

**ANTONIUS RHETOR
ON VERSIFICATION;
PP. 145-216**

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Antonius Rhetor on Versification; pp. 145-216 by Martin Sprengling

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The University of Chicago

ANTONIUS RHETOR ON
VERSIFICATION

A DISSERTATION

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IN THE GRADUATE DIVINITY SCHOOL

BY

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ANTONIUS RHETOR ON VERSIFICATION

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND TWO APPENDICES

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Ephrem Syrus is not a great poet to everybody's taste. Singing a simile to death in praise of a saint or applying strong epithets to dead-and-gone heretics in long, carefully numbered series of syllables will not impress many modern, occidental readers as good poetry. Yet, such as he is, in the very bulk of his works, in the variety of topics treated and of legitimate meters and strophic structures employed, in a kind of facile inventiveness, in the esteem in which he was held by a great number of his contemporaries and a still greater number of his countrymen of succeeding generations, Ephrem is the Syriac poet *par excellence*; and perhaps it is, as Duval (*Lit. Syr.*, p. 13) says, that the Syrians "saw excellences, where we find faults." As Ephrem is the first of Syriac poets whose works have been preserved to us in quantity, so he became a kind of Syriac Homer, the type and model of classic Syriac poetry.

A new, sumptuous edition of Ephrem's complete works, as preserved in the original tongue and in translations, is in process of publication, as the first fasciculus of the first volume, dated Rome, 1915, shows.¹ The former attempt at a similar edition, made at

¹ The full title is: *S. Ephraem Syri Opera. Textum Syriacum Graecum Latinum ad fidem codicum recensuit, prolegomenis notis indicibus instruxit Sylvius Ioseph Mercati. Tomus primus, Fasc. primus. Sermones in Abraham et Isaac. In Basilium Magnam, in Ellam . . . Romae. Sumptibus Pontifici Instituti Biblici, 1915. It forms in turn Vol. I of a larger series: Monumenta Biblica et Ecclesiastica.*

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Rome under papal auspices, was good enough in its day, the end of the first half of the eighteenth century, but has long since become superannuated. Both flow through the channel of papal munificence. The former was a gift of the Orient to the Occident; it was brought out by that brilliant Maronite family, who laid in Europe the foundations of an adequate knowledge of Syriac literature, the Assemanis (*as-Sim ānī*), and by their friend Father Benedictus (i.e., Mubarak). In the present edition the Occident returns the favor with interest. Not only will the text of Ephrem here published have the benefit of all the improvements modern technique can supply, but it is avowedly the intent of this whole edition with all the labor therein involved to furnish a reliable basis for the exact study of classical Syriac poetics and versification and its supposed influence on the new turn taken by Byzantine and Latin verse in the early Middle Ages.

It is a significant fact that the chief interest of the new editor of Ephrem is centered in the laws of Syriac and Byzantine and mediaeval Latin versification. Mercati is a pupil and evidently a thoroughgoing follower of W. Meyer of Speyer (Mercati, *op. cit.*, Proem *passim*, and especially p. xiv). W. Meyer is an expert pioneer and explorer in the field of mediaeval Latin, and incidentally also of Byzantine, versification, as his two volumes of *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur mittellateinischen Rhythmik* (Berlin, 1905) amply demonstrate. He is interested in Syriac versification in general and in Ephrem and the Greek translations of his works in particular as in one of the influences which gave rise to the Christian poetry of Byzantium and Rome, and through these to some of the peculiarities of our own modern poetry, Germanic and Romance. For his knowledge of Syriac and Hebrew versification he seems to have depended chiefly upon Hahn and, perhaps, Bickell, and was accordingly misled in several particulars. One of these faulty assumptions, a supposedly rigid disposition of accents at the close of each Syriac verse, he has since retracted upon the advice of Nöldeke (*op. cit.*, I, 11). On the matter of rhyme Meyer is still somewhat at fault, and Eduard Norden (*Antike Kunstprosa*, 810-908; *Nachträge*, 11-13) is fuller and nearer right, though Meyer's presentation (*op. cit.*, II, 122-26) is neither so one-sided nor so hopeless as would

appear from Norden's statements. For the rest, in his supposition that Semitic models had much to do with the prevalence of the acrostich and with the principle of syllable-counting in mediaeval Christian poetry, Meyer has in matter and manner a better case than Norden and others seem willing to admit.¹

It is largely to furnish a trustworthy text as a basis for the demonstration of this theory that Mercati has undertaken the new edition of Ephrem. The undertaking is praiseworthy enough, and the object is not unworthy. It is to be hoped, however, that the theory will not bias the restitution of the text. For Ephrem after all is of some value in other directions, and his works contain, besides much mere verse-making of more than Victorian length and tiresomeness, some poems² and passages of great beauty, as the opinion and the loans of the great Byzantine poet Romanos testify (Krumbacher, *loc. cit.*). And for our better knowledge of classical Syriac versification also *one of the prime requisites* is a text of Ephrem resting upon sound general text-critical principles not unduly influenced by any special theory on the history of versification.

As does this introductory résumé,³ so must every examination and exposition of classical Syriac verse take Ephrem for its starting-point. It is one of the merits of Hubert Grimme,⁴ for which he has been unduly criticized, that he recognized this and acted upon it. If Becq de Fouquières was justified in basing his fundamental treatise

¹ Cf. Krumbacher, "Die Griechische Literatur des Mittelalters" in *Kultur der Gegenwart, Griechische und Lateinische Literatur und Sprache*, 1905, pp. 259 and 262; also Baumstark, *Die chr. Lit. des Orients, I* (Sammlung Göschen, No. 527), Leipzig, 1911, p. 16.

² Cf., e.g., the sprightly hymn on the Virgin Mary, Lamy, II, 538 ff., No. 6, and the stately and impressive 11th hymn on the holy martyrs, Lamy, III, 711 ff.

³ This sketch of the work hitherto done on Syriac prosody, written partly in appreciation of Mercati's new edition of Ephrem, partly as an introduction to the publication of a portion of the Harvard manuscript of Anthony of Tagrit, covers the ground with some fulness, because nothing of the sort, accessible to English students and readers, seems to be in existence. The only thing of the kind of which I have found any trace is a treatise by Lamy *On Syriac Prosody*, said by Duval, *Journal asiatique*, 9^e Série, t. X (1897), 65, n. 1, to be "dans les Actes du Congrès des Orientalistes de Londres de 1891." A diligent search of the Harvard College Library failed to bring to light this essay, which from Duval's statement must have formed an intermediate stage between Lamy's first effort in the Prolegomena of Vol. III of his *Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones* in 1889 and his finished presentation of the final results attained by him in Vol. IV of the same work (1902), coll. 469-96 (but see also the Foreword of this latter volume, p. vii). In any case, whatever Lamy did does not conflict with the present sketch, nor does the one make the other unnecessary.

⁴ On Grimme's work in this field see pp. 157 ff.

on French versification for the classical period upon Racine alone—and his results would seem to have amply justified the brilliant Frenchman's procedure—then the needful refoundation of our knowledge of Syriac prosody will have to proceed from a thorough investigation of just such a text of Ephrem as Mercati intends to give us.

It should be Ephrem and no other. In the facility wherewith he molded the Syriac language into a variety of rhythmical forms, Ephrem represents the finished product of a developmental process of considerable length and intensity. Of what preceded him only the smallest remnants are preserved. The Carpentras stele (*CIS*, II, 141; with an English translation, in Cooke, *Northsemitic Inscriptions*, pp. 205 f.; photogravure in Lidzbarski, *Nordsem. Epigraphik*, Vol. II, Plate XXVIII, 3), in Egyptian Aramaic of the fourth or fifth century B.C., is almost certainly composed in verses of seven syllables each or thereabouts. Though not found in any extant document, yet of more significance than a mere accident, is Professor Charles C. Torrey's unforced retranslation of the Lukan Lord's Prayer into the Jewish Aramaic of Jesus' time, which fell naturally and without seeking under Professor Torrey's skilled hands into the same meter.¹ Coming thence to the two old gnostic hymns in the acts of Judas Thomas, the Soul's Wedding and the Song of the Apostle Judas Thomas in the Land of the Hindus, the latter often called the Hymn of the Soul, we are somewhat nearer the home of Edessene Syriac and on rather firmer ground.² The exact date of neither is known, but the time of Bardaisan, to whom they have by some scholars been assigned, the turn of the second and third centuries A.D., will not be far wrong. Both are composed in distichs of six-syllable verses. As to whether these beautiful rhapsodies belong to Bardaisan or not, no conclusive evidence has yet been offered. Very eminent authorities in various related fields—Nöldeke, Burkitt, Preuschen—have expressed their opinion in the affirmative. The present writer's feeling inclines in the same direction. This

¹ Cf. Torrey in *ZA*, XXVIII, 2-4 (March, 1914), 312-17. The more important literature on the Carpentras stele is named by Professor Torrey in this article.

² First published by W. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1871, I, pp. 106 f. and 117-118; English translation, II, 160 ff., 238-45; cf. also Bevan's text of the Hymn of the Soul with translation in Robinson's *Cambridge Texts and Studies*, Vol. V, No. 3. The best edition of the texts is that published with German translation by G. Hoffmann, in *ZNTW*, IV, 4 (1903), 273-309. See also Baumstark, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

is not the place to argue the question in detail. The pitiful shreds which the parsimonious hand of Ephrem has preserved for us (five fragments constituting in all ten lines of five syllables, one of eight, and two of six each, is the sum total)¹ are all that we can be absolutely sure of. A six-syllable line, quoted by Philoxenus (see Appendix I, 1), is certainly Bardaisan's property, probably a poetic verse. Though much too little to give us any adequate idea of Bardaisan's style or thought, and though culled and presented with all the fairness and honesty of a modern war censor or hostile headquarters, they are yet sufficient together with the comment of Ephrem and Rabbula to give the impression of poetic powers distinctly greater than Ephrem's. Clearly and flagrantly, now wilfully, more often stupidly, Ephrem misunderstood Bardaisan, and a better basis for just such misunderstanding could hardly be furnished than just such songs as those in the Acts of Thomas. Moreover, Bardaisan's fame as a poet rests upon fairly good evidence (cf. Appendix I, 2). It seems hardly in accord with the principle of the economy of documents, since we are restricted to supposition, to assume another unknown author for the "gnostic" hymns of the Acts of Thomas.

In any case Bardaisan's is the earliest name of any Syriac poet preserved to us, and, aside from the few lines positively known to be his, the hymns of the Acts of Thomas are the earliest extant Syriac verse. And these two constitute about all the pre-Ephraimite Syriac verse in our possession, upon which, manifestly, no very extensive treatise on Syriac versification may be based.² Those who follow Ephrem within the classical period of Syriac poetry, i.e., before the dominance of Arabic and Islam, or, from an inner-Syriac

¹ The 55th *Hymn against Heresies* of Ephrem, which contains all of Ephrem's direct quotations from Bardaisan's verse, in English translation preserving the form of the original, will be found in Appendix I, 1. The Philoxenus fragment is printed there also.

² The syllabic construction of the Bardaisanite fragments is clearly set forth in Appendix I; all that may safely be said will be found there. The hymns of the Acts of Thomas exhibit six-syllable verse throughout, gathered into distichs by a Hebraic *parallelismus membrorum* for the most part unmistakably clear; larger strophic structure has not been successfully demonstrated. With the elimination of the Sozomenus tradition it becomes increasingly clear that with our present resources nothing can be known except by inference concerning pre-Ephraimite strophic structures. Lest the unwary think them forgotten, it is distinctly stated here that the Odes of Solomon have been deliberately omitted from this review; though it may still be possible to doubt that they are translations, no doubt is possible to the knowing that they follow no known methods of versification, Syriac or otherwise. Sooner or later they will be claimed to represent a stage preceding Bardaisan's introduction of vowel-counting verse and regular strophes.

point of view, before Anthony of Tagrit, tread no great distance beside Ephrem's footsteps. Even the most renowned of them, Balai, Cyrillona, Isaac of Amid, Isaac of Antioch, Narses, James of Sarug, acknowledge Ephrem as their master and do not appreciably remove from the well-trodden paths by him approved as good and safe. And if a late¹ "tradition" connects the name of Balai with a five-, that of Narses with a six-, that of James of Sarug with a twelve-syllable meter, as that of seven syllables is named after Ephrem, then on the one hand this tradition is not in every case corroborated by known facts, on the other it means no more than that such a meter was the favorite of such an author, in which he excelled, not by him invented. It is Ephrem, therefore, who must furnish the basis and by far the greatest amount of material for any investigation of the laws of classical Syriac verse.

But it must be a corrected, carefully edited text of Ephrem. The insufficiency of the *editio princeps* in this respect is notorious. Overbeck in his *Ephraemi Syri aliorumque Opera Selecta*, Oxford, 1865, published for the most part simply the text of his manuscript, mistakes and all, and that not always faultlessly; he gives no hint, e.g., of the manifest superfluity of ܥܘܡܡܢܐ, end of line 12, p. 3, i.e., the very first page of text printed by him. Lamy, too, leaves something to be desired.² The best work in this direction yet done is that of Bickell in his *Carmina Nisibena*. Grimme's statement, *ZDMG*, XLVII (1893), 278, that scarcely a single Syriac poem, though it be of the simplest form, exhibits the regular number of syllables in all its verses, may not in its entirety be ascribed to exaggeration; it is in no small part due to bad texts. A text which constantly necessitates conjectural emendation by the reader will not do; one of the next necessary steps in the investigation of Syriac verse is the production of a reliable text of Ephrem, such as the Vatican contemplates in its new edition (see above).

What has just been said, not only expresses one of the needs of modern scholarship in this field, but it also uncovers one of the sources of error, one of the reasons for the insufficiency of the work hitherto done by moderns in the investigation of Syriac poetry and

¹ It can be traced to Antonius Rhetor, at least.

² Cf. Nöldeke, *GGA* (1882), 1505-14; (1887), 81-7; *WZKM*, IV, 245-51; XVII, 196-203.