Syriac Christianity flourished in three ancient cultural centres, Edessa in the east of Upper Euphrates, Ediabene in the east of Upper Tigris, and Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Lower Tigris. These centres adopted Aramaic as the main language during the neo-Assyrian period, and by the fifth century B.C., this language became the lingua franca of the entire Near East. Aramaic culture, heavily influenced by the ancient cultures of Assyria and Babylonia, marked these regions before they fell under the cultural hegemony of the Greeks, especially in the case of Edessa. Edessa was for several centuries the cultic centre of such Aramaized deities as Bēl, Nebu, the goddess Atargatis, the Arab goddess Allāt, and Šamaš. Harrān, located south-east of Edessa, was the seat of the moon-god Sin. Ediabene, located in the heart of ancient Assyria, worshipped Bēl, Aššur, Adad, Ba'ūl-Šamān, as well as Māran, Martan and Barmaṟn, as in the case of Hatra. By the fourth century A.D., southern Mesopotamia was under Sassanian control and the supreme god of the Sassanians, Ahura-Mazda, gained prestige in that part of the Semitic world.

Nevertheless, when the kingdom of Edessa officially adopted Christianity by the third century, its own Aramaic dialect, Syriac, became the language of the Christians in both Syria and Mesopotamia. Although Syriac sources draw a picture in which paganism vanished with the advent of Christianity, several pre-Christian religious traditions continued to exist to the surprise and condemnation of later generations of Syriac authors. Traces of those religions can also be detected in Syriac personal names, most of which are theophoric, as is the case of other Semitic onomastica in general. My compilation and comparative analysis of Syriac personal names, a project I am currently undertaking, allow me to offer the following observations regarding the continuity of some Aramaic religious beliefs in Syriac Christianity.

Pre-Christian influence over Syriac onomastica is detected in three cases. First, names of pagan deities have often been used by Christians as personal names. Second, several names reflect the structure in which the words ܐܒܕ (servant), ܒܪ- (son), and ܢܘ멩 (maiden) are followed by a divine name or a divine object in a bound phrase (ex. Servant of the Sun-god). Third, many names contain a divine name in a nominal or a verbal sentence. One of the pagan deities used as a personal name is ܫܡܫ. Thus name has been given to the founder of a monastery near the Lower Mesopotamian city of Anbar, (abba) ܫܡܫ, (Father) "Sun(god)" (Bedjan, Liber Fundatorum 508: 124). ܫܡܫ, (Bedjan, Acta Martyrum IV, 508:9) brother of Simeon the Stylite (4th-5th centuries), is formed with the divine name ܫܡܫ and the pronominal suffix -ܐ, "My Sun(god)." ܫܡܫ is the Syriac parallel of Sumerian UTU and Akkadian 𒈹Šamaš, whose cult centre was also located in Lower Mesopotamia, namely in Borsippa. The deity was also worshipped in Hatra, the "City of the Sun" as is stated in inscriptions on local coins, under the names ܡܪܢ "our Lord," and ܡܪܐ "Lord." The diminutive form of the latter divine name, ܡܪܢ, was given to the founder of the Maronite Church, (ܡܪܐ) Mārūn, "Little Mara" (early 5th century). The moon was worshipped by the Aramaeans under the name ܫܗܪ. The latter appears in early Aramaic inscriptions with other deities and with ܫܡܫ. The name of this deity in the forms of ܫܗܪ (BO I, 423), ܫܗܪܐ (Lib. Fund. 451:5), and the diminutive ܫܗܪܗ (Chronique do Seert II, 137) has been used as a personal name by Christians.

The name of the apostle and that of many Christians, ܕܝ, contains the divine name ܕܝ, another form of Adad, in addition to the personal suffix -ܐ "My (deity is) Adda." Tile form ܕܝ is also attested in the name of the bishop of Ar'āwān ܕܝ-Abra (on the Small Zab river) who lived during the 5th century (Synodicon Orientale 43:20); it was also the name of a Christian layperson who lived during the 6th century (Synod. 80:3). On the other hand, two Nestorian missionaries to China were named ܕܕ, "Adad" and Bar-Bahlūl mentions in his Lexicon (p. 607) a man's name, ܚܕ, although without specifying his identity. Parallel to ܕܝ is ܓܕ "My (deity is) Gād," a name borne by a bishop and martyr in Mesopotamia, a priest, and possibly a Christian layperson of Bēt Lāpāt (Synod. 79:13, 80:1). Aramaic ܓܕ is Greek Tyche, the name of the Fortune-god worshipped in Hatra and in several Syrian cities. The name of the well-known deity of Edessa, ܢܗܪ, ܢܢ, is also the name of at least two bishops. The first lived in Purāt (Basrā) during the early 7th century (Synod. 211:1), and the second in Harrān. (ܡܪܐ) ܙܝܪ is the disciple of Mār Eugene (4th century) whose name is that of the deity of escort and protection known in Hatran, Palmyrene, and Nabatean inscriptions (see below ܒܙܝܪ).

The supreme god of Mazdaism, Hormuzd, is also the name of a great eastern Syriac saint and monk, (Rabban) Hormuzd, whose monastery still stands in Alqosh in northern Iraq. This Mazdean divine name is still
borne almost exclusively by members of the Christian community of Iraq. Names derived from mlk, "(god) mlk," such as mlk², diminutive mlkw, mlkw, mlkwy are widely used in Syriac. The woman martyr mnmlk² may also be a shortened form of (')jm(t)-mlk² "Maiden of (god) mlk²." The name of an eastern Syriac Patriarch, tmlw², is also that of the Babylonian god of nature and spring, Dumuzi (Tammûz). It is unlikely that the Patriarch's name is that of the month Tammûz, since the latter is normally written in Syriac without the emphatic ending. Finally, several bishops were called by the name m²n² (Ma²nà), a deity attested in Hatran, Nabatean, and Palmyrene inscriptions. One should add the name of the prophet pgød², often borne by bishops, which was originally the name of one of the main deities at Gerasa. It should be mentioned that Greek and Roman divine names, such as Bacchus (Roman god of wine) and Dionysos (Greek god of wine), were also borne by Christians, namely those of the Western Syriac church.

Names expressing a bound phrase include ²bd-smš, "Servant of Šamaš," and ²bd-nbw, "Servant of Nebû." These are names of two persons whom the apostle Adday has converted to Christianity, according to the Doctrine of Addai. Since the scene of the teaching of Adday is the beginning of the Christian era, the use of these pagan names is understandable. Nevertheless, a hypocoristic form of ²bd-nbw, ²bdny, was given to the disciple of the catholicos Isaac who lived during the middle of the 8th century. Nebû, another form of Nabû, was the son of Marduk and the god of wisdom whose seat was in Borsippa. He was also worshipped in Syria as a local deity of Edessa and Palmyra. ²bdšmny², "Servant of Sin" is a name known in Hatran inscriptions, but also borne by a bishop of Edessa and a martyr of the 3rd century. In Hatra, smy² seems to have referred to standards representing members of the local pantheon. ²bd²-²zy² (for ²bd²-²zy²), "Servant of (god) ²zy²" (see ²zy² above), is the name of a Syriac author. ²bd²-²šlm², "Servant of Šlm²" is a martyr whose name is that of the "Sun-set" deity often mentioned with šnr "(God of the) Dawn" in Ugaritic Texts. Hypocoristic forms of this personal name, šmy and šlm², were also borne by Christians, among whom was a bishop (Synod. 70:25, 79:29).

Br-b²(1)-šmyn, "Son of Ba²al-gamin," is the name of an eastern Syriac Catholicos and martyr (middle of the 4th century), and that of a Christian noble (6th century) from Bêt Laphâe (Synod. 79:29). The second part of the name, b²(1)-šmyn (lit. "Lord of heavens") is the name of a god worshipped in Mesopotamia and Syria, namely in Palmyra, Hatra, Harrân, and Nisûbis. Br-n²dd, "Son of Hadad" (see ²dd above), is the bishop of Tella in northern Syria. Br-l²h² (for br-l²h²), "Son of God," the name of an Edessan author and martyr, can hardly be originally Christian since the phrase "son of God" is extensively cited in Syriac literature with reference to Jesus only. The non-Christian origin of brlh² is supported by an Aramaic name of the same structure, ²mr²lh² "Maiden of god" (CIS II 1078). Br-smš, "Son of the Sun-(god);" (see smš above) was the name of one of Mar Eugene's disciples (4th century). The name of the bishop bršm² (Synod. 42:2) may be a hypocoristic form of the same name. Brn², a name borne by a priest, a bishop of Karmê (Synod. 79:11), and a bishop of Edessa contemporary of emperor Constantine (Synod. 109:20) is a shortened form of br-nbw "Son of Nebû."

Bršmy², a bishop of Edessa and martyr in the Doctrine of Addai, means "Son of the (divine) Standard." We may consider sm², the name of a woman martyr as a hypocoristic form of brš-sm² "Daughter of sm²." ²bd-hyk²², "Servant of the temple," was the name of a martyr. The word hyk²² must have referred to a pagan temple. The Syriac Christian parallel of this word, ²di² "church," was used to form a personal name often borne by monks to this day, br²-di² "Son of the church." As for br²-n²wn (father of Mar Mârs in Act. Mart. IV, 526:11), the second part of the name is that of the goddess ²r² whose cult was widespread from the Syrian coast westward to Hatra near Aššûr on the Tigris eastward. Finally, the name of a great Syriac author br-dysn, "Son of the (river) Daysân," may be added if Daysân refers to the "river-god" as shall be seen later.

Nominal sentences containing divine names modified by a predicate include the name of the great Maronite saint, Šarbēl. This name contains two elements in a bound phrase: šr, "breeze, breath," and bēl, another name of the Babylonian god Marduk. Sarbēl is in fact a shortened form of a name parallel to the Assyrian name Tâb-šr-Asšûr "Good is the breath of Aššûr." In Assyrian sources we find Tâb-Bēl "(the breath of) Bēl is good," whereas Syriac preserved šr-Bēl "The breath of Bēl (is good)." Originally the name was borne by a pagan priest said to have converted to Christianity in Arbela during the second century. Today Šarbēl is a name borne only by Christians, namely Maronites, such as the saint of modern times Sarbēl Mahlufl. Another pagan name preserved in Syriac is hyb²l. It was borne by a bishop of the Persian city of Susa during the third century. This name is an abbreviated form of ²hy-b²l, found also in Ugarit and Palmyra as ²hyb²l, and
of "hyb-cyl, another martyr (A. Scher, Kaldwa Ągūr II 76). This name means "My brother is Baṣwa." RbwF is the bishop of Edessa and one important Syriac author of the 5th century; his name means "Bēl is great" (rēb-bēwF). Persian deities are also included in early Christian onomastics, such as the name of the Christian nobleman ysd-h(n) "Yazd is merciful." Bwlgcyy, another name mentioned in the Chronicle of Bar-Hebraeus, means "Bōl is gracious." The mother of the Edessan Bardaysan (2nd and 3rd centuries) was named nhgym "My omen is high." The name can be understood as a wish, "May my omen be high."

Among the verbal phrases one ought to mention bwlyd, the name of a Christian martyr which means "Bōl knows (or has known)." The name of the Syriac author bly (5th century) may be a hypocoristic form of bwlyd. Yḥbsyn, the deacon and martyr (4th century) of Ṣaw-Ardasir in Fars, means "(the Moongod) Sin has given," whereas ṣlyhb, another martyr, means "(God) Šēl has given." Šēl is a Canaanite deity, the father of humankind and that of the other gods. Parallel to ṣlyhb is mryhb "The lord has given," the name of another martyr of the same period (Act. Mart. II 325). Since mṛ(h) is also used as a title of God in Syriac Christianity, one may take the name mryhb as Christian. Parallels to ṣlyhb are gdyhb "the Fortune-(god) has given" (borne by a bishop and martyr in Mesopotamia), and nṣryhb "The Eagle-(god) has given," (name of a Syriac monk and author). The eagle was worshipped in Hatra under the name mn nṣryh "Our Lord the Eagle." The father of the Edessan author Stephen (5th century) was named Swdyly. This name is spelled Swdyhbly "(god) SWD has given me" in the Chronicle of Mikhail the Syrian (Vol. IV 312). The god SWD is attested as SD in Phoenician, Punic, and Aramaic personal names. Names with the verb ṣqb to "protect" followed by a divine name are also attested in ṣqb-f(h)lh "God has protected" (bishop of Karh Šīlah in the Arbeta Chronicon), and in ṣqb-sm "(Divine name) has protected the name" (bishop of Hanita and martyr of the 4th century in Act. Mart. II 351 ff.). The latter can be considered as a hypocoristic form of ṣqb-smx "The Sun-(god) has protected." ṣqb-lh and ṣqb-sm are both attested in Hatra and Palmyra. Since Syriac ṣlh is the name of "God," ṣqb-lh may also be a Christian name. The name of the martyr bwlh (4th century) is a shortened form of bwlh2 "(the god) Bōl (Bēl) has seen." Another hypocoristic form, dly (bishop of H. Ḥazayē in Synod. 110:52), stands for ṣlm-dly "(the Sun-god) Šamaš has rescued me." ṣylf lh is the name of many monks and that of a martyr of the 4th century (Act. Mart. II 351). It is also attested in the Syriac sources as a name of the priest of the god Šarbēl. It means either "there is god" or "god has brought (an heir)."

Some names stand as a bound phrase in which the first element is other than br, ṣbd, or ṣmt seen above. In other cases, the free element of the bound phrase is a divine object or notion. A Latin synaxarion discusses the martyrdom of a priest in Babylon (3rd century) named krwzwīl, i.e. "Preaching of Šēl." ṣhybl, a martyr of the 4th century (Act. Mart. II 325) stands for yhyb (passive participle of yhb) and "l "given by Šēl." Some shortened forms include bdy, a martyr mentioned in Act. Mart. IV 163, which stands for "in the hands of (Divine name)," and bdm2, (another martyr of the late 4th century; Act. Mart. I 165) which stands for "in the hand of (god) Ma(lkum)." The latter name is attested in Aramaic. Rivers and mountains were also divine beings in the ancient Near East and in this context one may understand the name of the famous Syriac author brdyšyn "Son of (the river-god) Daysān." The latter word is the name of the river which passed through Edessa and which destroyed its church during the third century. Divine objects in personal names continued to be used in Syriac. Brsmyn "son of the Standard" was the name of a bishop of Edessa. Smyn as a divine object is frequently attested in Hatra referring to Standards. Brnwyn "Son of the light" (Arabic parallel; ṣbd-al-Nūr), and ṣbdhyklF "Servant of the temple" (priest and martyr in Act. Mart. I 110) are also attested. Nhr is theophoric in Safaitic personal names, whereas hykF (a pagan "temple") has given the Christian name discussed above, br-dnr "Son of the Church." Other notions such as ṣb, ṣh, ṣm, attested as theophoric in Akkadian and early Aramaic names are frequently used in Syriac personal names. Among these are ṣhyynm "My brother rose high / became prominent" which was given to two bishops, and ṣbr-b "son of the father" which was borne by an archdeacon of Erbil.

Names containing clear references to pagan elements must have troubled some of the Syriac authors, especially when such names were borne by members of the clergy. Attempts have been made to avoid the true meaning of these names and for this purpose, folk etymologies have been created. Thus br-b-l-ṣmyn, which means "Son of (the god) Baṣa-Ṣamin," was read in one of the Syriac chronicles as br-b-ṣmyn, and was translated as "That of the four names" (see also Act. Mart. II 296 n.2). RbwF "Bōl is great" was interpreted as ṣrwn "head pastor." In addition, there was a clear attempt among Syriac Christians to avoid all traces of
paganism by simply replacing the pagan deity by the name Jesus or Christ. Thus "bd-nty" shifted to "bd-yšw", bwkt-yzd ("Yazd is Fortune") to bwkt-yšw ("Jesus is Fortune"), bwrz-šdwr, bwrz-mźh, or bwrzmyhr (all attested in Syriac) to bwrz-yšw, br-šmš to br-dyr, br-hykl to br-ždr, gd-yhb to yšw yhb, dwd-hwrmzd to dd-yšw, etc. Other attempts were made by later scribes and authors to avoid pagan elements in the names of former saints and martyrs. Thus the Persian name of the Catholicos and martyr šhdwst ("Friend of the king") who was killed for his faith in 341, was modified into yšw-šdws ("Friend of Jesus") by Sulayman bishop of Basra in his book entitled The Bee (p. 116 and n. 5) On the other hand, one exemplar of the Liber Fundatorum (p. 508 n. 4) reads the name of (Abba) Šmà (Sun-[god]) as Šamàša ("Deacon"). Names do not necessarily reflect the belief of their holders, and the shortened form of many of them often confuse their original meaning. Nevertheless, those listed in this paper point to a Near Eastern cultural continuity through Syriac Christianity. Without the latter, a glimpse on the last episode of Near Eastern cultural history would not have been possible.

1 The personal names mentioned below can be found in R. Payne Smith, Thesaurus Syriacus, unless otherwise indicated.