

Exegeting a Drink of Water

The Means of Syriac Patristic Biblical Interpretation

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The First Word

In the beginning was and is the Word. The best place to begin with the Syriac Church Fathers is with their expositions and interpretations of the Biblical text, the Christ to whom the text points, and the kerygma of the Gospel.

A consensus exists among Christian traditions regarding what the Bible contains, give or take a few passages and even books. There is no consensus, however, regarding what method(s) should be employed in interpreting the Bible. Modern Biblical interpretation has developed a range of methods or critical tools which distinguish its concerns from early Christian and patristic interpretation. Yet in particular traditions, such as the Syriac-speaking churches, a variety of methods also exists.

Modern and Patristic Reading of the Bible

The key to distinguishing and evaluating interpretive approaches resides first in how the reader perceives the text, and then in the primary goals and interpretative principles with which an exegete examines the text, often without conscious awareness of what these goals and principles are.

Modern Biblical exegesis tends to dismiss pre-modern and patristic interpretation as pre-critical since it appears to accept the historicity of the narratives at face-value and deal with only the surface of the text.¹ The aim is to go behind the texts to determine the real historical events at play and discern why these bestow theological meaning. Pre-modern patristic exegesis is considered pre-critical because it does not ask the basic question of what gives meaning to a particular story.²

1 Walter Brueggemann, "The re-emergence of Scripture: post-liberalism," in Paul H. Ballard and Stephen R. Holmes, eds., *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), 153–173, here 153–154.

2 John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 12.

That is correct, for the pre-modern reader assumes that the text has authority and meaning because it is Scripture. “For the fathers, the scriptural text itself is the subject matter of interpretation; it is not the means to that subject matter.”³ Instead of looking behind the scripture for ‘what really happened,’ the early Christian reader reads into the text, looking for signs and hints about how this authority works and what meaning it gives to the reader.

Searching for the Mystery

The purpose of Syriac Biblical interpretation is to apprehend the *rāzā/rāzē* “mystery/ mysteries” of Scripture, that is, to experience the reality of the divine encounter depicted in the text which unveils renewed life to its readers and listeners. While modern interpretation aims to describe an event as if it had happened yesterday, and therefore is depicted objectively, Syriac interpreters desire to enter into this event and once more live the Biblical event subjectively. One experiences the reality of the text, not just understands its intellectual meaning.

Syriac exegetes do not perceive the Scriptures as infallible with only one meaning for each passage. Endowed with *rāzā*, Scripture is dynamic, adopting different shapes and meanings for different situations. Rather than attempting to reconstruct the original profane historical event, the interpreter perceives the typological/figural characteristics of the text—which are historical traits—as recurring and transformative at innumerable points of human history.

Syriac exegesis involves close reading which looks for intertextual and typological references and connections. All of Scripture, therefore, can be drawn in as testimony since all Scripture engages the *rāzā*. The congregation and reader hear Scripture as part of the liturgical drama in which each become actors in the Biblical text. If Adam is a type of Christ, then you and I may be a type of a Biblical character.

Narratives and Exegetical Techniques in Syriac Theology

Narratives figure predominantly in the Biblical references of the Syriac Fathers, generally in preference to single-verse citations of moral principles. Narratives embody the drama and complexity of human and divine relationships and thus evoke the event of the *rāzā*. The homilist only needs to make a short reference to a particular story—for the listeners already know the story and how it proceeds and is resolved.

The interpretive techniques used by Syriac interpreters in close reading of the Bible are legion. Several of the most common are illustrated in four

3 Ibid., 116.

well-known Biblical narratives to be rehearsed here. Two Old Testament narratives (Jonah and Gideon) utilize typology and allegory, especially as a vehicle for Christological depiction, to translate the mystery into scenarios that confront critical situations in the congregations. Two Gospel narratives (Jesus Walking on the Water and Zacchaeus) demonstrate the richness of close reading, utilizing the intentional devices of omitting and adding words and incidents to point to the exegete's primary meaning, and making an interpretive move based on something that did not happen in the text.

The exegesis of Gideon and Zacchaeus are targeted for identifiable situations and audiences, while the circumstances of Jonah and Walking on the Water are less discernable and so more universal in their application.

A Fish's Conception: Christological Typology Without Saying So

Ephrem of Nisibis, renowned as the Syriac language's premier author, wrote a lot for the church and its people, especially in the liturgy. His *madrāšē* or "teaching songs" are the model of a unique genre of worship, theology and education in the Christian Church—the poetic singing of the kerygma. Cyrillona, Jacob of Serugh, Narsai of Nisibis, the several Isaacs of Antioch, almost certainly Romanos' *kontakia*, and many later authors continued this poetic medium to express not just the content of Scripture, but also its Spirit, joy and passion. Ephrem's Biblical exegesis adopted many genres with his singular use of symbolism, imagery, metaphor and typology. Although he seldom systematically went through a Biblical text verse by verse, he would evoke a sense of the whole of the Gospel from a verse here and there.⁴

As a case in point, in the *Hymns on Virginity* Ephrem presents a cycle of nine relatively brief *madrāšē* on Jonah.⁵ The first and longest one, Number 42 has 33 stanzas and alludes to the whole story, but his imagery centers on one

4 Among innumerable studies of Ephrem, two overviews are worthy of mention regarding Ephrem's Biblical interpretation: Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992); and Kees den Biessen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).

5 Kathleen E. McVey, transl., *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*, (Classics of Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist Press, 1989); idem. *Hymns on Virginity*, 42–50, 438–460; no. 42, 438–440. Edmund Beck, ed., *Hymnen de Virginitate*, (CSCO 223–224; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1962). There is much debate about whether the several cycles of Ephrem's hymns assembled around specific themes were thematically organized by Ephrem himself, or by later students and scholars, somewhat imperfectly. The inclusion of this group of Jonah hymns not belonging to the Virginity theme is an example.

particularly famous part of the story—Jonah and the great fish, the whale, which undergoes a re-imagination, but not a reversal of their roles.

Jonah hired a ship and went down to sea.
 With silver he bought a watery drowning.
 A bare voice entered Nineveh.
 A hundred thousand souls were engaged in business there.
 The naked voice that sowed—
 Its harvest [was] a hundred-twenty-thousand-fold.
 On the boat human mouths tore him in pieces.
 In the deep the whale's mouth swallowed him up.
 (stanzas 1–4)

The congregation has heard this famous tale before, and knows how to fill in the gaps of the sprawling story. Ephrem conveys the sense that each part and character of the story is connected with the others, a hermeneutic that draws the listeners into the story.

Not all Syriac Biblical interpreters spend as much time with the great fish or whale as we do today, but Ephrem does here.

A whale in the sea swallowed him too.
 It conceived and brought him forth instead of females.
 In the sea it conceived him; on land it brought him forth.
 It delivered him to the all-suckling land.
 He was conceived and born as in nature,
 once more conceived and born unnaturally.
 ...
 When a woman endowed with speech conceived him,
 he took his beginning in her as a speechless one.
 But again when a speechless whale conceived him,
 inside him [the whale] had an advocate endowed with speech.
 ...
 But when he was conceived within a human woman
 he resembled an animal that was speechless.
 An animal conceived him in the womb of the sea;
 that silent one became endowed with speech.
 Within one endowed with speech he was quiet;
 within a silent one he became endowed with speech.
 (stanzas 12–14, 17–18, 21–23)

For a congregation immersed in the Scriptures, this symbolic imagery comes seemingly from all directions, not allowing them to think it all through rationally, but striking them with wonder at how animal and human being, mute natures and verbose speech and silence form a single trajectory. Scripture here does not function as a series of doctrinal propositions, but as a new world

vision not to be gawked at like the apostles at Jesus' Ascension (Acts 1:10–11). Like the apostles being chastised by the two angels, this is a new world they are part of and in which they must live and act. Ephrem is bold as he describes Jonah's experience in the whale as a visceral second birth, a new conception both like and unlike his first birth by his own human mother.

Ephrem flashes startling images before his congregation's mind: the whale re-conceives Jonah who is now born again by a whale. Is the whale Mary, and is Jonah Jesus? Note that one important Christian word is not used by Ephrem.

A New Fetus

But Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) does. Jacob continued in poetic Biblical exegesis with great virtuosity, reputedly writing 763 *mēmre* as the Flute of the Holy Spirit, and is known to have borrowed and adapted Ephrem's poetry and theological imagery. His *mēmra*, "On Jonah," 2544 lines in 12-syllable meter, presents a verse-by-verse exposition and commentary on the Book of Jonah.⁶ The great fish episode (Jonah 1:17–2:10) is retold in much more detail, creating a picture in which members of Jacob's congregation each find their place.

The bridegroom, for whom the movements of the fish were like a bedroom, reclined to enjoy the banquet of passions at which he had sat down. A new fetus which entered through the mouth to the belly of his mother, and he became a conception without intercourse by a great miracle. (31.418.3-8)⁷

*A new fetus ... became a conception without intercourse*⁸ takes Ephrem's literary conception further, indicating an *immaculate conception* from which Ephrem carefully held back his words. In terms of interpretive strategy, what were the two exegetes intending to project to their listeners/readers? The assumption is that both were composed and recited during the Rogation of the Ninevites prior to the commencement of Lent. Although Ephrem avoided explicitly referring to Jonah's re-birth as immaculate, his congregants likely recognized the inference intuitively.

6 Cf. Robert A. Kitchen, "Jonah's Oar: Christian Typology in Jacob of Serug's *Mēmṛā* 122 on Jonah," *Hugoye Journal of Syriac Studies* 11/1 (2008): 29–62; and idem., "On the Road to Nineveh: Dramatic Narrative in Jacob of Serug's *Mēmṛā* on Jonah," in George A. Kiraz, ed., *Malphono w-Rabo-d-Malphone: Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock* (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 3; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008), 365–381.

7 *Mēmra* 122. Syriac text: Paul Bedjan, ed., *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, vol. 4 (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1908), 368–490.

8 നീക്കം ചെയ്ത പട്ടികയിലെ പേരുകൾക്ക് പട്ടികയിൽ ഉൾപ്പെടുത്തിയിട്ടില്ല.

Jacob utilizes Christological typology freely, involving two or more characters or events removed in time from one another to demonstrate the providence of God throughout the Biblical canon.⁹ In instances like this one, the typology suggests that these remarkable events can also take place in other people's lives, which might well mean someone in the pew. Literally, Jacob's immaculate conception refers polysemically as much to the second birth of John 3, which also does not involve sexuality.

While neither Ephrem nor Jacob states the virtually blasphemous idea, worshipers know it anyway. These worshipers know they have been disobedient like Jonah, but given his role as a prophet, he got his just reward. Yet, in a word, an unimaginable action by a whale, the Gospel explodes in your mind as you hear the Old Testament tale about someone being born again from the living dead, a dead man living in a living tomb, and yet the living tomb did not want something alive anymore and could not contain him, sending him back to life as a new immaculate conception. Can I too be reborn and reconceived—and then do what God has always wanted me to do? That's what Syriac exegesis does: dancing through Scripture and luring its listeners to be dancing partners with its implausible images. It is the treasure of the Syriac Orthodox Church, but even more importantly its gift and legacy to the Universal Church—a talent which should never be buried in a hole and not shared.

Exegeting a Drink of Water: Allegories of a Mystery (rāzā)

One of the most colourful and bewildering tales in the early period of Israel was Gideon's uprising against the Midianites, defined strategically and theologically by the selection of three hundred soldiers getting a drink of water at the Spring of ʿHarōd (Judges 7:2–8). Why those who knelt down and lapped up the water with their hands were considered by God to be worthier for the battle has challenged Biblical commentators ever since. Two early Syriac authors, Aphrahat the Persian Sage (ca. 345) and Philoxenos of Mabbug (d. 523), offer extensive exegeses of this famous story, and while their interpretations do not appear to resolve the meaning of Gideon's test, they do persuade their audiences that the story of Gideon's test is about them and their choices.

9 Sidney H. Griffith, "Disclosing the Mystery: The Hermeneutics of Typology in Syriac Exegesis" in Mordechai Z. Cohen and Adele Berlin, eds., *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping Inquires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 46–64.

Aphrahat on Gideon's Test

Aphrahat's 23 *Demonstrations* (*taḥwyāthā*) were written from 337–345 in the Sasanian Persian Empire during the early stages of Shapur II's persecutions against Christians, although readers hear little of the persecutions, as Aphrahat focuses on the problems of the Persian Church, organizational, ethical and theological. He retells the Gideon tale in the *Seventh Demonstration: On the Penitents*.¹⁰ A generation ago, a flurry of articles by T. Jansma,¹¹ George Nedungatt,¹² Arthur Vööbus,¹³ and Robert Murray¹⁴ debated the occasion and function of this particular exegesis. From a different perspective, the Thirteenth Discourse, *On Fornication*, by Philoxenos of Mabbug,¹⁵ at the end of the fifth century, approaches this same Gideon passage.

Robert Boling, in his *Anchor Bible* commentary on Judges, succinctly describes the modern consensus. "The test in the story is one of alertness; the men who lap the water scooped up with their hands, instead of lying down, 'show themselves more watchful and ready to meet any sudden emergency, such as an attack from the rear.' The story thus gives even greater credit to Yahweh, who chose not only a smaller force, but also those less suitable to a military enterprise."¹⁶

Aphrahat interprets the function of this narrative as a call given to the *Bnay Qyāmā*, "Sons of the Covenant" or "Covenanters," who are invited to the ascetic struggle. The opening call, "Let he who is afraid turn back from the struggle," is amplified by a list of reasons why one would turn back. The three reasons—one has planted a vineyard, become betrothed to a woman, or is building a house—closely mirror Deuteronomy 20:2–9. The list is also similar to the

10 Adam Lehto, transl., *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), Demonstration Seven: "On the Penitent," 18–22; 210–213; Syriac critical edition: Ioannes Parisot, ed., *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae. Demonstrationes* (PS 1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894), 7.18–22; columns 341:11–349:27.

11 T. Jansma, "Aphraates' Demonstration VII.18 and 20. Some observations on the discourse on penance," *Parole de l'Orient* 5 (1974): 21–48.

12 George Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the early Syriac-speaking church," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973): 191–215, 419–444.

13 Arthur Vööbus, "The Institution of the Benai Qeima and Benat Qeima in the Ancient Syrian Church," *Church History* 30.1 (1961): 19–27.

14 Robert Murray, "The exhortation to candidates for ascetical vows at baptism in the ancient Syriac Church," *NTS* 21 (1974): 59–80.

15 E. Wallis Budge, *The Discourses of Philoxenus Bishop of Mabbôgh A.D. 485–519*, 2 vols. (London: Asher & Co., 1894) [Syriac text, vol. 1: 597–601]; R. A. Kitchen, *The Discourses of Philoxenos of Mabbug: A New Translation and Introduction* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Cistercian Publications, 2013) [English: 465–468].

16 Robert Boling, *Judges* (The Anchor Bible; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), 145–146.

excuses of the invited guests in Luke's rendition of the Parable of the Wedding Feast (Luke 14:16–24)—one who has bought a field, has bought five yoke of oxen, or has just been married.

The “solitaries/single ones” *ihīdāyē*, who are often interchangeable with the *Bnay Qyāmā*, are the ones ready for the struggle. Aphrahat identifies them as those who “set their faces toward what is ahead and do not call to mind what is behind them,” reflecting Philippians 3:13, but also the person who plows and does not look back (Luke 9:62).

Aphrahat addresses personally “those who sound the trumpets”—whom he identifies as “the preachers of the church.” They are charged with three tasks: keeping watch “over those who have returned”—those who could not maintain celibacy; “care for those who remain”—catechumens probably; sending down to the waters of testing “those who have vowed themselves to war.” A textual problem with the Biblical text becomes apparent in these crucial directives. “Whoever laps the water with his tongue will hasten and take courage in going to war. But whoever falls on his belly to drink the water will be slack and weak while going to war.” The *Pešittā* adds “with their hands” as part of the action of lapping the water—as in the Hebrew text (7:6): “and the number of those that lapped, putting their hands to their mouth, was three hundred men” (RSV). Aphrahat assumes that whatever the 300 selected men were doing, it exhibited their courage, and those who lay down on their bellies demonstrated their inadequacy for the battle.

Suggestions for the occasion of Aphrahat's exegesis are varied. This was a baptismal document hearkening back to an era of stricter standards no longer in effect (Vööbus); a “liturgical document” intended for the proper selection of candidates for the *Bnay Qyāmā*—an entrance rite, but not baptism *per se*, singling out and consecrating an elite force, the *Bnay Qyāmā*, wrestlers of the spiritual life (Jansma & Nedungatt); Aphrahat's concern over the numerous defections from the *Qyāmā*, “fallen Covenanters,” from which he calls for more stringent and better selection of candidates, while admonishing the pastors not to turn away penitent Covenanters (Nedungatt); and that “the sole subject of the Seventh Demonstration is the admission of lapsed solitaries to penance” (Jansma).

Aphrahat defines the entire sequence involving Gideon as a mystery (*rāzā*), which is in turn a type (*ṭūpsā*) of baptism, a mystery of the struggle and an image (*dmūthā*) of the single ones. The test is affirmed inter-textually for the contemporary church by Jesus' word, “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14).

Aphrahat explains how this plays out in the church, reverting to God's initial call to Gideon to permit those who are afraid to go home before the battle

begins. The trumpet-blowers or preachers of the church are charged with warning those who enter into this covenant with God prior to their actual baptism about the issues of celibacy and marriage. The vow of the *Qyāmā*, typically adopted by young unmarried men and women, is to virginity and holiness. Evidently, there is some problem with those who enter the *Qyāmā* and lose the struggle and “there is only shame for the one who turns away from the struggle.” The one who turns away, but has not yet made a vow or put on battle armour is not to be blamed. The crucial sentence is: “Whoever has set his heart on the state of marriage, let him be married before the baptism,” indicating that baptism is not reserved only for the celibate.

Aphrahat then instructs the preachers to “bring those who have been chosen for the struggle to the waters of baptism in order to be tested. After baptism they will see who is strong and who is weak.” The different styles of drinking are the types of the strong and the weak or lazy, the signs distinguishing the character of one’s sin after baptism. Aphrahat embarks on an unusual midrash, relying upon an intertextual interpolation from Isaiah 56:10–11, on the fact that God’s selected ones lap the water like a dog, reflecting the virtue of a dog.

The strong are those who are distinguished by the waters: they follow after their master like dogs, give themselves over to death for his sake, take up his fight courageously, and keep watch over him day and night. *They bark like dogs* (Isaiah 56:10) *as they meditate on the Law, day and night*. They love our Lord and lick his wounds when they receive his body, setting their eyes on it and licking it with their tongues as a dog licks its master. Those who do not meditate on the Law are called mute dogs because they are unable to bark. And those who are not diligent in fasting are called greedy dogs, who do not know how to satisfy themselves (Isaiah 56:11). And those who are diligent in seeking mercy obtain the bread of children, which they leave for them (Matthew 15:26). (Demonstration 7.21, p. 213)

Here are new ascetical and anti-ascetical categories: “barking, mute and greedy dogs.”

Philoxenos on Gideon’s Test

Philoxenos of Mabbug approaches the exegesis of Gideon’s 300 as a vivid exhortation to the monks under his charge about how to conquer the passion and physiology of fornication. Philoxenos calls upon his monks to reduce their liquid intake—for moisture nourishes fornication—especially in tandem with gluttony, just as dehydration burns off desire. Philoxenos pointed to Gideon’s turning away those who drank their fill, but accepted those who “drank a little,” and this came not from Gideon’s ingenuity, but from God’s divine plan.

The root of this physiology derives from Evagrius Ponticus whom Philoxenos cites anonymously many times. Evagrius observes in the *Praktikos*, “The restrained use of water contributes greatly to chastity. You should be so persuaded by the three hundred Israelites in Gideon’s company who subdued Midian.”¹⁷

Philoxenos identifies the enemy of Israel, the Midianites, as the incarnation of fornication. The link with Midian goes back to Numbers 25:1–2, “the people fornicated with the daughters of Midian (Moabites actually!) and were initiated into the idols of their gods”—a conflation with the Midianite woman/Israelite man incident (Numbers 25:6–9).¹⁸ He employs inter-textual references to support this identification and interpretation, offering Paul’s warning regarding fornication (1 Corinthians 10:8) that refers to the incident in Numbers after which a plague swept over them, slaying 23,000 (Hebrew 24,000). Philoxenos interprets that the event in Numbers slew the fornicators, but not fornication itself. Instead, Gideon did not slay the fornicators, but made the act and sin of fornication itself perish. Gideon equipped each of his 300 men with horns, lamps and pitchers, around which Philoxenos links the sounding/breaking (Judges 7:15). “The sound of the trumpet is the signal of the commandment of God.”¹⁹

God protests again the passion of fornication, and Philoxenos again cites Paul (Hebrews 12:16) who warns against becoming a fornicator and dissolute person like Esau for the sake of one meal.²⁰ A catena of citations against fornication is presented as a “type” against fornication, the various trumpets sounding against the camp of Midian.

For the second time, Philoxenos reminds his listeners that “All these things are the type of our own spiritual life.”²¹ A Perfect one may use the sound of his soul as a trumpet to blare at the passion of fornication, indeed, as a form of the divine voice. With the hearing of the commandment (the trumpet), the desire of fornication is broken, just as the pitchers were broken. Then the hidden light inside the pitcher becomes visible, exposing and eliminating fornication as the light of the knowledge of Christ shines in the soul.

Philoxenos concludes with a summary of these three types. (1) The commandment of God is the sound of the trumpet; (2) the passion of fornication becomes the pitcher broken, because it is light and easy to break after the

17 Robert E. Sinkewicz, transl., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) *Praktikos* 17, 101.

18 Kitchen, *The Discourses*, 13.53, 465–466.

19 *Ibid.*, 13.54, 467.

20 *Ibid.*, 13.55, 467.

21 *Ibid.*, 13.56, 468.

elimination of fornication; (3) The visible lamp is the light of divine knowledge. In presenting this summary,²² Philoxenos recognizes that his typology/allegory is complex and perhaps a bit strained and puzzling to his monastic audience, and wants to make them understand that the passion of fornication is physically and morally conquerable.

Gideon's Dog

Both Aphrahat and Philoxenos perceive the fundamental ascetic character of the Gideon text as "selection for the struggle." Neither focuses his exegesis upon the characters in the text, but upon those hearing or reading the text, for these latter—pastors and *Bnay Qyāmā*, as well as novice monks—are now understood to be contemporaries of the Old Testament figures. The process of our reading the text has reversed, for the text is now reading us.

Philoxenos understands the narrative as an allegorical model for the new resident monks who are ostensibly celibate, but for whom the distracting ideas of the world are still active in their minds and souls. This is a prescriptive text, outlining how and why one should behave in the ascetic and monastic way of life. More precisely, this is a way of life moving from worldly Uprightness up to the spiritual realm of Perfection. The *Discourses* are seldom directed to the Perfect, but to the newly arrived monks, who Philoxenos is afraid may lapse into their worldly ways of thinking, even while living in the monastery. Jansma's focus on lapsed Covenanters in Aphrahat's depiction of Gideon has touched an important nerve in both authors' situations.

In terms of the method of exegesis, both Aphrahat and Philoxenos utilize fairly similar strategies of inter-textual analysis in order to direct their ascetical emphases. Aphrahat begins with Judges 7:3, the advising of those who were afraid or had certain excuses to go home, and then spells out the possible excuses using the list of Deuteronomy 20:2–9. Those who are meant to enter the struggle are described by Philippians 3:13, and the selection of the 300 is given emphatic closure by Matthew 22:14, "many are called, but few are chosen." The various aspects of dog-ness are recalled from Isaiah 56:10–11, the source of "barking dogs," and Matthew 15:26 regarding not throwing children's bread to the dogs.

Philoxenos' passage employs a few more inter-textual references than Aphrahat, establishing the context allegorically with the Midianite conflict in Numbers 25:1–2, 6–9. Philoxenos' only other Old Testament reference, besides Judges 7, is the Tenth Commandment (Exodus 20:17), "do not desire/covet the

22 Ibid., 13:56, 468.

wife of your neighbour,” the closing argument to the listening monks that fornication is something to be avoided.

A final note about dogs. Aphrahat appears to drift into the adverbial phrase in the Biblical text, “like a dog,” and interprets this as a positive image of those elected—the dog as lowly and humble, obedient and self-denying. Philoxenos notably does not mention the dog. “With their hands to their mouths [they lapped up the water]” functions for Philoxenos as a variant to the dog, although in the Hebrew text both are included. These variants point to a basic difference in the purpose for ascetical exegesis on this passage. Aphrahat was interested in the manner of *how* one drank water as a criterion for selection, a matter of liturgical submission to authority for the *Qyāmā* to imitate and obey. Philoxenos interpreted the using of hands to drink as an indication of *how much/little* one drank as the exact measure of the monk’s discipline in the midst of the ascetic struggle.²³

Walking on Water: The Importance of Omission

On the methods of exegesis (*pūššāqā*) in Syriac Biblical interpretation, Tanios Bou Mansour’s two-volume *La Théologie de Jacques de Saroug* provides a thorough examination. The second volume treats “la méthode exégétique proprement dite,” including a section on “les règles de l’interprétation.”²⁴

Bou Mansour begins with Jacob’s understanding of “the necessity of exegesis.” The literal sense of the text carries a hidden meaning, by which inspired persons could speak “something in place of something [else].” A text, therefore, requires a commentary in order to understand its true or full sense or meaning.²⁵ Jacob, however, declares that for those who are sufficiently discerning, the Good News does not need *pūššāqā*, since it is the essential light and all one

23 Since this conference devoted significant attention to Jacob of Serugh, it is fitting to point to Jacob’s reading of Gideon’s trial in “On Gideon and on that War of the Midianites,” no. 84 in Roger Akhrass and Imad Syryany, eds., *160 Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh*, vol. 2 (Damascus: Department of Syriac Studies – Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate, 2017), 161–173. “And those who knelt down to drink water he rejected; and those who lapped [water] while standing he chose.” (line 272, 170). The verb for “standing” is *قَامَ* (*qāymīn*), certainly a unique variant that is counter to the normal mechanics of drinking water at a stream. “Standing (up)” is the opposite verb to “kneeling down,” but in Jacob’s tendency to convert Old Testament stories into Christological types, the chosen ones are depicted as standing, “being resurrected” (root *qūm*).

24 Tanios Bou Mansour, *La Théologie de Jacques de Saroug*, 2 vols. (Kaslik, Lebanon: Bibliothèque de l’Université Saint-Esprit, 1993 and 1999), 317–350 and 330–333.

25 Bou Mansour, *La Théologie*, volume 2, 319–320.

has to do is to open the eyes of the heart.²⁶ Jacob does appear to identify this deep comprehension of the meaning of a text with an act of the human spirit that encounters a deeper sense or meaning which he compares to a pearl.²⁷

If the interpretation does not lift the veil from your story,
your word is obscured by the metaphors and is not visible.
If the questions do not dive into the sea of your story,
the pearl is not drawn up from your book.²⁸

The two characteristics of complete understanding involve multiple meanings/polysemic and deeper hidden meaning in the interpretation *pūššaqa*.²⁹

The Word of God does not limit itself to a single *pūššaqa*;
it is all light and full of the aspects of all parts.³⁰

Bou Mansour demonstrates how Jacob adheres to three fundamental rules of interpretation. First, he rejects any interpretation of a Biblical text that may derive from his own self-interest and ideas, that is, *eisegetis*; in other words, a respect for the integrity of the text and its meaning. Second, he grants foremost authority to the totality of the text, especially in instances when one passage seems to contradict another passage. It is the whole Scriptural text that ultimately decides its meaning. Third, interpretation consists of placing the text in its context, which includes the place and circumstances in which an event is reported.³¹ A parallel concept or principle which Jacob rarely noted consists of a distinction made between the kinds of audience to which his *mēmra* was targeted—basically, simple people, on one hand, and those more cultivated who were more capable of understanding the content of certain difficult texts, on the other. This happened with reference to Biblical texts in which the simple audience believed the literal sense, while the latter group recognized a metaphorical character to the story. Generally, Jacob's pastoral approach directed him to interpret Scripture to all believers.³²

26 Ibid., 321.

27 Ibid., 325.

28 Bedjan, ed., *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, 13:6–9.

29 Bou Mansour, *La Théologie*, vol. 2, 327.

30 Paul Bedjan, ed., *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, vol. 5 (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1910), 601:16–17.

31 Bou Mansour, *La Théologie*, vol. 2, 330–332.

32 Ibid., 333.

Jacob of Serugh's Exegesis: Interpreting What is Not Written

The recent publication of 160 *Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh* from the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Library, Damascus, edited by Roger Akhrass and Imad Syryany, has given us a “new” cache of Jacob’s work.³³ The two-volume edition contains critical editions of each text, but no translations, a more rigorous Bedjan. A number of the texts, however, are not complete, and there is a section of *mēm̄rē* attributed to Jacob which the editors observe are not authentically Jacob’s.

Many of the *mēm̄rē* treat topics of Biblical interpretation, and No. 10 is entitled “When Our Lord Walked upon the Waves of the Sea,” running to 288 couplets/576 lines in Jacob’s signature 12-syllable meter. Jacob examines here two stories he sees intimately connected, the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Matthew 14:13–21) followed by Jesus Walks on the Water (Matthew 14:22–33). Through a close reading of the texts, he connects the two pericopes from something that is not said in the texts. As in many of his *mēm̄rē* on Biblical stories, Jacob follows the canonical order, but does not examine every verse. Nothing—almost—is left unnoticed in the text. As noted above by Bou Mansour, Jacob seldom can limit himself to just one theme, for the Biblical narrative is much richer than that, “thicker” in recent terminology, and spreads out connecting intertextually with other thoughts and Biblical passages.

Jacob begins the *mēm̄rā* not by offering a proemion or introduction bemoaning his inadequacy and sinfulness as author who now pleads with God to assist him in writing this homily faithfully, but instead with the climactic moment of the story. Three times he employs the plea of Simeon, “Give me your hand, so that I do not sink among the waves.” Jacob places this plea not just in the mouth of Simeon, but also in that of the reader, and indeed of his own.

The story begins with the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish, which precedes Christ’s walking upon the water in three of the four Gospels; it is Luke that opts out of that sequence. Bread is the main course; the two fish are mentioned only once. Jacob’s concern is not so much with the physical elements as the perceived apathetic response of the disciples to this remarkable phenomenon, for they expressed little emotion or awe. His miracles or signs were no longer sacred, it seems, but profane, quite ordinary and even “normal.” Jacob’s analysis derives from his close reading of the Biblical text which says nothing about the response of the disciples to what is going on around them and Jesus—an exegesis of an omission. Jacob observes, non-canonically, that Jesus did notice a tangible attitude that was unable to appreciate or even see a miracle. Is Jacob reflecting a current attitude among the congregants in his church?

33 For reference, see note 24.

Jacob and Jesus do not stop to consider this possibility further, as Jacob makes a one stanza transition in which Jesus sends the disciples ahead onto the Sea as a teaching lesson. Jesus presses them to enter the boat while he stays behind to dismiss the well-fed five thousand. Jacob notes a sense of urgency on Jesus' part, acknowledging that it will be a rough voyage.

The *mēmṛā* describes the distress of the disciples in the boat amidst the storm, a Dark Night of the Soul long before St. John of the Cross, the language evoking the images of the sea as the home of primeval chaos into which the disciples are thrown. Jacob extends the dreary and desperate gloom with the depiction of the disciples wrestling with the darkness in replication of Jacob's namesake at Penuel (Genesis 32), a wrestling match which endured 'the entire night,' a phrase that becomes the refrain in this section of the *mēmṛā*.

And just like Penuel, when daylight arrives and the wrestling angel relents with Jacob, so as daylight dawns upon the sea Christ appears on the water. The verb *denah* means 'to appear,' but also means 'to dawn.' Jacob continues with metaphors of nature, as the elements rush towards Christ and rejoice with him. The Son harnesses the sea and is borne by it as if on a chariot. Subtly, Jacob is affirming the Second Person as the Word/Logos: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:3). Although the sea was carrying Christ, He had borne the sea in the beginning; just as Mary bore Christ, He had borne Mary in the beginning.

A curious omission from the canonical text is seen in the brief depiction of the disciples' initial fear of seeing Christ upon the water. The only specific observation Jacob attributes to them is their recognition that the sea 'road' upon which Jesus is walking is not normal. The Pešittā records their outcry, "It's a ghost" or *ḥēzwā*, an apparition. Perhaps Jacob wished to avoid an ambivalent image alluding to the nature of Christ, for an apparition would definitely not be human, and a ghost would not be fully divine either.

Then Simeon stands up in the boat. He is the First Disciple, not only in being the leader of the disciples, but also as the Initiator, the first one to act and do something. His first movement in the boat is a formal request, "Command me to come to you." Simeon confesses that he only has power through his obedience to Christ—I cannot do it by my own inadequate human power and skill. A brief mention of the fervency of Simeon's faith affirms that he was always the first one to take a risk. Jacob understands his subservience to Christ as a type for the Church, a type based in the recognition of his/its weakness.

Simeon begins to walk, but the Scriptures and Jacob never tell us how many steps he took. In a moment of eternity, who can count? Then the spiritual dynamics are turned around—Christ sees Simeon walking as a wonder, a miracle, which is ironic for the disciple who saw nothing to wonder at while

he was handing out the loaves and fish to the Five Thousand. At Christ's command to come to him, Simeon "descended from the boat and set out on his road among the waves, and he was a wonder to Christ because he was not a wonder." Jacob does not elaborate—better to leave some things unsaid—but appears to be raising the issue of human/divine powers and nature, or even an eschatological instant of *theosis* or deification. In a single line Jacob asks who saw Cephas walk except Christ—another instance of Jacob's close reading of the Gospel from which he draws a conclusion from what is not said. The other disciples saw Christ walking, so was eternity too short for them to see Simeon walking like Jesus?

Yet in that eternity of a moment, almost the same duration of timelessness as on the mount of Transfiguration, doubt enters Simeon's mind and body. The wind and the waves cause him to think and he begins to sink. Once again, Jacob interprets Simeon's sinking, the sin of doubt, as a dynamic type of the Church. "It was good for Simeon Cephas as he was sinking, so that in this same instance his Lord who rescues him would be exalted. He proclaimed the Gospel because he called out, 'My Lord, help me,' and he taught the world 'Who [else] is able to rescue [you]?'"

Jacob turns towards the congregation now, imploring them to call upon Christ for help. The Simeon episode is transformed into an allegory for the Church, as a long section advises the Church and its people to imitate Simeon, for the sea in the story is the world—another sense of the chaos and amoral character of the world. Jacob appeals especially to penitents that they should call upon Christ while they are sinking into iniquity.

The concluding statement in the Gospel narrative is the exclamation and confession of the disciples that "You truly are the Son of God!" They have not only marveled at the wonders they have just seen, but finally are able to comprehend what these wonders mean, which is the presence of God among us, Emmanuel. The sea now has become the *malpānā* and they have learned its lesson. If we follow Jacob's approach to exegeting textual omissions, Simeon did not join with the other disciples in this confession, but will declare it on his own (Matthew 16:16) in answer to Jesus' question, as will also Thomas upon seeing the resurrected Christ (John 20:28).

Half Only: The Hermeneutic of Adding to Scripture

Biblical interpretation, especially in its role in proclamation and preaching, has frequently sought to interpret particular Biblical narratives to address and grapple with contemporary problems of the local congregation, involving

conflicts, wars, religious oppression and catastrophic events, as well as issues found within the local community and audience. Removed in time, it is often difficult to equate certain references in a homily with actual events or conflicts within the congregation.³⁴

In the fourth-century collection of 30 discourses, *The Book of Steps* (*kthābhā dmasqāthā*),³⁵ the context of some of the interpretations become apparent. Ironically, there are few external details given about the social situation of *The Book of Steps* (*BoS*): the author remains intentionally anonymous, his location in the Sasanian Empire comes from a single geographical detail, and while it was likely written following the great persecution of Christians by Shapur II (345–379), there are no indications if the collected works of this author are chronologically or randomly ordered.

The author's purpose in writing, nevertheless, is clear. As the spiritual leader of a Christian community in a town or village, he has constructed a system for a consecrated Christian way of life, built upon two levels of commitment. The lower level are the Upright ones (*kīnē*) who are married, have jobs, own property, and fulfill the minor commandments of Christ which include the active duties of charity to those in need: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick. The higher level are the Perfect ones (*gmīrē*) who are required to be celibate, own no property or home, do not work, and devote themselves to a rigorous life of prayer and teaching, fulfilling Christ's major commandments directing them to a deeper level of humility and reliance upon God.

The 30 *mēmre* in *BoS* are the collected writings of this author and range from rules for both levels, sermons, theological and Biblical discourses on controversial issues, and deeper discussions regarding the nature of the Upright and Perfect life. The synopsis is that the Perfect allow their discipline to erode against which the author remonstrates. At the same time, the author begins to notice that the Upright were spiritually progressing beyond his expectations. In several *mēmre* he encourages them to continue, and if only they would just adopt celibacy they would become Perfect, and in fact are almost there now. This may be the only witness in early Christianity to a spiritually-stratified society in which the original superior level is supplanted by the inferior level. While the order of the *mēmre* is not necessarily chronological, the final six

34 Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "To Whom Did Jacob Preach?" in George A. Kiraz, ed., *Jacob of Serugh and His Times: Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2010), 111–131.

35 Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F. G. Parmentier, transl., *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum* (Cistercian Studies 196; Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2004). Syriac critical edition: M. Kmosko, *Liber Graduum* (PS 3; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1926).

evidence a shift towards the promise of the Upright, with the Perfect barely being mentioned.

The final, 30th *mēmṛā*, “On the Commandments of Faith and the Love of the Solitaries,” concludes with a retelling of the story of Zacchaeus’ encounter with Jesus (Luke 19:1–10). The author has repeatedly said that not only will the Perfect receive salvation, but the Upright as well, although in some fashion a lesser, undefined degree of salvation. Whether this was intentionally the final *mēmṛā* cannot be determined, but there is a sense of conclusion, especially with this Zacchaeus midrash demonstrating that the Upright are more than vindicated in Christ’s eyes.

Understand from this that people are saved if they do as they were commanded: [following] that precept which is lower than that perfect and superior precept, [even] while they are married and possessing wealth. [This is clear] by that demonstration when our Lord entered the house of Zacchaeus, a sinner and an extortioner and doer of evil things, and admonishing him made him a disciple with these commandments which are inferior to Perfection. [Jesus] did not say to him, “Unless you leave your wife and your house and your children and empty yourself from everything you own, you will not be saved.” Look, the response of Zacchaeus makes it clear that our Lord admonished him in such a way that he need not empty himself, because he knew that he could not reach the power of that great portion. Zacchaeus said, “Everyone whom I have cheated I will repay four-fold, and half of my wealth *only* I will give to the poor.”³⁶ See, while he did not say to our Lord, “I will abandon everything I have,” our Lord did say the following to him, “Today salvation has come into this house.”³⁷ Zacchaeus shall be called a son of Abraham, he who when he promised to repay their lords what he had extorted had said, “half of my wealth *only* I will give.”³⁸ But whoever gives to the poor half of his wealth while not defrauding anyone, look, is he not greater than Zacchaeus, who was called righteous? When he gave two portions of his wealth, look, does not he grow greater still? Whoever gives all he possesses to the poor and the strangers, look, is [that person] not better and greater? (*The Book of Steps*, *Mēmṛā* 30.27, 361)

The author utilizes two interpretive moves to convince his congregation—who appear now to be predominantly the Upright—that despite the strict hierarchy previously maintained, the Upright are scripturally worthy and vindicated for salvation by Christ himself.

The first move in this close reading of the text *qua* text is to notice once again what has not been said. After 30 *mēmṛē* promoting the way of Perfection, frequently in superior contrast to the way of Uprightness, using the teachings

36 Lk 19:8.

37 Lk 19:9.

38 Lk 19:9.

and actions of Jesus, the author now makes note of the fact that Jesus did not say, “Unless you leave your wife and your house and your children and empty yourself from everything you own, you will not be saved.” The author had declared many times that unless one did these things, one could not become Perfect. But now Perfection is not as important as salvation, and the absence of what Jesus could have said to Zacchaeus is a critical part of the author’s argument. This interpretation of a purported omission is a strategy employed to convince the listeners that there could have been a different direction in the argument, but this is the intentional one. Jesus made no presumed or hidden requirements for Zacchaeus to earn his salvation.

The congregation likely had lingering doubts about Zacchaeus’s eligibility for salvation, and theirs as well. The author turns to Zacchaeus’ own testimony as the affirming evidence. Jesus already knew the tax collector could not really relinquish all his assets, and so allows him to commit to repaying all his fraudulent activities. Again, the crucial point lies in the exegesis of an omission “he did not say, ‘I will abandon everything that I have.’” Zacchaeus (and the author) then adds, “half of my wealth *only* I will give to the poor.” The author adds to the canonical text the single word *balhūd* ‘only.’

If those listening knew the Gospel story, they would have been startled immediately by the ‘only.’ Aphrahat used this same tactic, adding or changing a word or short phrase in the canonical text, to grasp the attention of the listener—and that addition or change would indicate Aphrahat’s principal interpretation.³⁹ The author of *BoS* does precisely the same thing. Zacchaeus was giving to the poor 50% *only* of his wealth—not 51% or even 49%. This means the Upright listeners were allowed to keep a good portion of their wealth—and like Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come into this/your/my house.” *Balhūd* may have been an addition to the sacred text, but it captured the *rāzā* of what Jesus said.

Not the Last Word

Syriac Biblical interpretation has rarely made connections with so-called modern exegesis, which is primarily a Western Christian phenomenon. While the methods of historical criticism and its offspring, form and redaction criticism among others, are not used by Syriac interpreters, there has been a surprising

39 Craig E. Morrison, “The Bible in the Hands of Aphrahat the Persian Sage,” in Robert D. Miller, ed., *Syriac and Antiochian Exegesis and Biblical Theology for the 3rd Millennium* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008), 1–25.

turn in the last few decades in Western Biblical and homiletical studies towards what Syriac exegesis has practiced over the millennia, a distinctive and often poetic approach to a theological interpretation of the Scriptures. Through sermon and liturgy, Syriac exegesis is intended for the audience of all believers in the Church, not just “the educated layperson” or the scholar.

That modern Western Biblical interpretation has learned anything directly from Syriac exegetical traditions exegesis, or vice-versa, is not provable. These two exegetical world-views now have the opportunity to be enriched by one another through similar methods and perspectives that have emerged on the nature of Holy Scripture.

Rowan Williams observed that “the sacred text thus enacts its sacred character not by its transparency, but by its nature as unresolved, unfinished, self-reflexive or self-questioning.”⁴⁰ The examples shown certainly demonstrate the Syriac Church Fathers struggling with and appreciating the deep and unresolved nature of Scripture. Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh attempt to make sense of Jonah’s journey, in and out of the great fish, and on the road again to Nineveh, knowing that this cycle is the type Jesus himself identified for his journey on the road to Easter morning,⁴¹ and allow the paradoxical to remain. Aphrahat and Philoxenos draw deeply from the Spring of Ḥarōd to encourage and guide their congregations, but neither one was able to resolve why God wanted them to drink that way.

The return of Western Biblical commentaries to investigating narrative units of the canonical Scriptures for their theological intentions, rather than individual verses for their anomalies and historical remnants, injects an air of anticipation in each reading and sermon that there is something more here than the plain words seem to say. Jacob’s interpretive principle to rely upon the whole text for the meaning is seen in how he connects the Feeding of the Multitudes and Christ’s Walking on Water as one story that begins with the disciples’ absence of wonder and concludes with their ultimate declaration of faith.

Two concerns are contemporary. First, it is sadly the case that very few Western Christians are aware of the wealth and utility of Syriac interpretation and theology. Syriac exegesis should continue to be strengthened within the Syriac churches, but its light should not be kept under a basket. The gift of the Syriac Christian tradition to the Great Church is its distinctive, imaginative grappling with the mysteries of the Scriptures, and for its broad application

40 Rowan Williams, “Historical Criticism and Sacred Text,” in David F. Ford and Graham Stanton, eds., *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), 217–228; 227.

41 The Sign of Jonah: Mt 12:38–42, Lk 11:29–32.

to the enrichment of preaching world-wide. Through journal articles, Biblical commentaries, sermons, denominational and clerical educational publications, Syriac exegesis should be disseminated in Western Christian media—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical. It is no virtue to keep Syriac theology cloistered.

Second, what is required to enliven, even revive, Syriac Biblical interpretation is for contemporary Syriac exegetes and preachers to give voice to renewed interpretation. This begins as always by a deep acquaintance with and knowledge of Syriac historical theology—no way around that task—and then moving to construct sermons, Biblical exegesis and commentaries, and systematic theologies grounded in the Syriac engagement and encounter with the Bible. These renewed theological ventures may sound at first like Ephrem, Jacob, Isaac of Antioch, Narsai, Philoxenos, and Dionysius bar Šalibi, but in time they will be responding to the struggles and opportunities of today's situations in the Syriac Church and beyond.

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