CANADIAN SOCIETY FOR SYRIAC STUDIES
SOCIETE CANADIENNE DES ETUDES SYRIAQUES

ܟܢܘܫܝܐ ܟܢܕܝܐ ܕܝܘܠܦܢܐ ܣܘܪܝܝܐ

Annual Symposium

XXVI



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Saturday, November 28, 2026

Room 200B (Boardroom), Bancroft Building
4 Bancroft Avenue, St George Campus, Toronto

Sponsored by the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto

Free public event · All welcome



The Virgin's Vault, Mar Behnam · Photo © Amir Harrak

Canadian Society for Syriac Studies

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Annual Symposium XXVI

XXVIe Symposium annuel

Saturday, November 28, 2026

Samedi 28 novembre 2026

Bancroft Building, University of Toronto

Pavillon Bancroft, Université de Toronto

With gratitude to the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto, for sponsoring this symposium.

Avec nos remerciements au Département des civilisations du Proche et du Moyen-Orient de l'Université de Toronto, de parrainer ce symposium.

Annual Symposium XXVI

Saturday, November 28, 2026

Room 200B (Boardroom), Bancroft Building · 4 Bancroft Avenue, St George Campus, Toronto

9:15
Morning coffee

9:30
Annual General Meeting of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies
All members welcome · in person & online

10:00
Opening & welcome
Geoffrey Greatrex, President, Canadian Society for Syriac Studies

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SESSION I *Chair: Sihaam Khan, University of Toronto*

10:15–10:45
Equal Freedom and Repentance in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: Jacob of Serugh's Homily "On the Son Who Squandered His Riches"
Armando Elkhoury, The Hidden Pearl Press · *online*

10:45–11:15
St Ephrem the Syrian and the Nicene Term ὁμοούσιος — Defending Christ: Celebrating 1700 Years of Nicaea
John Haitham Issak, McMaster Divinity College

11:15–11:45 *Coffee & tea break*

SESSION II *Chair: Rita Sawaya, University of Toronto*

11:45–12:15
A Fragmentary Garshuni-Arabic Chronicle of the Early Modern Maronite College in Rome
Ephrem Aboud Ishac, Austrian Academy of Sciences / Central European University

12:15 *Reception lunch*



Equal Freedom and Repentance in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: Jacob of Serugh's Homily "On the Son Who Squandered His Riches"

Armando Elkhoury, Independent Researcher / The Hidden Pearl Press

Session I · 10:15–10:45 AM (20 min + 10 min Q&A) · Delivered online

ABSTRACT

This presentation examines Jacob of Serugh's (d. 521) metrical homily (mimro) "On the Son Who Squandered His Riches," his interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son. Through a close reading of the text, it shows that Jacob teaches that freedom is the same in everyone, righteous and sinners alike. Jacob reads the father as God, the older son as the righteous, and the younger son as sinners. The younger son uses his freedom to leave and the same freedom to return. In the distant land he enslaves that freedom to the love of the world and its passions, but repentance awakens his sense of himself as a free-born son and makes him value being with the father above possessions and worldly desires. Jacob also shows that God's love for both sons is one and undivided. Scholars have noted Jacob's defense of free will in his other homilies but have paid little attention to freedom and repentance in this one. This paper addresses that gap.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Rev. Dr Armando Elkhoury is the pastor of Our Lady of the Cedars of Mount Lebanon Maronite Church in Fairlawn, Ohio. He was previously vice-rector of the Maronite Seminary in Washington, DC, and taught Syriac literature at the Catholic University of America. Rev. Dr Elkhoury is the founder and president of The Hidden Pearl Press, a nonprofit that publishes books on the Eastern and Oriental Churches, and the editor-in-chief of the Syriac Treasures series. His research interests include the Syriac Fathers, especially Jacob of Serugh. With Rodrigue Constantin, he is preparing translations of Jacob's homilies on repentance, forthcoming in January 2027.



St Ephrem the Syrian and the Nicene Term ὁμοούσιος — Defending Christ: Celebrating 1700 Years of Nicaea

John Haitham Issak, McMaster Divinity College

Session I · 10:45–11:15 AM (20 min + 10 min Q&A)

ABSTRACT

St Ephrem, known for the Syriac church as “the prophet of the Syriac people,” was a teacher, a wonderful poet, a very great theologian, and a defender of the faith. He was among the most fruitful and productive of the Syriac writers. He wrote in Syriac, which is the dialect of the Aramaic language. After he left his city, Nisibis, for Edessa, where he spent the last ten years of his life, he encountered theological controversies with the followers of Marcion, Bardaisan, and Arius. His teaching was centered on the nature of Godhead, the mystery of incarnation, and the Trinity against Arianism. He died in the city of Edessa in 373.

The Church Fathers who gathered at the council to address the heresy of Arius declared that the Son possesses the exact nature of the Father; they used the term ὁμοούσιος, which means “of the same substance.” The term is significant in the theological expressions of the early church, particularly since the Council of Nicaea. It was utilized to express and declare the Christology of Jesus and his relationship to the Father. The paper will analyze and discuss the term, examining whether Ephrem used it in his hymns. If not, it will explore the alternative term he used to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Rev. Dr John Haitham Issak graduated with his Ph.D. from McMaster Divinity College. His ongoing research focuses on Syriac and the Syriac church fathers, including Ephrem, Aphrahat, and Jacob of Serugh. Rev. Dr Issak has taught Patristics, Syriac, and Greek at Syriac Orthodox seminaries in Nineveh (Mosul), Iraq, and in Damascus, Syria. He has also served as a director at the Syriac Orthodox seminary in Mosul. He has presented papers at numerous conferences related to Syriac studies, especially on Ephrem. He regularly participated in the Pappas Patristic Program at the Holy Greek Orthodox School of Theology. Rev. Dr Issak has published several articles, and his first book on Athanasius’ pneumatology is titled “The Spirit of Truth: Johannine Pneumatology in the Letters of Athanasius to Serapion”.



A Fragmentary Garshuni-Arabic Chronicle of the Early Modern Maronite College in Rome

Ephrem Aboud Ishac, Austrian Academy of Sciences / Central European University

Session II · 11:45 AM–12:15 PM (20 min + 10 min Q&A)

ABSTRACT

Situated among liturgical folios in a Vatican Syriac manuscript (Vat. Sir. 459), fragments of an early modern Garshuni-Arabic chronicle offer a critical, non-institutional perspective on the Maronite College in Rome. This paper analyzes these textual fragments across three primary axes.

First, they detail the material realities of student life, documenting systemic poverty, frequent expulsions, and intense administrative friction with the Jesuit directorship. Second, the account maps the complex inter-communal dynamics of the Roman educational milieu, highlighting interactions among Maronite, Syriac Orthodox, Cypriot, and European actors. Finally, the fragments contextualize the era's intellectual and pedagogical disputes, focusing specifically on ideological conflicts over Syriac language instruction and the contentious alienation of Syriac printing types to the Propaganda Fide. By foregrounding these fragmentary records, the presentation demonstrates the historiographical utility of embedded manuscript notes for reconstructing the material, social, and educational networks of early modern Eastern Christianity.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Dr Ephrem Aboud Ishac is the Principal Investigator for the FWF project "Identifying Scattered Puzzles of Syriac Liturgy Manuscripts" at the Institute for Medieval Research (Division of Byzantine Research) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. He also serves as a Visiting Professor in the Department of Historical Studies at Central European University (CEU), Vienna. Dr Ishac has held research fellowships at the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Université catholique de Louvain, the University of Graz, the Religious Studies Foundation in Bologna, and Yale University. His research focuses on Syriac liturgical and canonical texts, with a particular emphasis on digital humanities approaches to manuscript fragments and cataloging. He has taught Eastern Christian liturgical rites and Syriac language at the universities of Salzburg and Yale.

ABOUT THE CANADIAN SOCIETY FOR SYRIAC STUDIES

The aim of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies is to promote the study of Syriac culture, which is rooted in the same soil from which the ancient Mesopotamian and biblical literatures sprang. The Society is purely academic; its activities include a series of public lectures, an annual symposium, and the publication of its Journal. Founded at the University of Toronto in 1999.



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Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies

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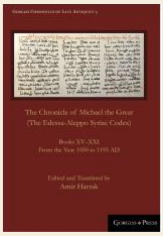
Amir Harrak

Founder and Past President of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies

Photo courtesy of Amir Harrak



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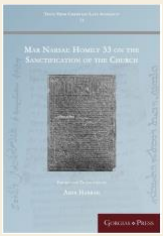

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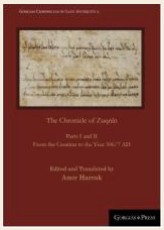

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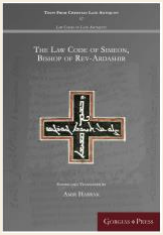
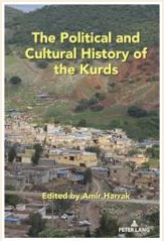


The Law Code of Simeon, Bishop of Rev-Ardashir
Gorgias Press, 2019



Catalogue of Syriac and Garshuni Manuscripts (CSCO 639)
Peeters, 2011



The Political and Cultural History of the Kurds (ed.)
Peter Lang