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# THE PRACTICAL CHRISTOLOGY OF PHILOXENOS OF MABBUG

*David A. Michelson*

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*To my parents:  
Thank you for teaching me to love the Author of all creation;  
may I do the same.*

*ἔστιν δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ ἃ ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, ἅτινα ἐὰν  
γράφηται καθ' ἓν, οὐδ' αὐτὸν οἶμαι τὸν κόσμον χωρήσειν  
τὰ γραφόμενα βιβλία. ἀμήν  
John 21:25*



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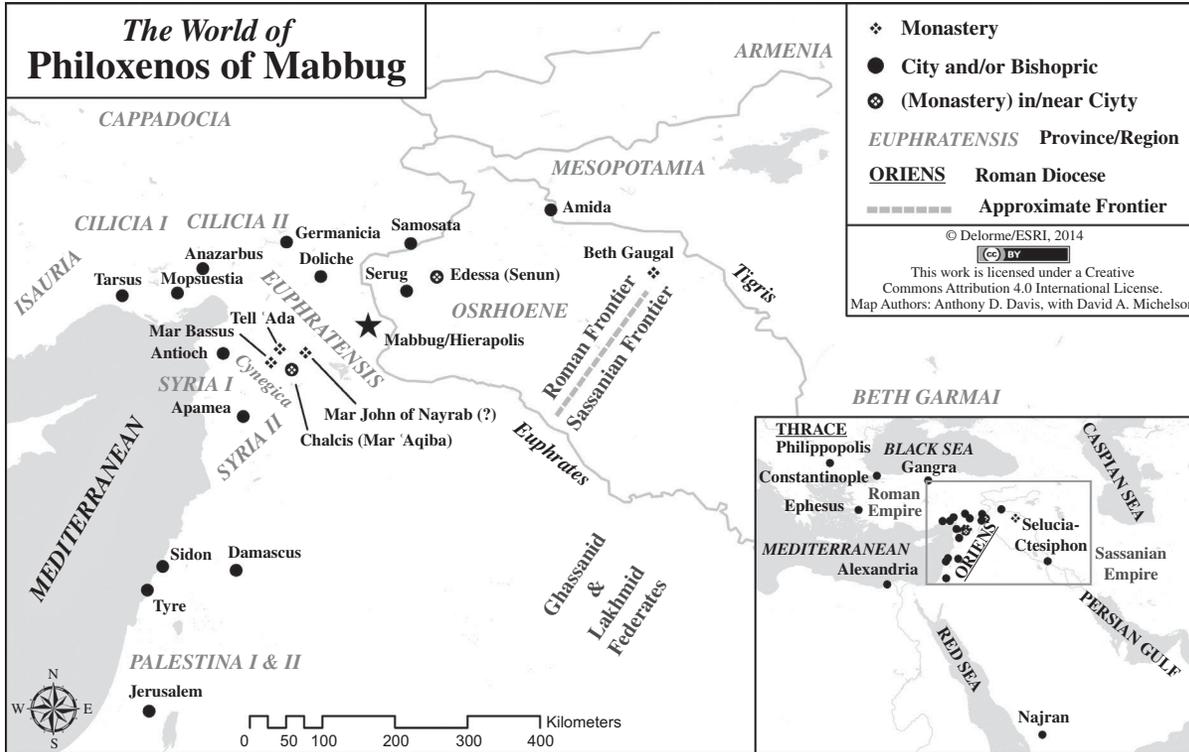
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## *Abbreviations*

BL	British Library
BO	Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana
<i>CAH</i>	<i>The Cambridge Ancient History</i>
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
OCA	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians
Vat.	Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana



Philoxenos of Mabbug: geographic extent of influence, late fifth to early sixth centuries A.D.

# 1

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## Introduction

### *The World of Philoxenos of Mabbug—A Practical Context for Understanding Late-Antique Christology*

#### THE LIFE AND WORKS OF PHILOXENOS OF MABBUG

... some of them turned aside toward falsehood out of prejudice, and some of them on account of bodily affection, and others because they were [already] heretics, and others because they were troubled, and again others because the fear of God was contemptible in their eyes, and others from ignorance, and again others because they were flattered, and others because it did not concern them if error should seize the Church instead of faith, and again others because it happened that they were angry with their neighbors, because those neighbors were honored more than them and pressed upon by the visits from the faithful. And for that reason, they preferred—miserable ones—to move to the side of the heretics because they saw that the orthodox faithful did not wish to agree with them. And while the reasons vary why the whole lot of those monks who were traitors are counted among the heretics, they are gathered under one head: because they were not willing to acknowledge the truth. Indeed, they did not know it because they were not worthy to know it. For this reason they have held to falsehood instead of the truth, just as was said about similar ones by the Apostle, “They held wickedness as truth” and again “Because they did not choose to acquire the knowledge of God, he handed them over to a reprobate mind.”<sup>1</sup>

—Philoxenos of Mabbug, *Letter to the Monks of Senun*

<sup>1</sup> Philoxenos of Mabbug, *Letter to the Monks of Senun*, published as *Lettre aux moines de Senoun (texte)*, edited by André de Halleux, CSCO 231 (Leuven: Secrétariat

Born in the mid-fifth century, Philoxenos of Mabbug (d. 523) was a prolific author and polemicist who left behind the largest surviving body of work in all of Syriac literature.<sup>2</sup> A metropolitan bishop in Syria from 485 onward, he was one of the last ecclesiastical and intellectual leaders of the one-nature theological party before the permanent separation of the eastern churches over Christology. As a subject for scholarly study, Philoxenos has been known (when he is known at all) either for his ardent attachment to the one-nature Christological doctrine or for his ascetic theology.<sup>3</sup> This book, *Practical Christology*, offers a new holistic view of Philoxenos' life and works as a means of better understanding the post-Chalcedonian Christological controversies.

Engaging with Philoxenos' Christological polemics from the perspective of various practical contexts, this study argues that Philoxenos' overarching concern in the Christological controversies was to promote and safeguard proper access to divine knowledge. For Philoxenos, knowledge of God was attained or preserved largely

du CorpusSCO, 1963), 89–90. The final allusion is likely a literal or mirror-style Philoxenian rendering of the Greek text of Romans 1:18 & 28. In his *Lexicon Syriacum*, Sokoloff notes that Philoxenos frequently employed “*ܡܕܪ*” as his verb of choice for the “acquisition” of knowledge. Michael Sokoloff, *Lexicon syriacum* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press and Eisenbrauns, 2009), s.v. *ܡܕܪ*.

<sup>2</sup> Philoxenos' corpus has been estimated to be over 500,000 words (see David A. Michelson, “A Bibliographic Clavis to the Works of Philoxenos of Mabbug,” *Hugoye* 13.2 (Summer 2010), 278. <<http://www.bethmardutho.org/index.php/hugoye/volume-index/443.html>>).

<sup>3</sup> The existing secondary literature on Philoxenos is limited but useful. Specifically, there are five monographs of note. Four are theologically or philosophically oriented: Joseph Lebon, *Le Monophysisme sévérien: Étude historique, littéraire et théologique sur la résistance monophysite au Concile de Chalcédoine jusqu'à la constitution de l'Église jacobite* (Leuven: Josephus Van Linthout, 1909); Roberta C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies: Severus of Antioch, Philoxenos of Mabbug, and Jacob of Sarug* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Guy Lardreau, *Discours philosophique et discours spirituel: autour de la philosophie spirituelle de Philoxène de Mabboug* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1985); Jad Hatem, *La Gloire de l'un: Philoxène de Mabboug et Laurent de la résurrection* (Paris: Harmattan, 2003). The fifth study is broader and more historically oriented: André de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabbog: Sa vie, ses écrits, sa théologie* (Leuven: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1963). The present study is designed to complement de Halleux's work, which has done much of the requisite chronological, codicological, and textual work needed for a cultural and historical study of Philoxenos. Of recent scholarship, particular mention should be made of T. Bou Mansour, “Die Christologie des Philoxenos von Mabbug,” in A. Grillmeier and T. Hainthaler, eds, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche: Die Kirchen von Jerusalem und Antiochien nach 451 bis 600* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag GmbH, 2004), 500–69 which synthesizes the work of de Halleux and brings some additional insights as well.

through forms of praxis such as the oversight of religious communities, mystical contemplation, the reading of scripture, participation in the liturgical mysteries, and ascetic practices of spiritual combat. This theological epistemology gave Philoxenos' anti-Chalcedonian writings their rhetorical strength. Philoxenos' Christological polemics were not just ideological exercises; they had practical implications for those seeking knowledge of God. Accordingly, Philoxenos' ardent attachment to the one-nature Christological doctrine must be understood in the light of the role he assigned right practice in the attainment of divine knowledge. In fact, one might say that for Philoxenos, "practice led to theory." Such an observation should not be mistaken for a Hegelian cliché—a deeper sense of the word practice is intended here. The defense of Christian orthodoxy was one practice among many in a larger spiritual struggle. In technical terms, Philoxenos saw this struggle as part of the divine economy of salvation (drawing on the Greek concept of *oikonomia*, referring to the divine design, governance, and action in the created world). Philoxenos' polemical concerns over the economy of the Incarnation took their meaning from this context, i.e. his larger vision of the divine economy of creation and salvation.

This practical yet theoretical contextualization of the Christological controversies is evident in the above passage from Philoxenos' *Letter to the Monks of Senun*. His remark offers a convenient starting point for this inquiry because it is a retrospective written at the end of his life, after Philoxenos' deposition by his theological opponents. In this letter Philoxenos makes a concise and impassioned appeal to his monastic followers at Senun, urging them to maintain the "confession of the true faith" and exhorting them to anathematize Christological heretics.<sup>4</sup> Writing from exile just before his death in 523, Philoxenos sought thus to explain to the monks of Senun why so many of their brethren from other monasteries of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine had changed sides and abandoned the miaphysite creed when its fortunes fell in 519. His explanation reveals the lens through which he viewed the Christological controversies. Of the many reasons he listed as to why monks might join those they had previously considered heretics, doctrinal agreement was only one among many. In addition to indifference to doctrine, Philoxenos mentions a variety of reasons that he classified as failure in asceticism, ignorance, or the

<sup>4</sup> Philoxenos of Mabbug, *Letter to the Monks of Senun*, CSCO 231, 95.