 7/8, 53-55

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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The Light from the East



George Kiraz was born in Bethlehem to a Syriac Orthodox merchants family. He learned Syriac at the St. Mary's Church in Bethlehem and St. Mark's Monastery in Jerusalem. In 1983 he emigrated with his family to the United States. He obtained a master's degree in Syriac Studies from the University of Oxford under Dr. Sebastian Brock and a doctorate in Computational Linguistics from the University of Cambridge. He came back to the US in 1996 where he worked as a research scientist at Bell Laboratories, Lucent Technologies. He founded in 1992 Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute (formerly The Syriac Computing Institute). In 2001 he founded Gorgias Press, an academic publisher of books and journals covering a range of religious and language

studies that include Syriac language, Eastern Christianity, Ancient Near East, Arabic and Islam, Early Christianity, Judaism, and more. He is the author of many works on Syriac studies including a six-volume *Concordance to the Syriac New Testament* (1993), a four-volume *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels* (1996), etc.

Andrew Schumann: You are one of the best experts in Syriac studies. In many respects these studies are connected with Eastern Christianity. What could these studies give Christianity at all taking into account the fact that Greek is considered the original language of Christianity?

George Kiraz: Sebastian Brock of Oxford always talks about the three 'linguistic' pillars upon which Christianity is founded: The Latin West and the Greek East are the best known, but he then emphasizes the Syriac Orient, especially in its non-Hellenized form of Christianity. We forget in the West that Christianity began in the East and the Eastern fathers, both Byzantine and Semitic (in the form of Syriac) built the foundations of Christianity.

Andrew Schumann: Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII formulated the official position of the Assyrian Church of the East in 1957 that the Syriac Peshitta is the original of the New Testament. This view was popularized by the Assyrian scholar George Lamsa. Whether we can claim that the Aramaic Peshitta is the closest text to the original New Testament? As I know, the Church you belong to uses the Syriac Peshitta as the main source, as well.

George Kiraz: The church that I belong to, the Syriac Orthodox Church, also uses the Peshitta, so do all the Churches of the Syriac linguistic family including the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, the Maronite Church, and the Churches of the St. Thomas Christians in India. The Peshitta is one of the most ancient versions of the Bible. Its New Testament has many unique readings. The Peshitta New Testament is a revision of an older Syriac version called the "Old Syriac". There was another Gospel harmony, the Diatessaron, which is called in Syriac "the mixed Gospel". Scholars today agree that the Peshitta New Testament as we have it today is a translation from the Greek. But because it is very ancient, its readings are very important and differ from time to time from the Greek "received text". The Antioch Bible project

brings a modern English translation of the Syriac Bible so that English speakers can appreciate the Syriac biblical text.

Andrew Schumann: His Eminence Mor Cyril Aphrem Karim ordained you Deacon (Ewangeloyo) in a grand ceremony at St. Mark's Cathedral which included numerous clergy and deacons from the archdiocese. His Eminence praised you for the contributions to the Syriac Orthodox worldwide community. For me it is a significant symbol that your scientific work in Syriac Studies is evaluated as a kind of spiritual mission of Ewangeloyo. How far do you feel that you have a special mission?

George Kiraz: It is difficult to separate the scholarly mission from the Church mission as Syriac is rooted in a Christian heritage. Having said that, one of course maintains all scholarly integrity when doing research. My mission is to serve the Syriac heritage in all its aspects, both secularly and religious. The ordination demonstrates the appreciation of the hierarchy to the scholarly work that is being done.

Andrew Schumann: You have studied Syriac from the point of view of religious studies as well as of computational linguistics, e.g., on the one hand, you published the book *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels: Aligning the Old Syriac (Sinaiticus, Curetonianus), Peshitta and Harklean Versions* (1996), and, on the other hand, you designed the first computer fonts for Syriac in 1986 and later you designed Syriac fonts that became the most useful till now. What does this combination of religious and computational aspects give?

George Kiraz: It is the blend of computational linguistics and Syriac studies that excites me when I do my work. It is a weird combination, but I managed to make it work for me and for the projects I am involved in. The computational power allows me to do things faster and in unprecedented speed and efficiency. Having been raised in a Christian environment and Syriac being what it is, I see my work that stems from Syriac and computing united under one umbrella. Using the metaphor that miaphysites use for the description of the Nature of Christ: it is like an iron put on fire. Once you pick it up, it is difficult to separate the fire from the metal. I see computing and Syriac blending together.

Andrew Schumann: How do you understand Heidegger's famous phrase 'Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins' in relation to Syriac? What is it the Syriac home, the Syriac universe? How does it differ from other universes?

George Kiraz: Language lies at the heart of one's identity. This cannot be emphasized more in the case of Syriac. Today, Syriac Christians are spread all over the world and Syriac Christianity is in danger. The more turbulent the Middle East becomes, the more we see immigrants leaving the Middle East to the West. But in the west, we know that no community can survive for more than 3 or 4 generations. It is with the use of the Syriac language as an identity tool that we can try to prolong the life of Syriac Christianity. I speak Classical Syriac with my kids, and they answer me in a blend of Syriac-English language. It is crazy but gives them the sense that they have a Syriac identity.

Andrew Schumann: Could you please tell us about some present and future projects of Beth Mardutho directed by you?

George Kiraz: Beth Mardutho publishes the peer-reviewed academic journal *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*. Recently, it finished publishing the first Syriac encyclopaedia title the *Gorgias*

Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage. We are now building the content of the Beth Mardutho Research Library. We have collected thousands of printed books, eBooks, images, etc. We would like to make all of this content available online, but we are in need of funding to do that.

Andrew Schumann: Gorgias Press, the academic publisher directed by you, is well known among scholars in Syriac language, Eastern Christianity, Ancient Near East, Arabic and Islam, Early Christianity, Judaism and so on. Maybe can you tell us about any future plans of this publisher?

George Kiraz: Our largest project now is the Antioch Bible which I have mentioned earlier. The Antioch Bible is a bilingual edition: Syriac and English. The English is an idiomatic translation of the Syriac with enough annotations to give variant translations. The Syriac text is fully vocalized and pointed. This is the first time in history where a fully vocalized Syriac text of the entire Bible is published in the Serto script with an English translation. We expect the project to be completed within seven years. We currently put out about 4-6 volumes every year. People can subscribe to the set on the Gorgias web site www.gorgiaspress.com/AntiochBible. We continue to publish books in all the fields that you have mentioned. We champion minority subject areas. That is our strength.