

THE UNRULY BOOKS OF ABDISHO OF NISIBIS: BOOK LISTS, CANON DISCOURSE, AND THE QUEST FOR LOST WRITINGS¹

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A series of book lists survive from late antiquity and the Middle Ages. These lists have played an important role in the history of scholarship on early Jewish and Christian literatures, with a particular impact on discourses about Christian canons and on attempts at recovering the lost books of early Judaism. These academic trajectories focus on scale and categorisation; that is, the imagined ranges and confines of (late) ancient literatures. The allure of the book lists is that they give scholars a sense of order and control, providing tools for dealing with the vast expanses, the gaps, and the complexities of long-gone literary worlds.²

¹ This chapter was written during my stay at the Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in Oslo in 2020–21.

² Belknap, *The List*, xii; Gilhus, 'Betydningen av religiøse lister', 46. The literature that theorises lists, list-making, and cataloguing is substantial. In addition to Belknap and Gilhus, I have benefited from engaging with

In this chapter, I will explore scholarship on one selected book list: the list³ in Abdisho of Nisibis's Syriac *Catalogue of the Books of the Church* (henceforth, the *Catalogue*).⁴ My focus is on the latter part of the first section of entries in the *Catalogue*: the writings Abdisho⁵ ascribes to the Old Testament. I will reiterate the trajectories of scholarly interpretation of this section, which focus on the Christian biblical canon and the lost books of early Judaism, paying particular attention to the entries that have proven challenging to previous research. The first category of these entries includes writings that are only known to modern and contemporary scholars by title, and which do not survive as extant and available texts. The second category contains writings known by multiple titles. The third and final category consists of

Goody, *Savage Mind*; Spufford, *Cabbages and Kings*; Chartier, *Order of Books*; Eco, *Infinity of Lists*.

³ Following Belknap, I apply the term 'list' to refer to "a formally organized block of information that is composed of a set of members" (Belknap, *The List*, 15). I will use the term in particular to talk about the cluster of entries in Abdisho's section on the Old Testament. I refer to his complete work as a 'catalogue', including more "descriptive enhancement" than a list (Belknap, *The List*, 2).

⁴ ܩܘܬܒܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. sir. 176, fol. 26r.

⁵ Abdisho of Nisibis is in all due likelihood a historical person. It is also likely that he was responsible for, or that he took part in, the making of the *Catalogue*. It is probably unlikely, though, that he alone would be responsible for the work. Since my key interest in this chapter is not the historical figure or his oeuvre, but the 'author function' associated with the name Abdisho of Nisibis, it is enough for my current purposes to know that this work has been ascribed to him.

those entries that do not comply with the scholarly imagination of an Old Testament book. It is my contention that a new look at the epistemological and ontological status of these categories of entries in the list will provide a crucial correction to the treatment of book lists by modern and contemporary scholars. My engagement with the unruly entries of the *Catalogue* will provide a new appreciation of the many ways of knowing (about) books and critically examine the scholarly imagination of late antique and medieval literatures.

1.0. *Abdisho's Catalogue of the Books of the Church*

Abdisho of Nisibis⁶ (d. 1318) was the bishop of Sinjar and Beth ʿArbaye, and the metropolitan of Nisibis and Armenia in the latter decade of the thirteenth and the first decades of the fourteenth century.⁷ Several works are associated with him,⁸ including the

⁶ He is also referred to as Abdisho bar Brikha, and sometimes in alternative spellings: ʿAbdishoʿ; Ebedjesus; ʾbd Jeshua.

⁷ All dates are CE, unless otherwise noted. On the life of Abdisho, the works associated with him, and his importance in the Syriac tradition, see, for example, Wright, *Short History*, 285–89; Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, 123–25; Van Rompay, ‘Past and Present’, 96–97; Kaufhold, ‘Introduction’, xii–xiv; Brock, *Brief Outline*, 69; Varghese, ‘Mar Oudisho’; Childers, ‘Abdisho’.

⁸ Other extant works associated with Abdisho are the *Nomocanon*, the *Pearl*, the *Treatise on the Rule of Ecclesiastical Judgements*, and *Paradise of Eden* (see, e.g., Brock, *Brief Outline*, 69). In the last section of the *Catalogue*, Abdisho lists his own writings. If we assume that all of these writings at some point existed as extant texts, several of his works are now lost. Note, though, that we do not have to take this for granted.

Catalogue, or more precisely, a “*memra*, which contains a catalogue of all the books of the church.”⁹ The *memra*¹⁰ has been dated to the year 1298, but also to the early fourteenth century.¹¹ In this metrical treatise,¹² and as the title indicates, Abdisho lists all of the writers and writings that he identifies as belonging to the literary history of the East Syriac tradition.¹³

Abdisho describes the goal of the *memra* in the introductory section:

ܘܚܘܠܝܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ
ܘܚܘܠܝܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ
ܘܚܘܠܝܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ
ܘܚܘܠܝܬܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ¹⁴

⁹ See n. 4. This is the title that appears in Vat. sir. 176, fol. 26r, dated 1476, available at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat. sir.176, image 29 (accessed 4 November 2021).

¹⁰ In this chapter, I translate the term ܡܡܪܐ *memra* as ‘treatise’. This is potentially a reductionist translation of the Syriac term. Abdisho’s text is metrical, and hence it is possible that ‘metrical homily’ would be more precise.

¹¹ Badger, *Nestorians*, 392; Kaufhold, ‘Abraham Ecchellensis’, 119.

¹² The *memra* follows the seven-syllable metre of Ephrem of Nisibis; Kaufhold, ‘Abraham Ecchellensis’, 130.

¹³ The ‘East Syriac tradition’ refers to the traditions associated with the Church of the East. The Church of the East developed after 410 in the Sassanian Empire, outside the church structures of the Roman Empire. Resulting from the Christological controversies in the fifth and sixth centuries, the Church of the East follows the dyophysite Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia. See Brock and Coakley, ‘Church of the East’.

¹⁴ All translations are mine. The text in the manuscript is richly dotted. I have only kept those dots that are necessary to convey the semantic

I write an admirable treatise in which I will arrange before the reader the divine books and all the ecclesiastical tracts of all past and present [writers]. I record the names of the writers and [the writings] they wrote and in what manner. And trusting God, behold, I begin with Moses.

In this section, Abdisho explains that the *memra* will arrange all of the past and present divine books and ecclesiastical tracts, and he adds that he will record the names of the writers and their works, as well as the type (format, genre) of the writing in question.¹⁵ As promised, he starts with Moses and the five books of the Law and continues to record the categories of writings of the Old Testament. After recording these writings, he continues with the New Testament. He then lists the ‘Greek Fathers’,¹⁶ which both the East and West Syriac Churches hold as authorities. Next, Abdisho catalogues the writings of the ‘Syriac Fathers’;¹⁷ that is, the Syriac writers and writings that are acknowledged by the East

meaning of the text. In addition, I have also kept all delimitation marks. The dotting can be seen in the digital images referred to earlier.

¹⁵ The *Catalogue* applies a set of different terms to talk about the listed entries. In the opening paragraphs, Abdisho states that he will list ‘the divine scriptures’ (ܟܬܒܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ) and ‘the ecclesiastical tracts’ or ‘booklets’ (ܟܬܒܝܢ). In the list of the Old Testament, Abdisho applies the words ܟܬܒܝܢ and ܟܬܒܝܢ with high frequency. These terms are indeed commonly used to talk about ‘books’ in Syriac. (See my definition of ‘book’ below.) He also applies ܟܬܒܝܢܐܢܝܢ ‘history’ and ܟܬܒܝܢܐܢܝܢ ‘proverb, fable’ in this section. These terms may refer to different literary formats (see the discussion below). In other parts of the *Catalogue*, he also applies a wide range of other terms to render the genres of the entries.

¹⁶ ܟܬܒܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ. Vat. sir. 176, fol. 28v.

¹⁷ ܟܬܒܝܢܐܢܝܢ ܕܥܠܡܝܢ. Vat. sir. 176, fol. 28v.

Syriac tradition, ending with Abdisho himself. In the concluding paragraph of the *Catalogue*, he notes that he has recorded works ascribed to writers that spoke ‘by the Spirit’.¹⁸

The present study is a study of one singular manuscript—Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. sir. 176—and its representation of the *Catalogue*. This manuscript is dated 1476 and is among the oldest manuscripts of this text that survive. I understand the representation of Abdisho’s *Catalogue* in this particular manuscript as meaningful and interesting in its own right—regardless of the existence of potential ‘variants’ in other manuscripts.¹⁹

1.1. Abdisho’s Old Testament and Its Latter Part

In this chapter, I will focus on the latter part of Abdisho’s list of Old Testament writings. After listing the five books of the Law—which are associated with Moses—Abdisho continues with Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ruth. He then lists the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon, Qohelet, the Song of Songs, Ben Sira, Wisdom, and Job. He records all of the major and minor prophets, in addition to Judith, Esther, Susanna,

¹⁸ ܩܘܕܝܫܐ. Vat. sir. 176, fol. 38r (image 45). Note that Badger reads ‘the books which we have seen’ (*Nestorians*, 379). This is not correct; or at least, it is not attested in Vat. sir. 176.

¹⁹ Indeed, several manuscripts containing Abdisho’s *Catalogue* survive (see, e.g., Kaufhold, ‘Abraham Echellensis’), but in this study I neither attempt to cover all of these manuscripts nor the variance to which they attest. A critical edition of the *Catalogue* is still missing, and a comprehensive study of variance across the parts of the manuscripts that include the list of Old Testament writings remains a desideratum.

Ezra, and ܩܝܘܢܐ ܕܠܘܘܝܐ. This latter entry is likely to either be a reference to Young Daniel²⁰ or to the additions to Daniel; that is, Bel and the Dragon and maybe the Song of the Three Youths.²¹ At this point, Abdisho lists the following writings:

ܩܘܪܐܢܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ
 ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ
 ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ
 ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ
 ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ

And the Epistle of Baruch and the Book of the Tradition of the Elders. And of Josephus the Writer, Proverbs, and the History of the Sons of Shamuni. And next the Book of the Maccabees and the History of King Herod and the Book of the Last Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. And the Book of Aseneth the Wife of Joseph the Just, Son of Jacob, and the Book of Tobias and Tobit, Righteous Israelites. Now that the Old [Testament] is ended, the New [Testament] will begin.²²

²⁰ See London, British Library, Add MS 18715, fols 239v–241v.

²¹ For suggestions and discussion, see, Schmoldt, ‘Die Schrift’, 25–27; DiTommaso, *Book of Daniel*, 110–11; Haelewyck, ‘Le canon’, 163; Kraft, ‘Daniel’; Brock, ‘The Young Daniel’, 267; Minov, ‘Syriac’, 116–17; Van Rompay, ‘The Syriac Canon’, 152.

²² I understand the *waw* (‘and’) as the main marker of division between discrete entries of the list. Or to be precise, the *waw* both separates the basic units *and* binds them together as items of the same list (see Belknap, *The List*, 27–28). I understand the use of the dot and double dot graphemes mainly as indications of a reading break, supporting the syllabic metre.

This last part of Abdisho's list of Old Testament writings includes entries that are easily identifiable from Syriac and other linguistic traditions, and also includes a spectrum of entries that are harder to pin down. In fact, this section of Abdisho's list embodies several of the challenges that we face when we read and use medieval book lists. How have scholars so far understood the entries in this section? And how have they treated the section in their research?

2.0. Canon and Lost Books: A History of Interpretation

In the following, I will focus more closely on two of the main research trajectories that have directed the interpretation and use of the entries in the section. As mentioned in the introduction, the first trajectory is a discourse of canon, while the second is the search for and recovery of lost, Jewish books.²³

²³ Both trajectories depend on the publication of two early editions of the Syriac text of Abdisho's *Catalogue*: Abraham Ecchellensis's 1653 edition and Latin translation (*Ope Domini Nostri*) and Giuseppe (Joseph) Simone Assemani's 1725 edition, translation into Latin, and commentary (*Bibliotheca Orientalis*). Assemani's work, in particular, has impacted later scholarship. For other, later editions, see Kaufhold, 'Abraham Ecchellensis', 129–33. It is likely that Vat. sir. 176 was one of the manuscripts that Assemani used in his edition. Kaufhold (p. 122) has suggested that Ecchellensis based his edition primarily on Rome, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS 1194. Note that Ecchellensis makes several changes to the Syriac text he edited, such as changing the order of the books of the Old Testament (Kaufhold, 'Abraham Ecchellensis', 130).

2.1. A Discourse of Canon

As the earlier quotation shows, Abdisho clearly marks the end of the Old Testament after Tobit: “Now that the Old [Testament] is ended, the New [Testament] will begin.”²⁴ However, this latter section of entries leading up to Tobit includes several writings that scholars interested in questions of canon have found to be difficult to pin down and not necessarily identifiable as ‘Old Testament books’. This has led them to produce auxiliary hypotheses to explain the presence and location of these books in the order of entries. I refer to the structuring presumptions, interests, and priorities that unite the contributions of this trajectory and that determine their approach to the *Catalogue* as a ‘discourse of canon’. This is one of the dominant approaches in the history of academic study of Abdisho’s *Catalogue*. In the following, I will present a selection of previous research contributions, focusing on some of the most influential. These contributions all participate in an explicit or implicit negotiation about what entries belong, or do not belong, in the scope of a Christian authoritative collection of biblical books.²⁵

His editorial practice deserves to be studied in its own right in a separate study.

²⁴ The phrasing ‘the Old’/‘the New’ (without ‘Testament’) is a commonplace in Syriac literature.

²⁵ The research on, in particular, the Christian biblical canon and its closedness/openness is immense. See, emblematically, the contributions to McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*. See also Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, esp. xii–xxii, 1–7, 17–29. For further discussion on the meta-level, see Rine, ‘Canon Lists’, 811–16.

In 1852 George P. Badger published *The Nestorians and Their Rituals*, which included the first English translation of the *Catalogue*.²⁶ The pages that include the translation of the treatise's list of Old and New Testament books include a feature that is not present in the rest of the publication: Badger adds a running list in the left-hand margin where he lists the common English names of the biblical books mentioned in Abdisho's *Catalogue*. However, when he arrives at the last section of the Old Testament, he mentions only three books—Baruch, Maccabees, and Tobit—all of which were well known to English-reading audiences as apocryphal or deuterocanonical books. However, this selection leaves out six of the writings that Abdisho mentions in the latter section of his Old Testament. Although Badger includes them in the running text of the English translation next to his marginal list, this graphic exclusion efficiently keeps them outside the order of Protestant and Catholic canonical books.²⁷

In a footnote, Badger addresses the entries that he did not include in his list in the left margin. This footnote deserves to be cited in whole:

The 'Narratives', and several of the other works enumerated in this paragraph, are probably legends such as are frequently met with in the East. Some of these are written with much pathos, and from epic poems, set to the most plaintive chants. The Legend of Joseph is very common among Mohammedans as well as Christians, and many

²⁶ Badger, *Nestorians*, 361–79.

²⁷ Note that Badger does the same in his list of New Testament books. He excludes the Diatessaron, which Abdisho listed at the end of his New Testament; Badger, *Nestorians*, 363.

strolling derweeshes obtain a living by reciting it from house to house.²⁸

The footnote shows that Badger disregards the entries that he avoids in his own list as “legends” from “the East.” This footnote displays a heavy orientalisng rhetoric, underscoring pathos, chanting, strolling, commonalities among “Mohammedans,” and the economic benefits of stereotypically exotic performers. This rhetoric efficiently constructs these entries in Abdisho’s list as something wholly other than ‘proper’ Old Testament books.

The entries in the latter part of Abdisho’s list were not only challenging to researchers of the nineteenth century but are also demanding for more recent research contributions. Albert-Marie Denis referred to the last section of Abdisho’s list of Old Testament books in his *Introduction aux pseudépigraphes grecs d’Ancien Testament*, which was published in 1970.²⁹ In this book, Denis aims to give an overview of Old Testament Pseudepigrapha surviving in Greek.³⁰ At pages xiv and xv, he includes a synoptic list

²⁸ Badger, *Nestorians*, 362.

²⁹ Denis, *Introduction*, xiv–xv.

³⁰ The term ‘Old Testament Pseudepigrapha’ is commonly used in research literature to refer to writings ascribed to Old Testament figures and story clusters that are part of neither the Hebrew Bible nor the deuterocanonical/apocryphal writings. The term is most often, but not exclusively, used in reference to Jewish writings from the Second Temple period.

of Christian apocryphal writings³¹ mentioned in some of the major book lists surviving from late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Denis lists four entries from the *Catalogue*: “(Aḥiqar),” “(4 Mach.),” “Livre des Mach.,” and “Asénath.”³² Just like Badger, his use of Abdisho’s list is selective, and he leaves five entries out. However, Denis makes a different selection from Badger, based on the categorisation that directs his work. Given that Denis’s synoptic list is a list of Christian Apocrypha, his list excludes, first, the biblical books that Protestant and Catholic traditions share with the Hebrew Bible and, second, the deuterocanonical writings. This leads Denis to exclude the Epistle of Baruch (which he probably understood as the Book of Baruch) and Tobit.³³ He is left with four potentially apocryphal/pseudepigraphal

³¹ Denis uses the term ‘apocryphes’ to denote a corpus other than the deuterocanonical writings. In other words, he considers lists of Christian ‘Apocrypha’ as a place to look for potentially lost ‘Old Testament Pseudepigrapha’.

³² Note that Denis mentions “(Aḥiqar)” and “(4 Mach.)” in parentheses. The parentheses probably indicate that this is his interpretation of the title in the source. As the heading and footnotes in the synoptic list show, Denis did not consult the Syriac text of Abdisho’s list—he was fully dependent on Assemani’s translation. He explicitly called the list “Assemanus” and the footnotes provide Assemani’s Latin translations of the titles of interest (e.g., “Josephi Scribae proverbia” and “Historia filiorum Samonae”). Denis also uses parentheses when he refers to “(Jub.)”—i.e., Jubilees—in the listing of books of the Gelasian Decree. This is his interpretation of the Latin title, “Liber de filiabus Adae Leprogeneseos, apocryphus.”

³³ It is unclear why he includes (and what he means by) “Livre des Mach.” 1–2 Maccabees are part of the deuterocanonical writings, which

writings from Abdisho's list. A side effect of Denis's focus on Pseudepigrapha and the frame of canonical categorisations is that he passes over in silence those entries that fit neither of these categories. If you read Denis's synoptic list only, there is no way of knowing that Abdisho's list also includes other items: the Book of the Tradition of the Elders, the Proverbs associated with Josephus the Writer, the History of the Sons of Shamuni, the History of King Herod, and the Book of the Last Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus.

In 'The Reception of Peshitta Chronicles', David Philips explores the potential canonical status of Chronicles in the Syriac traditions.³⁴ In the second half of his article, Philips explores the input of a category of writers that he refers to as "theoreticians of canonicity," among them Abdisho of Nisibis. Philips calls attention to the writings of Abdisho's Old Testament and refers to the last section as "a mixed bag of books," adding that "it is among these that we find the Epistle of Baruch, Maccabees and Tobit." He then focuses in on the reference to "Josephus 'the Narrator'" in this section, including the implications of this for the understanding of the *Catalogue* as a witness to the East Syriac biblical canon. It is noteworthy that Philips's otherwise thorough investigation of Abdisho's *memra* makes no mention of the other books in the "mixed bag." He names all of the books of Abdisho's Old Testament, with the exception of the Book of the Tradition

he otherwise avoids. It is possible that Denis understands the entry as the larger, multivolume Book of Maccabees, but note that he does mention "(4 Mach.)" explicitly.

³⁴ Philips, 'Reception', 288–91.

of the Elders, the History of the Sons of Shamuni, the History of King Herod and the Book of Aseneth the Wife of Joseph the Just, Son of Jacob. Thus these books are passed over in silence again.³⁵

In ‘Le canon de l’Ancien Testament dans la tradition syriacque’, Jean-Claude Haelewyck also engages Abdisho’s *memra* to explore surviving witnesses to an East Syriac canon. He starts by listing the writings of Abdisho’s Old Testament, but similar to his predecessors he mentions only three of the entries in the latter section: the Epistle of Baruch, the Book of Maccabees, and Tobit. He then moves on to the other entries in the section, arguing that Abdisho must apply the concept of divine books in the broad sense in his *memra* and that the list of Old Testament books is “entrecoupée de la mention d’oeuvres extra-canoniques” and that the *memra* thus includes books that are canonical and books that are not.³⁶

Finally, in ‘The Syriac Canon’ (a subsection of ‘The Canonical Histories of the Deuterocanonical Texts’), Lucas Van Rompay frames his discussion using the same discourse of canon that we have witnessed earlier, but he provides a quite different interpretation. He sees a growing receptiveness towards deuterocanonical books in the Syriac traditions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and understands Abdisho’s list of Old Testament books as one of the indications of this. Van Rompay includes the books

³⁵ Philips, ‘Reception’, 288–91. He also makes no note of ‘Young Daniel’.

³⁶ Haelewyck, ‘Le canon’, 163–64.

“not found elsewhere” in his treatment and concludes that the status of these books “remains uncertain.”³⁷

In summary, the unruly items in Abdisho’s list of Old Testament books have challenged scholars who have applied the list in service of a discourse of canon. However, given that many entries in the list do not fit the matrix of a biblical book, and do not even fit a ‘pseudepigraphon’, most scholars³⁸ have either recategorised, reinterpreted, exoticised, excluded, or passed over them in silence. The result is that they have left behind significant blank spots.

2.2. A Discourse on ‘Lost Books’

The quest for lost books has long traditions in the academic disciplines that study Second Temple Jewish writings, and for good reasons.³⁹ This field of study is characterised by a particularly challenging source situation, because late antique and early medieval Jewish communities themselves stopped transmitting a

³⁷ Van Rompay, ‘The Syriac Canon’, 152.

³⁸ Van Rompay is an exception.

³⁹ The academic interest in a systematic and comprehensive recovery of Second Temple Jewish writings started in the sixteenth century (1573–75) with de’Rossi’s *Light of the Eyes* (esp. pp. 86–92). The interest grew during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. See, for example, Fabricius, *Codex Pseudepigraphus*, and its second edition, *Codicis pseudepigraphi*; Whiston, *Collection*; Migne, *Dictionnaire des apocryphes*; James, *Lost Apocrypha*.

large share of these writings.⁴⁰ Some of them went out of circulation and were forgotten,⁴¹ while others were adopted, transmitted, and preserved throughout the Middle Ages primarily by Christian communities in the Middle East, North Africa, and central Asia.⁴² However, many of these writings were not known as extant texts to the budding academic communities in Europe and North America until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when large numbers of manuscripts were taken to Europe, bringing copies of hitherto unattested writings to the attention of scholars there.⁴³ Earlier generations of scholars knew references to these writings through citations in late antique works and because they were mentioned in the variety of book lists that were extant in linguistic traditions such as Greek, Latin, Arabic, Armenian, and Syriac. This means that, on many occasions, scholars were aware of mentions of works before they encountered extant texts.

⁴⁰ This is the case for the writings of Flavius Josephus and Philo of Alexandria, as well as the so-called Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

⁴¹ The finding of the scrolls in the caves close to the Dead Sea displayed several examples. See, e.g., Himmelfarb, 'The Pseudepigrapha in Greek', 263–64.

⁴² Some writings have later reappeared in chance finds and archaeological digs; for example, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the fragments from the Cairo Genizah.

⁴³ The practice of transferring manuscripts from monasteries and digs in the Middle East to Europe was part of the colonial practices of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. These practices are currently heavily debated. See, among others, Mazza, 'Papyrology and Ethics'; Stewart, *Yours, Mine, or Theirs?*.

The book lists have played a particularly crucial role in the retrieval and identification of writings categorised as Apocrypha and/or Pseudepigrapha.⁴⁴ In the earliest phases of scholarship on these writings, the lists impacted the scholarly imagination of the contents and reach of an early Jewish literature that was presumably once in existence, parts of which scholars considered to be ‘lost’ because they were unaware of extant and available texts.⁴⁵ When extant texts of these writings did occasionally appear in the newly available manuscript materials, the lists became tools to identify copies in these manuscripts.⁴⁶ Although other entries in the lists remained undocumented, the experience that extant

⁴⁴ I apply the term ‘apocryphal’ in *one* of the ways in which it is used in late antique and medieval sources, namely to refer to books that are either contested, condemned, or not seen as equally suitable reading (often, public reading) as other scriptural books. This means that I am not addressing the deuterocanonical books, referred to as Apocrypha in Protestant traditions, which have been and are part of (some) Christian canons. Note that the term ‘pseudepigraphal’ occurs as a native ascription in some of the lists too, to describe a feature of individual books (namely, that they are, according to the one who put the list together, falsely ascribed to a biblical figure). The use of the term ‘Pseudepigrapha’ to encompass a collection of books (a ‘literature’) is an early modern invention, though, which starts with Fabricius in 1713. So, books referred to as apocryphal in the sources may be referred to as pseudepigraphal in scholarship, and the books falling under these categories may thus be overlapping.

⁴⁵ For the earliest phase, see, in particular, the publications by Fabricius, Whiston, Migne, and James, cited above.

⁴⁶ This has been the case, for example, for the Testament or Assumption of Moses, books ascribed to Enoch, and 2 Baruch and 3 Baruch.

texts could be recovered in surviving manuscripts strengthened the idea that the entries in the lists were indeed indications of lost writings that were still waiting to be found. In this epistemological matrix, writings still known only by mention in the book lists became a 'lost book' by default; hence, it was assumed that the titles mentioned in the lists referred to discrete literary entities—books that once were written and read by Jewish communities.⁴⁷

The book lists that European scholars were most familiar with were, typically, some of the Greek and Latin ones.⁴⁸ Although available in Latin translation since 1635, Abdisho's *memra*

⁴⁷ See, for example, Denis, *Introduction*; Charlesworth, 'Introduction', xxi–xxiii (as well as the selection of entries in the volumes); Charlesworth, 'Foreword', xiv–xv. For a discussion, see Stone, *Ancient Judaism*, 174–76, 188–89, 192; Reed, 'Introduction to Forgetting', 13–16, 19–21.

⁴⁸ In particular, the Greek *Apostolian Constitutions*, the List of Sixty Books, the Stichometry of Nicephorus, and the list in the Pseudo-Athanasian *Synopsis of Holy Scripture*, as well as the Latin Gelasian Decree. See, e.g., Fabricius, *Codex Pseudepigraphus*, 16, 799–800, 801–2, 1116–17; Migne, *Dictionnaire des apocryphes*, xx; Whiston, *Collection*, 476, 481; James, 'Lost Apocrypha', 8–9; Kraft, 'James's *The Lost Apocrypha*', section 'Lists and Stichometries'. It should be noted, though, that many of the early volumes on lost Apocrypha/Pseudepigrapha drew heavily on Fabricius's work on the lists and thus often applied the books lists only indirectly: see, e.g., Migne, *Dictionnaire des apocryphes*, xxix–lxxii; Whiston, *Collection*, e.g., 444, 449, 462. The Armenian lists associated with Samuel of Ani and Mechichtar of Airivank and a selection of Slavic lists also figure in the research literature, many of them already in the early twentieth century; see, for example, James, *Lost Apocrypha*, 11; Denis, *Introduction*, xiv–xv; Kraft, 'Lists and Stichometries'.

was not brought into the search for potentially lost Apocrypha/Pseudepigrapha until 1970, when Denis included it in his synoptic list of apocryphal writings. Indeed, Denis's interest in Abdisho's treatise was part of his project to create a more comprehensive view of the Greek Pseudepigrapha, including "les fragments de pseudépigraphe perdus."⁴⁹ However, as I pointed out earlier, Denis left out several items from Abdisho's list that could have been considered "perdus," but did include four writings that qualified for him as Apocrypha/Pseudepigrapha.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Robert A. Kraft worked on a project called the New M. R. James Project, which aimed to publish an updated, digital version of Montague R. James's seminal book, *The Lost Apocrypha of the Old Testament: Their Titles and Fragments Collected, Translated and Discussed* (1920).⁵⁰ Kraft aimed to make a collection point online, a "new, electronic, James"⁵¹ that could easily be "expanded, corrected and reshaped."⁵² Kraft's project enters into the long tradition of attempts to search for lost Apocrypha/Pseudepigrapha. Indeed, it takes the shape of a revision of James's catalogue of lost apocryphal books and Kraft applies the vocabulary of "known and lost

⁴⁹ This is the heading of part 2 of Denis's book.

⁵⁰ Kraft, 'James's *The Lost Apocrypha*'.

⁵¹ Kraft, 'Eve'.

⁵² It is interesting to note how the digital age offers a new potential, and a new yearning, for comprehensiveness. The format makes for a never-ending project—"an open-ended electronic resource."

writings” to grasp the variety that he encounters.⁵³ The book lists are important sources for this work,⁵⁴ and among the writings he refers to are the entries in Abdisho’s treatise.⁵⁵ Under the rubric “References to ‘lost’ or suppressed writings associated with respected persons or groups,” Kraft mentions the Traditions of the Elders, the History of Aseneth, and “‘Proverbs of Josephus’ [= Aesop].”⁵⁶ In other words, in this presentation, these three entries are portrayed as lost ‘parabiblical texts’.

In the entry ‘Syriac’ in *A Guide to Early Jewish Texts and Tradition in Christian Transmission*, Sergey Minov provides a helpful overview of early Jewish writings in Syriac transmission. In the section on “Lost Works, Works Only Partly Preserved in Syriac, or Never Translated into Syriac,” Minov includes the Book of the Tradition of the Elders from Abdisho’s list.⁵⁷ He comments that “although no Syriac work bearing such title has been discovered so far, it seems unlikely that Abdisho invented it.”⁵⁸ In other

⁵³ For the perspective of ‘lost’ in Kraft’s project, see, for instance, his description of “known or lost writings” (‘Reviving’); his presentation of the book ascribed to Og/Ogias (‘Og and the Giants’); and his description of lost or suppressed writings (‘Parabiblical Literature’).

⁵⁴ See, e.g., ‘Lists and Stichometries’ and “‘Parabiblical’ Titles from Lists’.

⁵⁵ Kraft uses the name Ebed Jesu.

⁵⁶ Kraft, ‘Parabiblical Literature’.

⁵⁷ Note that he does not include the History of King Herod. Note, also, that this is also the only entry in Abdisho’s Old Testament that Assemani does not comment on in his edition and commentary (*Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 7).

⁵⁸ Minov, ‘Syriac’, 135.

words, Minov argues that it is likely that it once existed and, thus, should now be considered to be lost. In the list of “Works Discussed” at the beginning of Minov’s entry,⁵⁹ the Book of the Tradition of the Elders appears alongside writings that are extant in Syriac. Therefore, this contemporaneous list serves to reify the claimed book in Abdisho’s medieval list.

In summary, this second trajectory of engagement with Abdisho’s Old Testament is part of an established scholarly discourse of lost Jewish books. This discourse construes the entries in the list as books that at some point had extant and available texts associated with them. In this matrix, the titles are traces of identifiable but lost writings that are defined first and foremost by their potential of being more than just names on a list.

3.0. ‘Books Known Only by Title’, Writings Known by Multiple Titles, and Entries That Are Not Books

As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, some writings mentioned in Abdisho’s list are known only by title, others are known by multiple titles, and yet other entries in his Old Testament probably do not refer to books but refer instead to other literary formats. When the term ‘book’ is used in scholarship, it often refers to a literary entity that is conceived as a discrete and identifiable work that has a relatively substantial block of text associated with it. In the relevant scholarly fields, the most common example of this usage of the term is the conception of the

⁵⁹ Minov, ‘Syriac’, 96–97.

biblical book. Hence, the three categories that I will explore are all unruly and, in various ways, in conflict with the model biblical book. I focus on precisely these categories because they bring out the implicit epistemologies of the scholarship that has focused on the biblical canon and on presumed lost books.

First, when I apply the concept ‘books known only by title’ in the following I refer to writings that are unknown to us today in the shape of an extant text. These claimed books are known through (and are thus dependent on) another medium in which they are named and sometimes described or categorised. I apply the concept to stress the aspect of the entries in the list that actually remains and which is there for us to study: we know the names of claimed writings. Thus, we have access to a cognitive placeholder—the conceived textual object—regardless of whether or not these claimed books at some point also had extant texts attached to them.

Second, it is well known among manuscript scholars that the identification of a writing often varies from one manuscript to another. The identification may even vary within the same manuscript.⁶⁰ Title variation is also familiar to scholars who focus on literary texts. The same literary work may circulate under many names.⁶¹ Therefore, there is good reason to suspect that

⁶⁰ See, e.g., Sharpe, *Titulus*, 8–9.

⁶¹ There are many examples of this phenomenon. One pertinent example is the book (if that is really what all of these names refer to) that we today commonly refer to as Jubilees. This book has circulated as, for instance, Leptogenesis/Parva genesis, Life of Adam, Apocalypse of Moses, The Testament of the Protoplasts, and potentially Jewish Histories.

some of the names that appear in book lists are variant names of known works. On occasions, it is also possible that some lists may mention the same writing under two different names or that one and the same title may bring different writings to mind for different readers.

Finally, the general preference in previous research for the book as the presumed foundational unit of the list also warrants attention. On many occasions, the book category is fitting and helpful. However, the literary formats of ancient writings were richer and more varied and this may very well be reflected in late ancient and medieval lists.⁶² For instance, independently circulating smaller pieces—that may at some point have been extracted from a larger whole—also circulated as autonomous literary entities. A named entity may sometimes refer to several different formats, which suggests that it may not even have been entirely clear what format a title in a list would refer to.

3.1. Revisiting Abdisho's Old Testament

The three categories introduced above will help me to illustrate the complexity involved in engaging with the latter part of Abdisho's list of Old Testament writings. My goal here is not to determine, once and for all, what literary work an entry refers to but rather to display the potential for interpretation.

The first entry in this section is the Epistle of Baruch. Peshitta Old Testament codices often include two epistles ascribed

⁶² Cf., for instance, Mroczek, *Literary Imagination*; Lied, 'Between "Text Witness"'; Monger, 'Many Forms of Jubilees'; Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*; Spittler, 'Vienna Hist. Gr. 63'.

to Baruch: the First Epistle of Baruch the Scribe and the Second Epistle of Baruch.⁶³ The text of the epistle that these codices refer to as the First Epistle is very similar to the one that makes up chapters 78–86 of 2 Baruch. The Second Epistle is the name the Peshitta gives the writing known elsewhere as the Book of Baruch, Baruch, or, in modern nomenclature, 1 Baruch.⁶⁴ The entry ‘the Epistle of Baruch’ in Abdisho’s list may in theory refer to either of these epistles. Thus, this entry exemplifies one of the challenges of reading the list, as suggested earlier: the same title may refer to more than one discrete writing. Badger understood the title as a reference to the Book of Baruch (that is, the Second Epistle).⁶⁵ However, it is just as likely that this is a reference to the First Epistle and that Abdisho understood the Second Epistle (the Book of Baruch) to be implied by the entry ‘Jeremiah’. Whereas the Book of Baruch is included in the larger cluster of Jeremiah literature in several manuscript traditions, the Syriac Peshitta tradition is the only one that includes the First Epistle in that cluster. Hence, it stands out, and it is possible that it has thus been mentioned separately.

The second entry is a puzzle. In the manuscript Vat. sir. 176, fol. 26v, Abdisho records it as the Book of the Tradition of the Elders. This entry is an example of a book known to us by title only. It is mentioned in Abdisho’s *Catalogue* but it appears

⁶³ See, Lied, ‘Between “Text Witness”’.

⁶⁴ Cf., Ecchellensis, *Ope Domini Nostri*, 4–5.

⁶⁵ Badger, *Nestorians*, 362.

nowhere else. It is thus uncertain to what it refers. Abraham Ecchellensis understood it as a rubric, introducing the rest of the writings that follow after it rather than as a reference to a discrete book.⁶⁶ Giuseppe Simone Assemani suggested that the entry refers to the Mishnah, and his hypothesis has later been mentioned (sometimes acclaimed) in subsequent scholarship.⁶⁷ Minov offered another interpretation, pointing to similarities found in quotations of a rabbinic work in a preface to a Christian Arabic catena on the Pentateuch.⁶⁸

Following the Book of the Tradition of the Elders, Abdisho lists Josephus the Writer, Proverbs. The syntax of the sentence is unusual, probably due to the syllabic metre. It is possible to interpret the expression as ‘Proverbs of Josephus the Writer’,⁶⁹ or as a statement of the name of Josephus the Writer followed by references to more works ascribed to him, the first being Proverbs. Note that the Syriac term, ܩܕܝܫܐ, can also mean ‘fable’ or ‘parable’.⁷⁰ The entry may thus refer to proverbs, fables, or parables ascribed to the figure Josephus. As we shall soon see, several of the entries that follow the mention of the Proverbs are traditionally associated with Flavius Josephus. Thus, it is likely that

⁶⁶ Ecchellensis, *Ope Domini Nostri*, 4–7.

⁶⁷ Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 6–7; Haelewyck, ‘Le canon’, 163; Van Rompay, ‘Past and Present’, 80–81. Francis Borchardt has suggested that it may be a reference to Pirqe Avot.

⁶⁸ Minov, ‘Syriac’, 135.

⁶⁹ Kraft, ‘Parabiblical Literature’, understands it in this way.

⁷⁰ I apply the term ‘proverb’ to ensure consistency in my translation. The Syriac word is also used in the title of the Proverbs of Solomon.

Flavius Josephus is the writer that Abdisho had in mind. If so, then the Proverbs associated with Josephus the Writer is the second example of a book that is known to us only by title. However, Assemani and several other scholars have suggested that the entry may be a reference to Aesop's Fables, given that Syriac and Arabic sources sometimes ascribe these fables to Josephus. The name Aesop was mixed up with Iosippos/Josephus and the fables became associated with him.⁷¹ Denis's interpretation of the entry as "(Aḥiqar)" builds on this idea: the Greek Life of Aesop draws on the story of Aḥiqar.⁷²

The next entry, the History of the Sons of Shamuni, refers to a literary formation of the well-known narrative of the Maccabean martyrs and their mother, who is often called Shamuni (Shmuni) in Syriac sources.⁷³ This narrative enjoyed a widespread circulation among Syriac Christians in a variety of shapes. This very fact constitutes a challenge when we interpret entries in a book list: the title 'The History of the Sons of Shamuni' may refer to at least three different extant writings or textual forms.⁷⁴ The narrative about the sons of Shamuni is often associated with 4 Maccabees, as suggested for instance by Denis.⁷⁵ 4 Maccabees

⁷¹ Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 7. See DiTommaso, *Book of Daniel*, 110–11; Brock, 'Aesop'. Hence, the entry is potentially an example of the re-attribution of a writing to another author.

⁷² Brock, 'Aesop'; Brock, 'Aḥiqar'.

⁷³ See, in particular, Brock, 'Eleazar'; Witakowski, 'Mart(y) Shmuni'.

⁷⁴ Forness, 'First Book of Maccabees', 120–22.

⁷⁵ Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B 21 inf.; London, British Library, Egerton MS 704.

is almost entirely devoted to the narrative, and sometimes this literary content is reflected in the title that scribes gave this book.⁷⁶ However, the ‘history’, ܪܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ, of the sons of Shamuni may be a reference to an excerpt from 2 Maccabees that also includes the narrative. For example, an additional marginal heading in the copy of 2 Maccabees in London, British Library, Add MS 14446, fol. 90r, identifies the section of the text as such: “The History of Shamuni and her sons and Eleazar, Elder and Priest.”⁷⁷ The extract from 2 Maccabees sometimes circulated independently, as is the case in London, British Library, Add MS 12172, fols 188v–192r. Hence, we do not know precisely to what writing or what format the entry in Abdisho’s list refers.⁷⁸

Next is the Book of the Maccabees. This is a multivolume work and the number of volumes ascribed to it in Syriac manuscripts and book lists varies from two to five.⁷⁹ Hence, although the identification of the reference in Abdisho’s list is unproblematic and affirmed by several of the scholars mentioned earlier,

⁷⁶ See, for example, ‘Shamuni and Her Seven Sons and Eleazar, Their Teacher’ (Milan B 21 bis inf., fols 312v, 320r).

⁷⁷ ܪܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܕܫܡܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܕܫܡܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܕܫܡܘܢܝܘܬܐ ܕܫܡܘܢܝܘܬܐ.

⁷⁸ In addition, several hymns, homilies, and narrative poems bear similar titles. For an overview, see Witakowski, ‘Mart(y) Shmuni’, esp. 157, 158. See additionally Minov, ‘Syriac’, 122; Young, ‘The Anonymous Mēmra’.

⁷⁹ See the helpful overview in Haelewyck, ‘Le canon’. See also Forness, ‘First Book of Maccabees’, 100–1, 123; and Van Rompay, ‘Syriac Canon’, 142–45.

the number of volumes and thus the range of the reference remains unclear. Abdisho also includes a list of Old Testament books in another of his works, the *Nomocanon*. In that writing, he lists three volumes of the Book of Maccabees. Thus, it is possible that this is the imagined extent of the entry in the *Catalogue* too. However, given that there are many differences between the lists in the *Nomocanon* and the *Catalogue*, this remains uncertain.

The History of King Herod follows the Book of Maccabees. This is the second entry in the list that is referred to as a 'history'. Once again, we are dealing with a writing that we know only by title. Many of the scholars that have dealt with Abdisho's list have overlooked this entry. For instance, it is the only entry in the section that Assemani does not comment on.⁸⁰ Likewise, none of Badger, Denis, Philips, Kraft, or Minov note its existence. A possible reason for this omission is that traditions about King Herod are more commonly associated with the New Testament and hence the entry seems to be misplaced or does not fit the categories that the scholars are investigating (that is, the Old Testament, Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, or other early Jewish books). A potential interpretation of the entry is that Abdisho has singled

⁸⁰ Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 7.

out one of the sources that Josephus mentions in *Jewish Antiquities*: the so-called Memoires of Herod.⁸¹ However, this remains a hypothesis only.⁸²

The Book of the Last Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus is, in all due likelihood, a reference to book 6 of the *Jewish War*, by Josephus. In the Syriac Codex Ambrosianus (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B 21 inf. and bis inf.), the book is copied under this title. It is also referred to as the fifth volume of the Book of Maccabees.⁸³ Thus, this entry refers to a writing identified by several different names.

The second to last entry Abdisho records is the Book of Ase-neth (Asyat) the Wife of Joseph the Just, Son of Jacob. This is the book that contemporary scholars most often refer to as Joseph

⁸¹ *Jewish Antiquities* 15, 174. Josephus mentions the Memoires of Herod and a world history in 144 volumes associated with Herod's court historian Nicholas of Damascus (*Jewish Antiquities* 16, 184–87, and elsewhere). See Siegert, 'Minor Jewish Hellenistic Authors'.

⁸² See Siegert, 'Minor Jewish Hellenistic Authors', 346.

⁸³ The title of the volume in the Codex Ambrosianus is 'Memra of the Last Destruction of Jerusalem' (fol. 320v). The two running titles say 'The Fifth Memra of Josephus on the Destruction of Jerusalem' (fols 323v–324r) and 'The Fifth Book. Which Relates to the Last Destruction of Jerusalem' (fols 328v–329r). The subscription of the Book of Maccabees on fol. 330r says '...the fifth [volume] on the last destruction of Jerusalem by Titus son of Vespasian, King of the Romans'. See Forness, 'Narrating History'; Lied, *Invisible Manuscripts*, 72–73. For the occurrence of *Jewish War* in Deir al-Surian, MS Syr. 9 (9A+B), see Van Rompay, 'Flavius Josephus' *Jewish War*'.

and Aseneth.⁸⁴ This name is somewhat misleading, though, because the book is just as often ascribed to Aseneth as to Joseph in medieval manuscripts. Consequently, this entry is another example of a writing circulating under several names in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. The identification remains confusing—even to modern scholars.⁸⁵ As pointed out earlier, Badger notes that the “Legend of Joseph” is common among “Mohammedans” and Christians. This note probably refers to the entry for the Book of Aseneth the Wife of Joseph the Just, Son of Jacob, but it is unclear why Badger chooses to interpret the entry as the “Legend of Joseph.”

The last entry in the section, the Book of Tobias and Tobit, Righteous Israelites refers to the book that English naming conventions identify as Tobit. This book is infrequent in Syriac Old Testament codices, and Abdisho leaves it out of his other list of

⁸⁴ This name has been in use since at least the early twentieth century; see, e.g., Brooks, *Joseph and Asenath*. Joseph and Aseneth survives in two Syriac manuscripts: London, British Library, Add MSS 17202 and 7190.

⁸⁵ Among the names are: History of Aseneth; Book of Asyat; Prayer(s) of Aseneth; History of Aseneth and Joseph; Prayer of Joseph and Aseneth; Tale of Joseph the Just and of Asyat his Wife; Story of Joseph and Aseneth; and potentially also Prayer of Joseph. This latter name would probably be the result of a mix up with the Prayer of Joseph mentioned, among other places, in the Annals of Michael Glycas, in Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* VI, 11 (James, *Lost Apocrypha*, 33–34), and in several medieval book lists. For an overview of the various titles, see Burchard, *Untersuchungen*. Note that although a large number of the titles suggest that Aseneth is the main figure of the tale, the conventional English name prioritises Joseph; see Kramer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*.

Old Testament writings in the *Nomocanon*.⁸⁶ However, the book appears, for instance, in the twelfth-century pandect⁸⁷ Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Oo. 1.1,2, and it is mentioned by some Syriac writers.⁸⁸ The title The Book of Tobias and Tobit does not appear in Syriac manuscript copies of the work.⁸⁹ While there is little doubt that this entry refers to the Book of Tobit, it is possible that the title formula aims to highlight the narratives associated with Tobias within it.⁹⁰

As this brief presentation suggests, the entries in the latter part of Abdisho's Old Testament embody qualities that have made them confusing to scholars, and are incompatible with established epistemological frames and dominant discourses. Some

⁸⁶ See Mai, *Scriptorum veterum*, 183–84; Perczel, *The Nomocanon*; Haelewyck, 'Le canon', 152; Van Rompay, 'The Syriac Canon', 152.

⁸⁷ A pandect is a (perceived) full Bible codex.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., the list in Michael the Great's *Chronicle*, VI, 1; see Van Rompay, 'The Syriac Canon', 143–45, 151–52, 155.

⁸⁹ See Lebram, 'Tobit', 1. Indeed, the mention of Tobias in the title is rare in other linguistic traditions as well; see Weeks et al., *The Book of Tobit*, 62–63. However, the Greek Stichometry of Nicephorus refers to the book as "Tobit, which is also (called) Tobias" (Τωβίτη ὁ καὶ Τοβίας).

⁹⁰ Tobias is the most important figure of the book. See, for instance, the miniature in CUL Oo. 1.1,2, fol. 234r (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-OO-00001-00001/501>, accessed 18 January 2021), that portrays Tobias, Raphael, and the fish. The miniature is found at the beginning of the copy of the Book of Tobit and is used to mark the start of a new literary or layout unit, serving as an aid to retrieval and memory or interpretation. This suggests that identifying the book with the narrative of Tobias would be relatively common.

explanatory models may increase our understanding of the section. I offer these models as heuristic tools. Although none of them will explain all of the features of the section, they all shed some additional light on it.

First, as mentioned earlier, Syriac Christians ascribed many of the entries in this section to Flavius Josephus. The History of the Sons of Shamuni, the Book of Maccabees, the Book of the Last Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, the Book of Aseneth the Wife of Joseph the Just, Son of Jacob, and the Book of Tobias and Tobit, Righteous Israelites have all at some point been associated with him.⁹¹ In addition, and as suggested above, it is possible that the History of King Herod is a reference to a (fictitious) book mentioned in *Jewish Antiquities*. If so, then all of the books that follow the mention of Josephus's name in Abdisho's list bring his oeuvre to mind.⁹² Given the overall logic of Abdisho's *Catalogue*, this would not be a surprising find. Abdisho states explicitly in

⁹¹ See, e.g., the titles and running titles in Milan B 21 bis inf., mentioned above. BL Egerton 704 connects the History of Shamuni (e.g., 4 Maccabees) explicitly to Josephus; Deir al-Surian Syr. 9 connects 3 Maccabees to him. Likewise, several late antique and medieval writers attribute Maccabees to him. See Bensly and Barnes, *Fourth Book of Maccabees*, xiii–xiv; van Peursen, 'La diffusion', 202–3; also Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 7–8; DiTommaso, *Book of Daniel*, 110–11; Vollandt, 'Ancient Jewish Historiography', 73; Minov, 'Syriac', 112–14; Siegert, 'Minor Jewish Hellenistic Authors', 344–46. Note, though, that I have not been able to confirm that Tobit is associated with Josephus in Syriac sources. This remains Assemani's claim.

⁹² Cf. Ecchellensis, *Ope Domini Nostri*, 7.

the introductory paragraphs that he “record[s] the names of the writers and [the writings] they wrote.”

Second, it is possible that Abdisho gathers together writings that contain examples of, or that are ascribed to, ideal figures in ancient Israel. The section contains entries that are associated with a major biblical scribe (Baruch), hero martyrs (the Maccabean martyrs), an exemplary convert (Aseneth), and righteous and wise people (that is, the Elders, Joseph the Just, and Tobias and Tobit) of the Jewish tradition. Abdisho even refers to some of them explicitly as such: the section ends with the mention of Tobias and Tobit, “Righteous Israelites.” An important interpretational key is that Syriac Christians would commonly interpret figures and narratives of the Old Testament as ‘the old covenant’ and as models and forerunners of the new covenant. For example, the Maccabean martyrs were often understood as the forerunners of Christ.⁹³ Aseneth could have been understood in light of the category of the holy women of the Syriac traditions, as well as a prototypical convert.⁹⁴ As I have pointed out elsewhere, a reason for Baruch’s relative success among Syriac Christians may be his portrayal in several writings as the scribe that transmitted the knowledge of the old covenant to those who dwell “across the

⁹³ See Young, ‘Anonymous Mēm̄rā’, 329. See, furthermore, Forness, ‘First Book of Maccabees’, 120–22.

⁹⁴ See the manuscript context of this writing in BL Add 17202. According to Minov, it is located between biblical genealogies and the story of Constantine’s conversion in Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor’s *Ecclesiastical History* (‘Syriac’, 111). See Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*, 38; Wright, ‘After Antiquity’, esp. 71–72.

river [Euphrates],” bringing to mind Syriac Christians themselves.⁹⁵ Likewise, the story about Tobias and Tobit is set in ancient Nineveh and Media.

Third, it is likely that Abdisho’s list of Old Testament writings implies chronological order.⁹⁶ The overall logic of the *Catalogue* suggests that this may be the case: Abdisho starts with the Old Testament and he ends with his own oeuvre. While not all of the individual entries of the latter section of the Old Testament comply with this logic,⁹⁷ a chronological logic makes sense if we accept the suggestion that the majority of them are writings ascribed to Flavius Josephus. Syriac Christians considered Josephus as an authoritative source to the major events of the first century—the birth and life of Jesus (implied by the History of King Herod) and the fall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (implied by the Book of the Last Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus).⁹⁸ If so, then Abdisho extends his Old Testament or time of the old covenant all the way up to the first century CE. He thus links the Old and New Testament chronologically, letting the New take over where the Old ends.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Lied, *Invisible Manuscripts*, 258.

⁹⁶ Cf. Philips, ‘Reception’, 289–90.

⁹⁷ Tobias and Tobit is a case in point.

⁹⁸ For an overview, see Lied, *Invisible Manuscripts*, 71–74.

⁹⁹ A potential fourth explanatory model is that Abdisho was familiar with the way of organising the latter part of East Syriac Old Testament manuscripts that survives today in some seventeenth-century pandects. The latter collection of these full Bible manuscripts is called Maccabees

4.0. Unruly Books, Scholarly Priorities, and Abdisho's Old Testament

The two research trajectories that I have discussed in this chapter have one feature in common: neither of them fully approaches the entries in Abdisho's list of Old Testament books as intrinsic parts of the work they are part of, that is, the *Catalogue of the Books of the Church*. This means that instead of allowing the *Catalogue* itself to be the primary context for an interpretation of the inclusion of entries in it, the *Catalogue* is mined in the service of a project external to it. This approach is indeed common and can in some settings be fruitful, but only if the immediate literary context is also satisfactorily taken into account. As the earlier presentation shows, a focus on the three categories of books known only by title, writings known by multiple titles, and entries in the list that are not necessarily books highlights that this is not always the case.

4.1. Canon—or Heritage?

The publications that are guided by a discourse of canon have approached Abdisho's Old Testament with the Protestant and Catholic biblical canons as authoritative comparanda (Badger),

and includes 1–3 Maccabees, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Wisdom, Judith, Esther, Susanna, Epistle of Jeremiah, First Epistle of Baruch, and Second Epistle of Baruch. Two arguments are against this explanation: first, too many entries in Abdisho's list are left unexplained; and second, the only surviving evidence for this collection dates to centuries after Abdisho's *Catalogue*.

to argue for the canonicity in the East Syriac tradition of a particular book while dismissing others (Philips), by questioning the legitimacy of Abdisho's understanding of "divine books" (Haelewyck), and even by protecting the category of Old Testament Pseudepigrapha from potential "unreal" books (Denis). As my earlier presentation shows, this has led them to either exclude, reinterpret, exotify, or silence those entries that do not fit their matrix. This move is particularly clear in the case of Badger. He uses all of the tools in his orientalisng tool box to label the unruly entries as improper.

It is important to note that the list of Old Testament entries in Abdisho's *Catalogue* is arguably not a biblical canon list. In fact, Abdisho includes a list that would be more fruitfully approached as such in the *Nomocanon*. The list in the *Nomocanon* differs from the one that he included in the *Catalogue*; for instance, it is more restrictive in scope.¹⁰⁰ In contrast, the *Catalogue* provides an ordering of "the books of the church."¹⁰¹ I share Van Rompay's judgement that Abdisho's *Catalogue* is a profiling of the

¹⁰⁰ Abdisho's list of biblical books in the *Nomocanon* is probably reproduced from the *Apostolic Canons*. See Mai, *Scriptorum veterum*, 183–84; Philips, 'Reception', 291; Haelewyck, 'Le canon', 152; Van Rompay, 'The Syriac Canon', 152; Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 134–41.

¹⁰¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of Syriac book lists and the biblical books in particular, see Haelewyck, 'Le canon'; Van Rompay, 'The Syriac Canon'; Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 134–41. For other types of lists transmitted in Syriac manuscripts, see Matthew P. Monger's contribution to the present volume.

East Syriac literary tradition at around the year 1300—as someone at a given time and place conceived of it.¹⁰² In this sense, it is a heritage list. In some regards, and particularly in some of its sections, the *Catalogue* is indeed selective and exclusive: it limits itself to figures and books that are widely acknowledged as authoritative within the tradition.¹⁰³ In other regards, the list is characterised by comprehensiveness and inclusivity. For instance, Abdisho includes the Diatessaron in his New Testament—in addition to the four Gospels. Furthermore, he is generous in his inclusion of contemporaneous East Syriac writers and books to the extent of being sweeping. The inclusion of ‘histories’ in the *Catalogue* points in the same direction. The history is a common genre in the Syriac traditions and an overview of Syriac literature would not be complete without them.¹⁰⁴ The fact that the entries in the *Catalogue* are ordered chronologically and in the shape of a list creates an impression of an unbroken chain of writers in the East Syriac tradition. Each entry is genealogically linked to the next and together the entries make up a comprehensive whole.

Thus, Abdisho’s list of Old Testament writings is part of a catalogue that reflects someone’s perception of East Syriac literary history. In such a heritage list, the Old Testament serves as

¹⁰² Van Rompay, ‘Past and Present’, 96. In other words, the *Catalogue* does not offer a bird’s eye view on East Syriac literature as it objectively was.

¹⁰³ See, in particular, his treatment of “the disciples of the Apostles.”

¹⁰⁴ Van Rompay, ‘Past and Present’, 80–81. See Minov, ‘Syriac’, 118–19, for an overview of other ‘histories’ related to the Old Testament narrative world: History of Job, History of Jonah, History of Joseph.

the starting point. It is construed as the first category of East Syriac literature.¹⁰⁵ The inclusion of the Old Testament serves constructions of the antiquity of the tradition, of continuity, and of golden beginnings. The entries that Abdisho included in his Old Testament served these goals—their inclusion was not guided by canon, but by a notion of heritage.

4.2. ‘Lost Books’?

The publications associated with the second research trajectory have another goal and thus meet other challenges than those met by the publications of the first trajectory. Their goal is to recover an early Jewish literature. To meet that goal, they trace entries in the *Catalogue* that may once have been Jewish books. Ironically, in contrast to the first trajectory that tends to make the unruly entries invisible, the second trajectory may end up making these entries hyperreal and creating an imagination of Jewish literature that is out of proportion.

The project of recovering early Jewish literature demands that entries in books lists can be pinned down as extant texts and as ‘real writings’. A book that is known only by title and which does not survive as an extant text can either be disregarded as ‘unreal’ or ‘false’ due to its lack of an extant text (and thus considered irrelevant to the project), or it can be construed as a ‘lost book’, assuming that all entries by default were books that had texts associated with them.

¹⁰⁵ The Old Testament often serves as the beginning of Syriac historiography and the origin of the literary tradition. See Debié, ‘Syriac Historiography’, 94–95, 98, 103, 105.

This approach is challenged by some of the entries that I have discussed above, which may never have circulated as extant and available texts that were materially present in the world as layout units in manuscripts. It is possible that entries such as the History of King Herod refer to a fictitious book, which is embedded in a literary text. Another challenge is that publications of the second trajectory will easily fall prey to what I would call the ‘one-to-one fallacy’. If we are to argue the existence of an early Jewish book based on an entry, then we must imagine a one-to-one relationship between an entry and an identifiable and discrete (sometimes hypothetical) extant text, and we also have to trust that the copying and transmission of the *Catalogue* has not affected the rendering of the entries. As my presentation has showed, many of the entries in the latter part of Abdisho’s Old Testament may refer to a selection of potential texts; this is the case for the Epistle of Baruch, the Proverbs, and the History of the Sons of Shamuni. There is no clear one-to-one relationship between these entries and discrete target texts. In addition, given the general priority of the book format—particularly for entries that are catalogued as part of the Old Testament—the entries that the list ascribes to other formats (such as ‘histories’ and ‘proverbs’ or ‘fables’) quickly also become ‘books’. The risk is that the publications of the second trajectory disregard the potential ontological multiformity of these entries in the *Catalogue*. For example, the History of the Sons of Shamuni may refer to 4 Maccabees, but it may also refer to an independently circulating, excerpted, narrative cluster.

5.0. The Various Ways of Knowing about Books

In this chapter, I have argued that Abdisho of Nisibis's *Catalogue of the Books of the Church* is best understood as someone's late thirteenth-century conception of the East Syriac literary heritage. In other words, the *Catalogue* provides a heritage list, and is not a canon list. Furthermore, the list does not provide an objective account of East Syriac literature as it once was. The list reflects the knowledge and the judgement of the list-maker(s) and the surrounding community at a certain point in time—which is mediated by the later scribes who copied and recopied the *Catalogue*. If scholars engage book lists such as Abdisho's *Catalogue* to mine them for historical information about books or categories of books that were once in existence, then it is vital to, first, take the book list into account as a piece of literature in its own right—that is, as a work that may not have been designed to answer the questions that modern and contemporary scholars would like to pose to it. Second, it is equally important to keep in mind that the list consists of names of writers and the titles of their writings. These names and titles are sometimes all that we have, and there is no direct link between them and identifiable texts outside the literary universe of the list. While we may harbour a deep longing for filling in the blanks, it may be equally beneficial—not least to our academic imagination of past literary landscapes—to allow the entries to remain unruly.

The three categories of unruly entries that I have explored in this chapter provide intriguing indications of the various ways of knowing (about) the writings that are represented in a book list. It is of course likely that a learned figure such as Abdisho

read and handled (alternatively: heard read) many of the writings that he lists in his *Catalogue*, and that he thus knew them as extant and available texts. However, it is unlikely that this is the case for all of the entries that he includes. Van Rompay has suggested that Abdisho may not actually have been familiar with all the writers and writings he listed and that he may sometimes just have “quoted from memory or copied some vague reference.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the character of a number of the entries in the *Catalogue* suggests that Abdisho knew many of them only by mention. As pointed out above, he treats some entries in a highly sweeping manner—“Bar Yaqub/Bar Shahaq,¹⁰⁷ he has one book; Damanais, he has treatises”¹⁰⁸—and he also includes “a book that Paqor wrote.”¹⁰⁹ This way of knowing about writings, maybe by hearsay, allows for misunderstandings, layers of interpretation, and the inclusion of entries that may never have existed elsewhere. Moreover, as suggested in this chapter, some of the writings that Abdisho lists may be fictitious. The line between writings known only by mention and writings that were fictitious can be difficult to draw. Alternatively, the inclusion of fictitious books may have served rhetorical purposes, filling in perceived gaps in the comprehensive account of East Syriac literary history.

In my view, there is nothing peculiar about this multifaceted way of knowing (about) writings. On the contrary, I would

¹⁰⁶ Van Rompay, ‘Past and Present’, 96–97.

¹⁰⁷ Vat. sir. 176, fol. 38v, has Bar Yaqub. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Sachau MS 312, fol. 60r, has Bar Shahaq.

¹⁰⁸ ܩܪܝܬܐ ܕܒܪ ܝܥܩܘܒ ܕܒܪ ܫܗܗܩܐ ܕܒܪ ܕܡܢܐܝܝܫܐ ܕܒܪ ܕܡܢܐܝܝܫܐ ܕܒܪ ܕܡܢܐܝܝܫܐ ܕܒܪ ܕܡܢܐܝܝܫܐ (Vat. sir. 176, fol. 39v).

¹⁰⁹ ܩܪܝܬܐ ܕܒܪ ܩܘܪܝܘܫܐ (Vat. sir. 176, fols 40v–41r).

consider it to be highly common. In any attempt at profiling East Syriac heritage literature, we should expect to find entities that had different epistemological statuses for the list-maker(s). In a manuscript culture, where manuscripts and thus physical copies of writings were less frequent than in a print culture, a learned person would know about writings in many ways.¹¹⁰ That person may have heard about and maybe yearned for several works that he or she would never see or handle. The conception of the literature of a tradition would far exceed what any person or local community would physically engage. Hence, when the goal is to provide a list of the books of the church, the imagination of a comprehensive literature would invite the inclusion of entities whose ontological and epistemological status were indeed varying.

¹¹⁰ Of course, this is still so. We are constantly imagining, referring to and talking about the literature that we think about as 'ours', and that literature includes several books we have never read.