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Barhebraeus: Gregory Abū al-Faraj

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Alternate names

Grīgōriyōs Bar ‘Ebrāyā

Grīgōriyōs Bar ‘Ebroyo

Born **Malatya, (Turkey), 1225/1226**

Died **Marāgha, (Iran), 29/30 July 1286**

Barhebraeus, a Syrian (or Syriac) Orthodox (“Jacobite”) prelate and polymath, is the foremost representative of the “Syriac Renaissance” of the 12th and 13th centuries. He was also closely associated with several members of the “Marāgha School” of astronomers, and he wrote several works dealing with various aspects of astronomy.

Barhebraeus' birthplace of Malatya (or Melitene) was at the time under the rule of the Saljūqs of Rūm (Asia Minor), a Turkish-Islamic dynasty. It had an important community of Syrian Orthodox Christians that included Barhebraeus' family. His father Aaron (Ahrōn) was a physician. The view that links the name Barhebraeus to a Jewish ancestry is best rejected in favor of one linking it to the village of ‘Ebrā on the Euphrates, downstream of Melitene. After periods of study in Antioch, Tripoli (both then still in the hands of the Crusaders), and possibly Damascus, he was raised to the episcopate at the age of 20 in 1246 and was appointed, successively, to the sees of Gubos and Laqabin in the vicinity of Melitene. Sometime around 1253, Barhebraeus was transferred to Aleppo, where he would witness the fall of the city to the Mongols in 1260. In 1264, he was raised to the office of the Maphrian of the East, the second highest office in the Syrian Orthodox Church with jurisdiction over an area roughly coinciding with today's Iraq and Iran. His normal place of residence as Maphrian was Mosul and the nearby monastery of Mar Mattai, but a significant part of his maphrianate was spent in Marāgha and Tabrīz, the new centers of power under the Mongol ilkhānids.

Barhebraeus composed over 40 works covering a diverse range of subjects, most of which are in Syriac, although some are in Arabic. Typical of Barhebraeus is the manner in which he takes an Arabic (occasionally Persian) work as his model and structures his own work around it. He then incorporates into this framework materials taken from both Arabic and Syriac sources, thus making a new synthesis out of older Syriac and more recent Arabic materials. In his philosophical works he

is influenced by **Ibn Sīnā**, while in his moral-mystical theology he stands under the influence of Al-Ghazālī (died: 1111), the preeminent Islamic theologian, jurist, and Sufi.

Barhebraeus' interest in astronomy and related sciences is likely to have been prompted by his acquaintance with **Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī** and other scholars gathered around the newly founded observatory and library in Marāgha. Evidence for this is provided by a manuscript of a collection of mathematical texts revised by Ṭūsī, which was once in Barhebraeus' possession and bears his signature (today in Istanbul-üsküdar, Selim Ağa MS 743). We are also told by Ḥājjī Khalīfa that **Ibn Abī al-Shukr al-Maghribī**, one of Ṭūsī's collaborators, composed an epitome of **Ptolemy's** *Almagest* at Barhebraeus' behest (*Kashf al-zunūn*, Vol. 5, pp. 387, 389).

Barhebraeus' major work in the field of the exact sciences is the *Ascent of the Mind* (*Sullāqā hawnānāyā*), a textbook of astronomy and mathematical geography composed in 1279 and modeled on Ṭūsī's *Tadhkira fī 'ilm al-hay'a*, but incorporating materials taken from other sources. Especially for his Syriac terminology, Barhebraeus must have been dependent upon earlier Syriac works, among them the works of **Severus Sebokht**, who is mentioned by name at one point (Nau, p. 106f.).

The lists of Barhebraeus' works mention a work, now lost, called "Astronomical tables (*zīj*) for Beginners," composed, according to the older manuscript witnesses of the lists (Vatican, Borgia syr. 146 and Florence, Laur. or. 298), in Arabic. It is unclear what exactly Barhebraeus means when he tells us in his *Chronicon ecclesiasticum* (II.443.1f., 443.19f.) that he "solved/explained" (*shrā*, corresponding to Arabic *ḥalla*) the "Book of Euclid" (*i. e.*, the *Elements*) in Marāgha in 1267/1268 and Ptolemy's *Almagest* similarly in Marāgha in the summer of 1272. Perhaps the meaning is "lectured on" or simply "studied." It is unlikely, at any rate, that it involved the composition of written works.

Astronomy and related disciplines occasionally play a role in Barhebraeus' other works, as in the second part ("On Creation," composed *circa* 1267) of his major theological work, the *Candelabrum of the Sanctuary* (*Mnāraṭ qudshē*). The principal source for the parts of this work dealing with mathematical geography, astronomy, and chronology is **Bīrūnī's** *Kitāb al-taḥīm li-awā'il ṣinā'at al-tanjīm*; here too, Barhebraeus has used a number of additional sources, as may be seen from the fact that the values given for the latitudes of the seven climes are neither those given in Bīrūnī's *Taḥīm* nor those in Ṭūsī's *Tadhkira* (which Barhebraeus later adopted in the *Ascent of the Mind*) but the traditional values as given in the *Almagest*. Traces of Severus Sebokht's works are found again among the newly added materials in Barhebraeus' later, shorter work on theology, the *Book of Rays* (*Kṭāḥā d-zalgē*), which is otherwise largely a summary of the *Candelabrum*.

Barhebraeus' historical works are of interest to the historian of science for the information they provide on earlier scholars and have frequently been used for this purpose since the first publication of his Arabic history, the *Mukhtaṣar ta'rīkh al-duwal*, in 1663. While the publication of those works used as sources by Barhebraeus (*e. g.*, Qiftī and **Sā'id al-Andalusī**) has diminished the value of Barhebraeus' works in this respect, there are instances where he reveals his knowledge of older Syriac sources inaccessible to Arabic historians. One example is the passage on the trepidation of the fixed stars taken from **Theon of Alexandria's** *Small Commentary on the Handy Tables* (in Barhebraeus' Syriac *Chronicon*; also in the *Ascent of the Mind* and his major philosophical work, the *Cream of Wisdom*/*Ḥēwaṭ ḥekmā*).

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