Article

Babel's Dawn and the Primeval Language. Between Translation and Narrative, or the Syriac Version of an Old Jewish Tradition

Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala

Full Professor University of Córdoba, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Córdoba, Plaza Cardenal Salazar, 3, 14071, Córdoba, Spain; E-Mail: ff1mosaj@uco.es; Tel.: +34-618-742-777; Fax: +34-957-218-955

Abstract: The story of the Tower of Babel in Gn 11:1–9 gave rise to a rich literary tradition, in which the *topos* of the primeval language emerged. Whereas the interpretative tradition originating among the Jewish commentators upheld that the original language was Hebrew, in the heart of the Eastern Christian communities some authors supported this theory, but others stated it to be Aramaic. The aim of the present article is to show how a celebrated chronicler like Michael the Syrian (12th c. CE) composed his version of the account narrated in Gn 11:1–9 by echoing different textual sources, but at the same time by combining both translation and narrative techniques in composing his text.

Keywords: Book of Genesis; Babel; primeval language; translation; narrative; tradition; Syriac; Michael the Syrian

1. Introduction

The account in Gn 11:1–9 tells us that after the flood, men lived together in a valley in the land of Shinar (*biqĕˁāh bĕ-ˀereṣ Shinˁār*), in Babylon, where they settled after leaving the east (*qedhem*). There they started to make bricks (*lĕḇēnîm*) and asphalt (*ḥēmār*) with which to build a city and a tower (*ˁîr û-migdāl*), whose top (*rōsh*) would reach heaven, and they also gave themselves a name (*shēm*) lest they be scattered over the whole earth. In this descriptive passage, moreover, the redactor informs us that they all spoke one language, or more specifically 'sound' (cf. Ar. *lafẓ*, pl. *alfāẓ* ([1], pp. 122–123); *kalām* ([2], I, p.16), the Hebrew term *śāpāh* thus equating with *cheilos* ([3], pp. 729–730). Hence, the Hebrew text of Gn 1:1 (cf. 11:6) runs as follows: ויהי כל־הארץ שׂפה אחת ודברים אחדאם ('and the whole

earth is of one language, and of the same words'), rendered in the LXX as καὶ ἦν πᾶσα ἡ γῆ χεῖλος ἕν καὶ φωνὴ μία πᾶσιν ('and all the earth was one lip, and there was one language to all').

The account gave rise to a rich legendary tradition, not only in Jewish but also in Christian and Islamic literature. The story of the building of the tower was one narrative element that aroused increasing interest as the tradition developed ([4], pp. 191–214), but it was by no means the only one. The information provided in Gn 1:1,6, to the effect that a single language was spoken, prompted considerable exegesis by commentators keen to identify that primeval language spoken by the whole of mankind after the flood and before men were scattered over the earth for having dared to build a tower that would reach into heaven.

The vast amount of literature on this *topos,* in the literary traditions of the three great monotheistic religions, points largely to two possible candidates, either Hebrew or Aramaic. This study examines a fragment included by the great twelfth-century chronicler Michael the Syrian ([5], pp. 113–121) in his *Maktbanūth Zabnē* ([6], pp. 445–448, [7], p. 309, [8], pp. 476–484, [9], pp. 196–198); the fragment is particularly significant for the interesting exegetical information it provides on the primeval language of the world in its treatment of the biblical account of the Tower of Babel (for a general view [10], I, pp. 188–218).

The text transmitted by Michael the Syrian's Chronicle ([11], I, pp. 19–20, IV, pp. 9–10) reads as follows:

"At the beginning of the life of Rě'ū, men started to build Babel and the Tower in the land of Sin'ār.[1] 'Let us build us a settlement and a tower—they said—and let us make us a name before we are scattered and depart each for his own heritage'. The great Nimrod, son of Kūsh, fed the builders on what he hunted. The duration of the building lasted for forty years. They trod the law underfoot, they scorned the commandment and they did not observe the virtues of the righteous Noah. They divided the land, and agreed to seek a way of escaping the wrath of the Lord after breaking with his precepts. That is why, said the Scripture, 'and he divided their sound'. The single tongue was divided into seventy-two tongues, and the land of Sin'ār was called Babel because of the confusion. 'Eber, the great old man, did not agree with them about the division, for he told them that they should observe the precept of Noah and not incur a curse; he did not by any means agree to build with them the Tower. As a result, the primeval tongue of his fathers was preserved for him. He called this land Babel. In our Aramaic language the name Babel is properly explained as confusion. Mār 'Ephrem, the great Basil and other ancient sages give it this meaning. James called [James] of Edessa and John of Litharb, who quote from old chroniclers, say: 'the Hebrew language is the primeval one, which was preserved for 'Eber, and it is from it that the Hebrews took their name'. By contrast, others say: 'Since Abraham passed over the River Euphrates to enter the promised land, through which he passed fighting among armies, and because he passed from the pagan customs of his forefathers to faith in God, creator of the universe; because of all this—they say—he was called he who passes. We say that all these things are true: the primeval language is Aramaic, from which *'ebrōyō'* derives".

This fragment set down by Michael the Syrian has three interesting features: first, the composition of the text itself; second, the translations incorporated in that text; and third, the exegesis contained in the text. These three features were closely linked in the Middle Ages, particularly when dealing—as

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[1] Ms. ܪܥܘ

here—with the translation of a biblical text. As we shall see below, Michael the Syrian's account closely follows the Bible narrative (the Syriac version of the Peshīṭṭā), although he makes use of a number of strategies, when quoting the biblical text, which will be duly addressed below.

In terms of format, this narrative whose purpose is synthetic falls into two parts. The first contains what might be termed the *expositio*, and includes a summary of the account offered by Gn 11:1–9. In it, the author sets down the chief elements of the biblical narrative, referring specifically to the biblical text on two occasions. The second part contains an exegetical section dealing with the issue of the primeval language. In it, Michael the Syrian alludes to the Fathers of the Church (Mār 'Ephrem, St. Basil) and to chroniclers (James of Edessa, John of Litharb), who in their turn—as we are told by Michael the Syrian—take their information from ancient chroniclers; finally, Michael the Syrian offers an interesting exegesis on the figure of Abraham, described as *'ebroyō*.

2. Building a Text

The narrative techniques used by medieval chroniclers are closely linked to those employed by the chroniclers in classical and late antiquity, to whom they owe a substantial debt. A good example is the *opus magnum* composed by Michael the Syrian, a full-scale *de facto* chronography (χρονογραφία) in which he made extensive use of an interesting range of sources. As indicated earlier, the fragment under study draws on the account to be found in Gn 11:1–9, two verses of which (11:1,6) give rise to a concluding exegetical section in which the author lends his support to a *locum biblicum exegeticum* already well-known even in antiquity and revived during the medieval period by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

Apart from that, the author's compositional technique is fairly straightforward: he follows the biblical account, selecting from it whatever information he deems necessary for his purposes. It is interesting to note—here as elsewhere—Michael the Syrian's eagerness to pinpoint the time when the events narrated took place. He does so at the start of his narrative, setting the building of the city of Babel and its Tower at the beginning of the life of Reu, a descendant of Shem, son of Peleg, grandson of Eber and father of Serug, in the line of Abraham's ancestors (Gn 11:18–21; cf. 1Ch 1:25). Barhebraeus goes further, and explicitly states that the work on the building of the 'Great Tower' (ܪܒܐ ܡܓܕܠܐ), a term also used by Solomon of Akhlāṭ (13th century CE) in his 'Book of the Bee' ([12], pp. ܡ/41), started in the seventieth year of Reu ([13], I, p. 8).

This timing does not appear in the biblical text, and the genealogy that follows the account of the building of the Tower did not serve as a textual reference for the present narrative. As we have shown in an earlier study, Michael the Syrian made use of an apocryphal work known as the 'Book of Jubilees', and certainly used information transmitted by other chronographers [14]. Here, he has done the same: the chronological reference with which the account opens comes ultimately from a Greek or Syriac version ([15], II, pp. XI–XVIII) of the Book of Jubilees 10:18, whose Ethiopic text reads as follows:

ወበሠላሳ : ወሡለስቱ : ኢዮቤልዉ : በዓመት : አሐዱ : በዝ : ካልእ : ሱባዔ : ነሥአ : ሎቱ : ፋሌክ : ብእሲተ : እንተ : ስማ : ሎምና : ወለተ : ሲናአር : ወወለደት : ሎቱ : ወልደ : በዓመት : ራብዕ : ዘሱባዔ : ዝንቱ : ወጸወዐ : ስሞ : ራግው : እስመ : ይቤ : ናሁ : ወሉደ : ሰብእ : ኮኑ : እኩያነ : ለምክረ : ቱግ : ከመ : ይሕንጹ : ሎሙ : ሀገረ : ወማኀፈደ : ወስተ : ምድረ : ሰናአር : ([15], I, p. 63).

"During the thirty-third jubilee, in the first year in this second week [1576], Peleg married a woman whose name was Lomna, the daughter of Sinaor. She gave birth to a son for him in the fourth year of this week [1579], and he named him Ragew, for he said: 'Mankind has now become evil through the perverse plan to build themselves a city and tower in the land of Shinar'" ([15], p. 82, 38, II, p. 61).

The Jubilees text is not only of interest for the timing offered here; it also had a crucial influence on other aspects of the rest of the account, since Michael the Syrian drew on it when arranging his narrative of the events. Indeed, the narrative sequences forming the textual unit of Michael the Syrian's account follow the order used in Jubilees. His omission of Gn 11:3 and quoting of Gn 11:4 reflect the fact that Gn 11:4 is quoted in Jubilees, whereas Gn 11:3 is relegated to a secondary position, though quoted later in 10:20 ([15], I, p. 63, II, p. 61). We shall return to this quotation below.

The brief allusion to Nimrod, however, draws on Gn 10:8–9 (cf. 1 Chr 1:10; Mi 5:6): ܟܘܫ ܐܘܠܕ ܠܢܡܪܘܕ ܗܘ ܫܪܝ, ܠܡܗܘܐ ܓܢܒܪܐ ܐܪܥܐ ܗܘ ܗܘܐ ܓܢܒܪܐ ܨܝܕܐ ܩܕܡ ܐܠܗܐ ܡܛܠ ܗܢܐ ܐܬܐܡܪܝ ܐܝܟ ܢܡܪܘܕ ܓܢܒܪܐ ܨܝܕܐ ܩܕܡ ܡܪܝܐ ('And Kush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; wherefore it is said: 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord') a direct translation from Hebrew - וְכוּשׁ יָלַד אֶת-נִמְרֹד הוּא הֵחֵל לִהְיוֹת גִּבֹּר בָּאָרֶץ הוּא-הָיָה גִבֹּר צַיִד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה עַל-כֵּן יֵאָמַר כְּנִמְרֹד גִּבּוֹר צַיִד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה. Josephus, and later Syncellus ([16], pp. 50–51, 57–59 §§37–39, 43–45) highlights Nimrod's role as king in the building of the Tower of Babel ([17], I:113–116), all of which was echoed in the Haggadah ([18], I, p. 177–179). Indeed, and as the Barhebraeus account proves, while taking into account the biblical text, Michael the Syrian undoubtedly used other texts which report that the workers were fed on what Nimrod hunted ([13], I, p. 8).

The building work, according to Michael the Syrian, lasted forty years. This information is not to be found in the account provided by Gn 11:1–9, nor in the Haggadah, which refers to an indefinite period of 'many, many years' ([18], I, p. 179). Syncellus agrees with Michael the Syrian, also referring to forty years ([16], p. 58 §43, cf. pp. 62 §48, 114 §90). By contrast, Jubilees 10:21 tells us that the building work lasted for a period of "forty-three years" ([15], I, p. 63, II, p. 61). Vanderkam notes the corrupt state of the Ethiopic manuscript at this point ([15], II, pp. 61–62, n. on 10:21), suggesting that the figure of forty-three years mentioned in the Ethiopic version may not be correct.

Between this sequence and the second direct quotation from the biblical text (Gn 11:6), the author includes a transition, offering a corollary of what is narrated in 11:10ff, which provides an exegetical gateway to the quotation itself, according to which God inflicted a severe punishment on them, first by dividing their hitherto single language (so in [1], pp. 122–123, [19], p. 601 (=45)) and then by scattering them over the face of the earth. This single language (*leshonō ḥad / lisānan wāḥidan*) was divided into seventy-two languages (so in [12], pp. ܥܒ/42, cf. seventy in [1], pp. 124–125), a piece of information not to be found in the biblical text, but included by Syncellus ([16], [20], pp. 60 §46, 61 §48, 63–64 §49, 71 §56) and later by Barhebraeus ([13], I, p. 8). Also of interest is the reference to Noah as righteous (*zadīqō*), an attribute with fascinating theological implications in various scriptural contexts both in Judaism and in Christianity, which is echoed by Michael the Syrian within the Syriac tradition. The adjective is clearly intended to describe people whose behaviour was considered good. However, the description of Noah as *ʾīsh ṣad d q̂* in Gn 6,9 has a more restricted sense, and in the Qumrān texts is even used as a highly-significant technical term ([20], p. 81; cf. [21], pp. 115–119). The sentence 'the land of Sinʿār was called Babel because of the confusion' (cf. [13], I, p. 8) is no more than a loose adaptation of Gn 11:9 (ܡܛܠ ܗܢܐ ܩܪܐ ܫܡܗ ܀ ܒܒܠ ܡܛܠ ܕܬܡܢ ܒܠܒܠ {ܐܬܬܒܠܒܠܘ ܗܝ} ܠܫܢܐ)

ܟܢܘܐ ܚܠܡܗ ܢ܇ ܠܘ 'Therefore they call its name Babel, because it was there that the Lord confounded the language of all the earth'), in which Michael the Syrian includes the toponym Sinʿār used in the opening of his account, drawing on Gn 11:2.

The final portion of the first part of the narrative concludes with Michael the Syrian's allusion to ʿEber as 'the great old man' (*sobō rabō*), a feature also found in the chronographies compiled by ancient authors, who describe this character as being of great age at the time the Tower was built ([16], pp. 57, §43, cf. 62 §48). The positive attitude toward him undoubtedly reflects the fact that the Hebrew people are said to be descended from him, as also asserted by Josephus ([17], I:146): Ἕβερος ἀφ᾿ οὗ τοὺς Ἰουδαίος Ἡβραίους ἀρχῆθεν ἐκάλουν ('…ʿEber, after whom the Jews were originally called Hebrews'). This would also account, it would seem, for his opposition to the building of the Tower; ʿEber, who took no part in it (cf. [13], I, p. 8), remained steadfast in obedience to his Lord ([19], p. 604 (=48)). This is a well-known reference both in the Jewish milieu ([18], V, pp. 195, 205), from which it comes, and in Christian circles, as indicated by the tenth-century Arab Melkite chronicler Agapius of Menbij ([19], p. 601 (=45)), who states that 'because of the language of ʿEber the Jews were called Hebrews, because the first language was Hebrew' (على لسان عابر سموا اليهود عبرانين لان اول لسان كان عبرانيا). This tradition was familiar in the Arab milieu: Eutychius of Alexandria ([2], I, p. 15) notes that 'ʿĀbir was the father of the Hebrews, and the Arabs called him Hūd' (وعابر هو ابو العبرانيين والعرب تسميه هود).

3. Rewriting Translations

We remarked at the beginning that the author includes two quotations taken directly from the account of the building of the Tower of Babel provided by the Book of Genesis. As we show in the synoptic chart below (Table 1), he takes 11:4,7 from the Syriac version of the Peshīṭtā, translated from a Hebrew text in conjunction with LXX and other material including Targumic texts [22].

Table 1. Hebrew text and translation of Gn 11:4,7.

Translation	Hebrew text	Verses
And they said: 'Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth'	וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָבָה נִבְנֶה-לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן-נָפוּץ עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ	11:4
'Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech'	הָבָה נֵרְדָה וְנָבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם--אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ	11:7

To facilitate comparison of Michael the Syrian's text with the Peshīṭtā version, the two are set out below in the tabular form (Table 2).

The differences between the two are evident. In 11:4, Michael the Syrian has made a number of changes with respect to the Peshīṭtā text. The same narratological technique, although of a different nature, is also to be found in other accounts of this episode, including Solomon of Akhlāṭ's 'Book of the Bee' ([12], pp. ܢ/41). The only plausible explanation—apart from the possibility that the author consulted another version of Gn 11:4—would seem to be that he adopted this strategy simply for compositional purposes. As Table 3 shows, there is a very close match between the two texts, and the

word order of the Peshīṭtā is faithfully respected, with the exception of the phrase ܪܫܗ ܒܫܡܝܐ ('with its top in heaven'), not found in Michael the Syrian, and a few other minor features, e.g ܐܡܪܝܢ for ܘܐܡܪܘ or ܢܥܒܕ for ܢܒܢܐ/ ܕܢ.

Table 2. Gn 11:4.

Michael the Syrian	Peshīṭtā	Verses
܆ ܘܗܘܘ ܐܡܪܝܢ ܠܚܕܕܐ ܬܘ ܢܒܢܐ ܠܢ ܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܘܡܓܕܠܐ ܆ ܘܢܥܒܕ ܠܢ ܐܬܪܐ ܕܢܬܟܢܫ ܬܡܢ ܟܠܗ	ܘܐܡܪܘ ܬܘ ܢܒܢܐ ܠܢ ܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܘܡܓܕܠܐ ܕܪܫܗ ܒܫܡܝܐ ܘܢܥܒܕ ܠܢ ܫܡܐ ܕܠܡܐ {ܕܠܐ} ܢܬܒܕܪ ܥܠ ܐܦܝ ܟܠܗ ܐܪܥܐ	11:4
ܘܢܒܠܒܠ ܬܡܢ ܠܫܢܗܘܢ	ܬܘ ܢܚܘܬ ܘܢܒܠܒܠ ܬܡܢ ܠܫܢܗܘܢ ܕܠܐ ܢܫܡܥܘܢ	11:7

Table 3. Lexical equivalences on Gn 11:4.

Michael the Syrian	Peshīṭtā
ܗܘܘ ܐܡܪܝܢ	ܘܐܡܪܘ
—	ܬܘ
ܬܘ ܢܒܢܐ ܠܢ	ܢܒܢܐ ܠܢ
ܡܕܝܢܬܐ	ܡܕܝܢܬܐ
ܘܡܓܕܠܐ	ܘܡܓܕܠܐ
—	ܕܪܫܗ
—	ܒܫܡܝܐ
ܠܢ ܢܥܒܕ	ܢܥܒܕ ܠܢ
ܐܬܪܐ	ܫܡܐ
ܢܬܟܢܫ	ܕܠܡܐ {ܕܠܐ}
ܬܡܢ	ܢܬܒܕܪ

The case transliterated below in Table 4, however, is a different matter. Here, the two versions are quite different because Michael the Syrian rewrote the text using the information provided by the biblical account to the effect that after the building of the Tower, mankind was scattered. As indicated earlier, therefore, it would appear that the author, rather than using another version of the account, took the biblical text as a starting point, adapting it to his narrative needs, and in particular to the framework imposed by the account, *i.e.*, the building of the Tower and the scattering of those that built it, each group departing to the lands in which they settled. Michel the Syrian wishes to focus not just on the building of the Tower, but on the scattering of mankind prompted by the curse (*lawṭthō*) deriving from their refusal to obey God and his commandments.

Table 4. Translation disagreement in Gn 11:4.

Michael the Syrian	Peshīṭtā
ܘܢܬܟܢܫ ܬܡܢ ܟܠܗ	ܥܠ ܐܦܝ ܟܠܗ ܐܪܥܐ
and we go to his possesions	upon the face of the whole earth

In other respects, this divergence resembles that found in Gn 11:7, where Michael the Syrian has again clearly opted for a rewriting strategy (Table 5). Strictly speaking, then, this is not a translation,

for all that the author introduces the text with the set expression 'said the scripture (*'emar ktobō*). This is confirmed by a simple glance at the text.

Table 5. Gn 11:7.

Michael the Syrian	Peshīṭtā	Verses
ܢܚܬ ܡܪܝܐ ܐܡܪ ܟܬܒܐ	ܬܘ ܢܚܘܬ ܘ ܢܦܠܓ	11:7
ܘܦܠܓ ܡ̇ܩܠ ܠܗܘܢ	ܬܡܢ ܠܫܢܗ	

Michael the Syrian quotes only part of Gn 11:7: 'And [God] divided—said the Scripture—their sound (*i.e.*, language)' (*nḥet Moryō—'emar ktobō—w-flag mqol l-hūn*), which, moreover, does not coincide with the *lectio* provided by Peshīṭtā: 'Come, let us go down and there divide their language' (*taw neḥūt w-neflag tamon leshōnō*). Did the author perhaps make use of another Syriac or Greek translation? (cf. LXX δεῦτε καὶ καταβάντες συγχέωμεν ἐκεῖ αὐτῶν τὴν γλῶσσαν 'Come, and having gone down let us there confound their tongue'). It would appear not. Unlike other authors who have narrated the episode of the building of the Tower, for example Solomon of Akhlāṭ, who quotes literally the Peshīṭtā text ([12], pp. ܡܒ/42)—as indeed he does in the earlier case—Michael adapted the quotation to his narrative requirements, and in doing so did not hesitate to 'rewrite' the Peshīṭtā text rather than quoting literally from the biblical account.

One of the interesting features of Michael's strategy is that in the first section of the statement (before the aside *'emar ktobō*) he dispensed with the imperative form *taw* and the fut. *neḥūt* was replaced by the perfective *nḥet*. In the second section, too, the fut. *neflag* is replaced by the perfective *flag*. It is also significant that in the process of adaptation Michael the Syrian interpreted *leshonō* 'language' as *mqol* 'sound', to which he added the pronominal suffix preceded by the preposition with possessive value *l-hūn* in order to mark plurality. The use of *mqol* rather than *leshōnō* is not without significance, since it provides a direct link to the Hebrew *śāpāh* 'sound' (cf. LXX *glōssa*).

4. Transmitting Traditions

As indicated earlier, the second part of Michael the Syrian's account is plainly exegetical, and therefore differs radically from the previous narrative sequences. This second part focuses only on the well-known *topos* of the 'primitive language' (*leshonō qadmōyō*) or 'single language' (*leshonō ḥad* < Heb. *śāfāh 'eḥāt*; cf. LXX *cheilos*) which is obviously linked to the *topos* of the 'holy language', in Hebrew לְשׁוֹן הקדש, which for the rabbis was Hebrew ([23], pp. 7–11). The author introduces it by specifying that though God divided the 'single language' into seventy-two languages, as a punishment for building the Tower, he preserved for 'Eber that original language, the 'primitive and paternal language' (*leshonō qadmoyō w-'abohoyō*; cf. Ar. *awwal al-alsinah* 'the first of the languages', ([1], pp. 122–123) as a reward for 'Eber's righteous and faithful attitude to the commandment (*fūqdonō*) of God (cf. [18], I, p. 181).

The author's first task is to specify the etymon of the toponym Babēl (ܒܒܠ). To do so, he links it in his Aramaic language (*'armoyō*), *i.e.*, Syriac ([24], pp. 229–239), with the term *būlbolō* 'confusion' (cf. [13], I, p. 8), from the root ܒܠ 'confuse' ([25], I, p. 527), which is the equivalent of the Hebrew *qal* בָּלַל 'to confuse' used in Gn 11:7,9 ([26], I, p. 128). The celebrated 'Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius' ([27], pp. 61/125) and Solomon of Akhlāṭ's 'Book of the Bee' ([12], pp. ܡܒ/42) note that 'their tongues

were confused' (ܐܬܒ̈ܠܒܠ (ܗܘܘ) ܠܥ ܗܘ̈ܢܝܗܘܢ). A similar idea is furnished by the Arab translator of the *Me'arath Gazzē* in his rendering *tabalbalat al-alsun* 'the languages were confounded' ([1], pp. 124–125), although in the previous section he expands the dual sense of the Syriac verb using the verb pair *ikhtalafat wa-tabalbalat* ('they were mixed and confused'). Agapius of Menbij reports that *al-Rabb hunāk balbala ... alsinatahum* 'the Lord confounded there … their languages' ([19], p. 604 (48)) whilst the Nestorian Ibn al-Ṭayyib offers a more periphrastic version ([28], pp. 58/55). It should be noted that Michael the Syrian's explanation can in no way be considered linguistic. Quite the reverse: this is an exegetical explanation in that Michael the Syrian simply transmits the popular etymology inherited from the biblical text (Gn 11:7,9). At this point, it should be recalled that LXX translates *qal* בָּלַל (Gn 11:9) by the noun σύγχυσις 'confusion' ([3], p. 644), the term also used by Josephus ([17], I, p. 118), an author on whom Michael the Syrian draws extensively.

The second part comprises a four-level structure: (a) an etymological statement; (b) a reference to the Fathers of the Church (Mār ʾEphrem and St. Basil) and to two chroniclers (James of Edessa and John of Litharb) based on older sources, clearly intended to support the validity of Michel the Syrian's interpretation by appealing to *auctoritas*; (c) a reference to the tradition stemming from the figure of Abraham; and finally; (d) a conclusion confirming this information and opting for one of the two alternatives available.

We have already examined the etymological statement. The reference to patristic authorities and the chroniclers draws on the support of key figures in Christian Syriac culture, ancient and medieval: the Fathers of the Church to whom he appeals (cf. [13], I, p. 8) are ʾEphrem the Syrian, ca. 306–373 CE [29] and Basil, who is none other than Basil the Great, 329/30–379 CE ([30], pp. 579–91). The two medieval chroniclers referred to are the famous seventh-century authors James of Edessa ([31], pp. 1–10) and John of Litharb, known as John the Stylite ([32], V, p. 931). Barhebraeus offers the same references, although he gives Yathrib rather than the correct Litharb, whilst agreeing with Michael the Syrian that these two writers maintained that Hebrew was the primeval language ([13], I, p. 8).

Of particular interest is Michael the Syrian's use of the Abraham tradition to justify the etymon of the word, a tradition to which Barhebraeus also alludes, albeit more briefly ([13], I, p. 8). In Gn 14:13 (וַיָּבֹא הַפָּלִיט וַיַּגֵּד לְאַבְרָם הָעִבְרִי) 'And there came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew', cf. Heb 11:13–16), Abraham is described as 'the Hebrew' (*ha-ʿiḇrî*). The same interpretation is given by the great Saʿadyah (10th c. CE) in his Judeo-Arabic rendering אלעבראנّ 'the Hebrew' ([33], p. 21). This name is taken to mean 'to pass' or 'to cross over' (עבר), because Abraham crossed over (cf. LXX τῷ περάτῃ αὐτὸς) the River Euphrates to leave the land where he had grown up to get to the land of Canaan (Gn 12:1ff).

The Haggadah and the midrashim also refer to this event, which was obviously echoed by Christian ([28], pp. 58/55) and even Islamic authors. The Muslim writer Ibn Saʿd notes in his *Ṭabaqāt* that, before he crossed the Euphrates, the language of Abraham (Ibrāhīm) was Aramaic (*suryānī*), but after crossing the river from Ḥarrān God changed his language to what is assumed to be Hebrew (*al-ʿibrāniyyah*). Since those who arrested him could not understand Hebrew, he was able to escape persecution by Nimrod ([21], pp. 231–232). The account offered by Ibn Saʿd matches the information provided by Ibn al-Ṭayyib, who notes that Abraham was *nabaṭī* 'a Nabataean' who spoke *nabaṭī* 'Aramaic' ([28], pp. 58/55), which he adds was not Syriac, and must in this case be identified as part of a different linguistic, cultural, and religious context ([34], pp. 487–503). The idea, as we have

suggested, is also to be found in other Christian authors, and particularly among Syriac writers, including James of Edesssa and John of Litharb, as asserted by Barhebraeus (13th c. CE) in his *Maḵtbanūth Zaḇnē*, which also notes that the name derives from Abraham's crossing of the river Euphrates ([13], I, p. 8). Although not mentioned explicitly, it is this tradition that underlies the account in the *Me'arath Gazzē*, where Abraham is described as *al-'ibrī*, *i.e.*, 'Hebrew', retaining in Arabic the meaning of the Syriac *'ebrōyō* 'the Hebrew' ([1], pp. 122–123). This is also the case in the writings of earlier Christian Arab authors, including the Melkite Agapius of Menbij (10th c. CE), who in recounting this tradition specified that 'others say that because Abraham crossed the Euphrates they were called Hebrews' (واخرون يقلون من اجل ابراهيم عبر الفرات سموا عبرانين) ([19], p. 601 (=45)).

Contrasting with this interpretation of עִבְרִי (*'ibrî*) as 'Hebrew', however, is the interpretation of ܥܒ̇ܪܝܐ (*'ebroyō*; cf. Aram. עִבְרָאָה) as 'he who crosses', an exegesis echoed by Michael the Syrian. The point of the exegesis, as Michael himself concludes, is to link *'ebroyō* with ܐܪܡܝܐ (*'armoyō*), *i.e.*, 'Aramaic', since some felt that Aramaic was the original language. Clearly, the link between *'ebroyō* and *'armoyō* is an artificial one, since the two terms are not grammatically related ([35], pp. 51–54). The Peshīṭtā text of course served as the basis for that interpretation: ܘܐܬܐ ܚܕ ܕܐܬܦܠܛ ܘܚܘܝ ܠܐܒܪܡ ܥܒ̇ܪܝܐ 'And there came one who escaped, and told Abram *'ebroyō'*…, but the narrative formulation provided by Michael the Syrian draws—here as elsewhere ([36], pp. 226–227, n. 72)—on patristic exegesis. Far from reaching any consensus regarding the two possibilities—Hebrew and Aramaic—a third option emerged based on an idea current in Melkite circles, and found in Eutychius of Alexandria ([2], I, p. 16):

فقال قوم كانت لغتهم السرياني وقال قوم كانت لغتهم العبراني وقال قوم كانت لغتهم اليوناني وهم عندي اصدق لان لسان اليوناني احكم واعرض واوسع من لسان السرياني والعبراني

"One group said that their language was Aramaic, another group that their language was Hebrew, and another group that their language was Greek, which is what I take for the truth, because the Greek language is more trustworthy, broader and vaster (in terms of vocabulary and expressions) than the Aramaic and Hebrew languages".

Moreover, among supporters of the Aramaic option there were also, *velis nolis*, divisions. The tradition transmitted by Michael the Syrian's text is part of a pan-Syriac tradition to be found in Eastern Syriac milieux, for example in the following century in the 'Book of the Bee' by the Nestorian bishop Solomon of Akhlāṭ ([12], pp. ܡܒ/42):

ܡܢ ܐܕܡ ܘܥܕܡܐ ܠܒܢܝܢܐ ܕܡܓܕܠܐ ܚܕ ܗ̣ܘܐ ܠܫܢܐ ܕܟܠܗܘܢ، ܗ̇ܘ ܕܝܢ ܣܘ̇ܪܝܝܐ ܗ̣ܘ ܀ ܐ̱ܢܫܝ̈ܢ ܕܝܢ ܐܡ̣ܪܘ ܕܥܒܪܝܐ ܗ̣ܘܐ ܀ ܐܠܐ ܥܒܪ̈ܝܐ ܠܐ ܐܬܩܪܝܘ ܒܗܢܐ ܫܡܐ ܥܕܡܐ ܕܥܒ̣ܪ ܐܒܪܗܡ ܢܗܪܐ ܦܪܬ ܘܥܡ̣ܪ ܒܚܪܢ ܀ ܘܡܢ ܥܒܘܪܗ ܕܐܒܪܗܡ ܐܬܩܪܝܘ ܥܒܪ̈ܝܐ ܀

"From Adam to the building of the tower, there was only one language, and that was Syriac. Some have said that it was Hebrew; but the Hebrews were not called by this name until after Abraham had crossed the river Euphrates and dwelt in Ḥarrān; and from his crossing they were called Hebrews.

Yet the tradition echoed by Solomon of Akhlāṭ is appreciably not the same narration as that reflected in Michael the Syrian, even though it shares the same content and aims, while providing substantially greater precision. Whilst Michael the Syrian holds that the primeval language was Aramaic (ܐܪܡܝܐ), without specifying any particular Aramaic dialect, Solomon of Akhlāṭ states

that it was a specific Aramaic dialectal group known as Syriac (ܣܘܪܝܐܝܬ), a tradition with several variants in Nestorian circles ([28], pp. 58/55). Clearly, Michael the Syrian is echoing an old Christian interpretation, although it was one which was already circulating in Jewish circles where the primeval language was thought to be Aramaic ([18], V, p. 206). But what Solomon of Akhlāṭ did here was to adapt the tradition by identifying that language as the Aramaic dialect spoken by the Christians ([37], pp. 43–45), thus marking a new advance in the Syriac reception of this *topos* regarding the original language.

5. Conclusions

Naturally, Michael the Syrian's account of the building of the Tower of Babel focuses primarily on that *topos*, which grew into a rich tradition in the monotheistic literatures from antiquity to the Middle Ages. The author's structural approach to the text draws on a basic text, Gn 11:1–9, on which Michael constructs what we might term the target text. We saw earlier that this was not intended at any stage as a translation, but rather as the adaptation of a translated text (the Peshīṭṭā) to the narrative framework established by Michael the Syrian.

Although he adheres closely to the Syriac text of the Peshīṭṭā, he is really shaping the information provided by the biblical account to fit the three-level structure of his text. Translation, narration and exegesis thus combine to provide a text in which all three depend on each other to give a holistic meaning to the events narrated through this rewriting. Countering the human challenge inherent in building a tower (*ziggurat*), a place in which to worship the Mesopotamian deities, God responds by confounding the language of the builders, and then scattering them over the face of the earth, *i.e.*, all over the world.

The division of the single language spoken by mankind after the flood into seventy-two languages serves to illustrate not the destruction of mankind but, quite the reverse, the diversity of the peoples who were henceforth to form states and nations, each with their own varied and often-conflicting interests. After all, the world—according to ancient belief—consisted of seventy-two nations (Gn 10; cf. Mt 28:19). It was that united world which rose up against God. The union of peoples depended on communication, and more particularly the sharing of a language; the concept of a "single language" was thus important because that linguistic unity was at the same time an assertion of the ethnic and cultural unity of those who spoke that language.

The exegesis transmitted by Michael the Syrian settles a question that is more than simply linguistic. The point at issue is not just which was the original language spoken by the first dwellers on earth; there is also an attempt to link that linguistic origin to the people who spoke that language. In turn, that ethnic and linguistic origin is linked to a third element, that of religion. Hence the reference to 'Eber, described as a righteous, faithful man, who observed the commandments and did not stray from the path of God. Thus, the language that was preserved for 'Eber also points to the origin of the Hebrews. Interestingly, Abraham's forsaking of paganism and embracing of the faith in one God are symbolized by the crossing of the Euphrates, *i.e.*, the point when Abraham made Hebrew his new language, thus replacing Aramaic.

Clearly, the narrative provided in Gn 11:1–9 has an exemplary function; the redactors intended it as a means of transferring the new 'world order' created at that time within an increasingly Aramaicized

society. This is therefore the description of a newly established *status ethnicus,* in which the primeval language is simultaneously an indicator of the origins and religious beliefs embodied by 'Eber, the eponym of גוֹי קָדוֹשׁ 'holy nation' (Ex 19:6), a term which has its ideological parallel in לְשׁוֹן הקדשׁ 'holy language'. There is thus a rearranging of historical and religious models: Hebrew and its speakers—the Hebrew people—represent the new model, founded on faith in the true God. By contrast, Aramaic and its speakers represent the old model, a polytheistic pagan society on which true faith in the one God was superimposed.

But the assertion claimed as his own by Michael the Syrian at the end of the text tells us that the primeval language was in fact Aramaic. The assertion is of interest not only because it supports an interpretation which differs from the tradition maintained by two pillars of Syriac orthodoxy—Mār 'Ephrem and St. Basil—but also because it strays from the line adopted by the prestigious chroniclers James of Edessa and John of Litharb. What was Michael the Syrian's purpose in doing this? In the hands of Christian authors, this tradition represents a new inversion of the historical and religious model. The language of the Christians is an Aramaic dialect, whose ancestral origin goes back to Abraham, *i.e.*, to the father of the three Abrahamic religions. It is to Abraham that God makes the promise (Gn 12:1–2) which will later become a covenant (Gen 15:18; 17:1–14). Abraham crosses the Euphrates (Gn 12:1–2) , and that act of 'crossing, passing to the other side' means being party to the promise made by God (the new social model, dominated by faith in the one God) and forsaking the earlier pagan world. That action (ʿ*ebroyō*) is related to the Aramaic language spoken by Abraham, who—*pace* certain Jewish accounts—is not given a new language after crossing the Euphrates.

The exegesis transmitted by Michael the Syrian seeks to assert what for him and others was a historical truth, an original linguistic situation—a group of dialects that developed from Aramaic—which is in fact that of Syriac Christendom. The original language, therefore, was not the national language of the Hebrews, but rather that of the Aramaic-speaking Christians. It is not difficult to imagine the importance of this claim amongst Aramaic-speaking Christian communities. This was not simply a matter of defending linguistic origins; the sociohistorical context in which this exegesis developed was a wholly new society, dominated by a new Arab state, and a new religion, Islam; the Arabic language of the Qur'ān was—according to the Muslims—the language in which God had vouchsafed to mankind the last, true revelation.

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