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JACOB OF SERUGH AND HIS HOMILIES ON THE PRAISE AT TABLE¹

Jacob of Serugh², the greatest Syriac writer after Ephrem, and one of the most remarkable theologians of the West Syrian tradition, has contributed in a remarkable way to the growth of Syriac theology. The life of Jacob of Serugh lies between 451 and 521 A.D. He had a great reputation in his own age. He was a man whose learning and piety earned him esteem to be a star in the history of Syriac literature. At an early age he attracted the attention of his countrymen by his piety and his literary gifts, and entered on the composition of the long series of metrical homilies on religious themes which formed the great work of his life. «His *memre* radiate a spirituality which finds expression in the spirit of gentleness, meekness, intimacy and warmth. The abundance of his creative talent, the exuberance of his inspiration, the delicacy of his spirit, the profundities of his religious insight and the charm of spirituality brought him boundless admiration»³. Through his writings, a master speaks to us, who belongs to the few of the most eminent who have reached the zenith of producing elegance of style in Syriac and writing what were to become the recognized classics of homilies in the Syriac literature.

Homilies on Praise at the Table

Paul Bedjan, in the beginning of the 20th century, published 195 homilies of Jacob out of 763 in five volumes. There is a group of 8 homilies which deal with the theme Praise at Table in the 4th volume, numbering from 139 to 146. Each homily deals with the following themes respectively: Providence, Bread and Wine, Word of Life, Bees, Almsgiving, Drink Offering, Excess and Ingratitude. All these homilies are having about 100

¹ B = P. Bedjan (ed.), *Homiliae Selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis*, IV, Paris-Leipzig 1908, 872-914; when a reference to a particular passage is given, then the volume number and homily number in Bedjan's edition is given in the brackets.

² Serugh was the pre-Islamic name of this area. It is about 46 km south-west of the city of Urfa. The term Serugh literally means woven or latticed. The older name of the main town in this region is Batman.

³ A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient. A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, 3, CSCO 500, Louvain 1988, 121.

lines each and are written in dodecasyllabic meter. The interrelatedness of ideas in these homilies is very strong. There is internal cohesion between the themes. Sometimes, there are repetitions of the same idea, which is peculiar to Jacob. The homilies on the Praise at the Table have a remark at the beginning: «Again they wrote to us a series of *memre* of the teacher, Mar Jacob» (B IV 139). This is an indication that the copyist had added this information when he wrote these homilies either to a monastery or to a congregation for reciting.

Normally Jacob begins his homilies with a supplication for divine help to recite his homilies. This supplication extends to few lines. But here he starts just with a small supplication: «Son of God, who is the riches and the treasury of His Father, give me Your Word, which is the riches, that is on account of the mercy from You» (B IV, 139: 1-2). Each homily ends with a glorification or thanksgiving or blessing. We cannot find any disputable theme in these homilies. Jacob's firm interest for finding typological expressions is also seen in these homilies. To assert his message, Jacob depends on the biblical tradition. Whenever there is a possibility of incorporating a biblical theme, Jacob had used it. The interesting thing is that these eight homilies form a group and they are entirely different from other homilies of Jacob. These homilies are unique in nature, viz. in the case of length, the treatment of the themes, etc.

There is no translation in any modern languages for these homilies. So I translated these eight homilies into English and this paper is based on the Syriac text and my translation.

Theological Themes

It is interesting that Jacob treats a variety of theological themes in these eight short homilies. Here our attention is focused mainly on following themes: Baptism, Eucharist, Word of God, Thanksgiving and Divine Providence. Even though there are other themes, we do not go into the details of them.

Baptism

Jacob does not go into the details of the theology of baptism in these homilies. His concern is to present baptism as a means for the human beings to become the sons of God and the brothers of the Son of God. Through the baptism, one receives the gift of brotherhood and son-ship. That means we become the children of God through the baptism. Through the anointing of the baptism, the expelling of the evil takes place. Thus, those who come for the baptism acquire the status of Adam

before the Fall. And the baptism gives one the right to pray Our Father in heaven, since he becomes the son of God, so also, the brother of the Only-Begotten.

The Father created you in the image of His Son and your master gave (you) to drink

And the Spirit of God adorned in you the fruits of faith.

Put your root in the blessed stream of baptism

See, because of the spear⁴, it flew from the fountain which you drink.

The tree of life made you Its brother that you will grow with It (B IV, 143: 71-75).

Jacob even though admits the baptism of Jesus as the source of Christian baptism⁵; he always makes it clear that pierced side of Jesus is also the source of baptism.

He poured the fragrant oil of baptism upon the heads

We will be anointed so that its smell expels the evil one from us.

By the oil, He made us to be the brothers of His Only-Begotten

And His people will call His Father, our Father who is in heaven (B IV, 144: 37-40).

Eucharist

Jacob treats the theme of Eucharist in many different homilies, such as The Passover of the Law on the night of the Thursday of the Mysteries (B V, 175); The Homily on the Reception of the Holy Mysteries on the day of the week of White (B II, 42); Our Lord portrayed in Scripture as Food and Drink (B II, 43); For the Vigil of Holy Week (B II, 53); On the commemoration of the Reposed and on the Loaf brought for the Eucharist, and that the Reposed benefit from the Oblations and Alms made in their Behalf (B I, 22); The Homily on the Reception of the Holy Mysteries (B III, 95); etc. The homilies on the Praise at Table also deal with this theme.

Eucharist as Medicine of Life: **ܘܚܪܘܫܐ ܕܚܝܢܐ** - The healing aspect of the Eucharist is an important concern in the Eucharistic doctrine of Jacob of Serugh. Eucharist is viewed as a medicine for the spiritual sickness. It heals the wounds of sins. The Eucharist enables the sinners to recover

⁴ Io. 19,34.

⁵ B I, 8: 327-354.

from their grave illness caused by the sins. When the sinners receive the Eucharist, they are healed from their spiritual sickness. Due to sin, the human beings are spiritually dead. It is through his sacrifice at Golgotha; the new wine flew out and caused the world to drink from it. So all the dead ones were revived and mourners were comforted. Jacob highlights the role of Christ as a physician. Through the Eucharist the Son of God, absolves the sinners and thus heals them from their spiritual illness. The sinners collect mercy from the merciful one.

Virgin vine gave bunch of grapes, which gave its sweet wine
Behold, it is sucked as medicine of life in the four quarters of the world.
The vine was cultivated by the Ploughman not to destroy
And his wine came down to the earth of dead ones and awakened them.
The new wine flew from him upon Golgotha⁶
The world had drunk and all mourners were comforted.
Behold, the tables were set in order on the earth before the sinners
And they consume the nourishments from them spiritually every day⁷ (B IV, 144: 21-28).

Participation in the Eucharist and its consummation leads one to a new life. He will be healed from all spiritual diseases. While emphasizing the healing aspect of Eucharist, Jacob is sharing the general concern of Syriac Fathers to view Eucharist as the 'medicine of life'. The expression 'medicine of life' (*som hayye*) denoting the Eucharist is a commonplace in the Syriac tradition.

Eucharist as Tree of Life: **ܫܘܡܝܢ ܥܘܠܡܝܢ** - Jacob has a great concern of presenting Eucharist as the means of eternal life. Eucharist offers life without end. Jacob makes the reference to the 'Tree of Life' in the Paradise. The first commandment was «you shall not eat from the tree which is in the centre» (*Gen.* 2:17). But Adam and Eve ate and they were cast down from the Paradise. Eve ate with desire and she died with Adam. It was not a carnal death, but a spiritual death (B IV, 141: 39-54). They lost their spiritual life. Their relationship with God is broken.

«The tree of life made you its brother that you will grow with it; Bring fruits of glory to your Lord prudently» (B IV, 143: 75-76). Adam ate the bread of life that is the food from God, which came down from the heaven

⁶ *Io.* 19,34

⁷ The verse «And they consume the nourishments from them spiritually every day» (B IV, 144:28) makes it clear that at the time of Jacob also there was the practice of daily communion. If it was not the situation, then he would not have written 'every day'.

so that Adam returned to his place. The dead Adam became alive and he could retain his original place and image. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree which is in the centre, they became dead, and when they ate from the new tree of life, the Eucharist, they became alive for ever.

Eucharist as Table of Life. ܐܘܚܪܝܫܬܐ ܕܗܝܘܬܐ - Eucharist as table, which is full of life, is another theme in the homilies of Jacob. He stresses very much the meal aspect of Eucharist.

He gives life freely every day from His treasury
 His gesture nourishes the whole world and where there is no price.
 He nourished with manna and quail⁸ the people within the desert
 The pure food is to the pure people, which is not harvest.
 The hidden sign arranged the table and heaped plenty
 He gave gloriously and nourished the people when they are not persistent
 (B IV, 139: 78-83).

The pure food is to the pure people is an allusion to the West Syrian Liturgy. During the elevation of body and blood of Jesus Christ before the communion in the Eucharistic celebration, the priest recites the same prayer. As God provided the Israelites with food in the desert, He provides today for everyone. The term ܐܘܪܫܬܐ in Syriac denotes the Eucharist. The Eucharistic table is the place, from where the faithful receives their spiritual nourishment. From there the body and blood is given to the faithful which is set for eternal life.

See, by whom Messiah is in need, who stands at the entrance?
 Bring forth and give him the bread and wine from your table (B IV, 143: 45-46).

According to Jacob, with love, the Church has opened the high door before those who enter, so that they may recline with her upon the table of the bridegroom. The starving one should not be reluctant to come to the feast. It is an invitation to rejoice very much. Jacob emphasizes the Eucharist as a table of life. The Church invites everyone to be nourished by the table which is full of life.

Eucharist as a Spiritual Fountain of the Living Waters: ܐܘܪܫܬܐ ܕܗܝܘܬܐ - Jacob of Serugh views Eucharist as the fountain of living waters. Indeed it is the source of eternal life. Drink is offered from the fountain which is never exhausted. Eucharistic fountain is compared to the pierced side of the

⁸ Ex. 16.

Lord. A well was opened with the spear piercing the side of the Lord upon Golgotha. This new fountain overflows and satiates the whole earth. This opening brought out rivers of life. This new well is prefigured by the well⁹ that Moses made in the desert for the Israelites. During the Eucharistic celebration we are invited to drink from Christ (*Jo.* 7:37). In *1 Cor.* 10:4, St. Paul says 'The rock was Christ'. So Jacob uses this allegory to show that the well of Moses represents fountain flew from the pierced side of Christ. So Christ is the rock, and a spiritual fountain is formed from him.

See, because of the spear, it flew from the fountain which you drink (B IV, 143: 74).

The soul did not gain (even) some enjoyment in the wine of vines

On your side, give her to drink and to be satisfied from it (B IV, 145: 3-4).

For Jacob it is clear that no worldly drink is enough to satisfy the soul. So he alludes that from the side of Jesus, i.e., from his pierced side, drink can be given to the soul. Here the drink is the Eucharistic blood.

Eucharist as the Great Armour against Evil Powers: ܦܫܘܬܐ ܦܫܘܬܐ - Eucharist is the great armour which makes capable the one who receives it to stand against all the evil powers. No one can stand against this armour. All the evil forces are not capable to stand against this armour.

The Son of God arranged the tables and broke his body

And the peoples and the worlds receive daily life from it.

Behold, the adversities and the evil ones standing round against us

And the Messiah came and arranged the great armour against them.

He arranged His body and blood for us upon the holy table

All the devils and demons are weaker than the armour (B IV, 144: 31-36).

When one receives the body and blood of the Son of God, he receives the great armour to fight against the evil powers. No evil power can prevail over this armour.

Eucharist for the Forgiveness of Sins: Forgiveness (*husoyo*) of sins is a very important theme in the Eucharistic doctrine of the Syriac Churches. The Eucharistic celebration emphasizes the aspect of the absolution of sins in and through the Eucharist. Jacob of Serugh shows great interest in presenting Eucharist as the means for the remission of sins.

⁹ *Num.* 20,11.

He mixed the life-giving chalice with his blood for us (so that) we will become drunken from it

And we will forget in His drink all the pains of paganism.

He mixed and gave us to drink His life-giving wine of sweet taste

And it made us forget all the bites of great devil.

The Son of the virgin mixed the chalice for us at Golgotha

And He gave us drink in it; and behold, we, ourselves came in contact with His crucifixion.

...

See, the serpent had bitten Adam and he became dead

And the Son of God mixed the chalice and gave us to drink.

And Adam had drunk from the wine of crucifixion

And the bitterness of the serpent, which had killed him, was put out from him (B IV, 144: 41-52).

According to Jacob, the blood of Christ shed upon Golgotha is the reason for the forgiveness of sins in the Eucharist. The Eucharistic blood is the atoning blood which was shed for us upon Golgotha. By participating in the Eucharist and receiving the blood of Christ, we participate in the crucifixion of Christ. It is through the sacrifice of Christ, Adam is revoked, for Adam drank from the wine of crucifixion. So Adam regained the lost image, which he had before the Fall. When one is atoned, then he gets the new image. In the Antiochene Liturgy, when the body and blood of Christ is given to the faithful, the priest recites a prayer that «This body and blood of Jesus Christ, which is the Fire-Coal is given to the faithful for the remission of sins and for the eternal life». Atonement has an important role in Jacob's theology of the Eucharist.

Word of God

Besides the sacraments, the soul lives from the power of the word of God (B IV, 141: 4). Jacob firmly makes it clear that there is life not only from bread and water, but also from the word of the Lord. Since the word of the Lord is powerful, it cannot be destroyed (B IV, 141: 15).

Christ is «the one who secretly brought down the riches of his Father to earth» (B IV, 125). These riches are the Scriptures, the powerful meadows of life. The Holy Scriptures are the meadows of stronghold and they are filled with life (B IV, 144: 64). This is an allusion to Psalm 23. 'The bread is for the body and word of the Lord is for the soul' – this idea repeats in homilies 141, 143 and 144. Without the word of the Lord, according to Jacob, all meals are incomplete (B IV, 143: 6). The word of the Lord is always powerful and it has no time limit. It is beyond all worldly time settings, for Jesus Christ is the Word of God. The Word of God has to be

recited in the churches, monasteries, congregations and at the table (B IV, 143: 23-24).

If the life-giving Word is intermingled with the bread of pains
Its taste becomes sweet and death flees from his food (B IV, 144: 83-84).

When the man loves the word of the Lord, then he lacks nothing, since the word is better than water, wine, milk and honey (B IV, 144: 99-102). Jacob apprises his audience to be diligent in using the word of God during all meal times. This word of the Lord is full of light. As the food is for the body, the word of the Lord is for the soul.

Thanksgiving

One must acknowledge for what he received in his life. If man does not thank the Creator for His creation, then he is like an animal, which is ungrateful and slow in understanding (B IV, 140: 57-58). For the providence of God, one has to glorify and thank God always (B IV, 140: 62). Human being is supposed to glorify and acknowledge God for everything, and especially for his food (B IV, 141: 65-66). When the hunger is satiated, one has to praise the one who sustains the whole creation (B IV, 142: 1-10). There is no effect on the Lord by our praise, thanksgiving and glory (B IV, 142: 70), but if we don't acknowledge, we are not human beings. We become like animals that don't praise or thank anyone for their food. Man has intellect, mind and reason. If the human being does not understand his honour, he becomes like animals (B IV, 140: 7-10; 57-58). «A table from which the praise of God does not ascend is not different from an animal sty» – Here Martyrius says «... As one of the saints said...» Even though he does not refer the name of Jacob of Serugh. It is clear that he is referring to the homilies on Praise at the Table.¹⁰ Martyrius also refers to the theme of thanksgiving. If somebody receives the body and blood of Christ and leaves the table of life, then he is like an animal. Jacob clearly in his homilies on the Praise at Table insists the faithful not to leave the church before the end of the Eucharist.

Jacob counsels his hearers that they should not be like the Israelites because when they were in the desert, they had not given praise to the Lord for the gifts of food. Jacob advocates that whenever they eat, they have to praise (B IV, 142: 102). Israelites had been given abundantly

¹⁰ S.P. Brock (trans.), *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Michigan 1987, 217.

manna, quail and water in the desert, but they failed to acknowledge for what they had been received. But they murmured against God and Moses. Jacob says:

And after these, dishonour, murmuring and blasphemy
They did not render the Lord thanksgiving, so that they are guilty (B IV, 146: 35-36).

Jacob opines about thanksgiving in his another homily that:

Because now you bring forth all the senses from your lips
The voices of glory are to the giver of your goods.
Acknowledge because you ate; glorify because you drank; praise because you smelled
Bring thanksgiving for the meal which is full of good things.
The people has dealt falsely the food which is inside the desert¹¹
And when one eats and does not praise, then he is the one who does wrong (B IV, 142: 93-98).

Jacob continues in another homily:

Make fervent and bring forth the fruits of praise from your lips
Voice of thanksgiving will be said in you with great wonder (B IV, 143: 99-100).
And in all things, and in all resources and in all actions
Give thanks to your Lord because whole glory is to Him (B IV, 143: 103-104).

Jacob strongly advises his hearers to thank God always and everywhere. It is seen throughout his homilies that he always praise God for all what he has received from Him.

Divine providence

The Divine providence is His tutelage and care for His Creation. Jacob clearly portrays how God provided the spiritual ones, the angels and the carnal ones. God's abundant mercy takes care of the fishes, the reptiles and the birds. It is God's hidden sign which fulfils the needs of all. Since God provides all creatures, man can live like other creatures without anxiety. Life itself is also the result of the Divine providence.

¹¹ Ex. 16,17.

The crows neither sow nor reap the fields
And they are satisfied everyday as there are riches in their palaces (B IV, 139: 38-39).
To the embryos, they are closed inside the belly of woman
They are enclosed in the difficult place, there You (God) may support in it
(B IV, 139: 42-43).

In the bellies, the embryos are cared and provided very well. Even though there is darkness in the bellies, the embryos are given breath and food. It is God's signs which have watchful care on the creation. After the birth, for the nourishment of the child, God has set milk in the breast of the mother (B IV, 139: 28). As God provides the children, He also provides the young of the crows. God fills the table of the hungry (B IV, 139:64). He provides water and bread for everyone (B IV, 139: 17, 64-69). The mercy of God also cares for those who do unjust acts (B IV, 139: 76). God's providence is free and there is no price for it (B IV, 139: 78-79). Here Jacob brings the Old Testament incidents to prove that God provides His creation abundantly. It is only because of God's merciful love and providence that He provided manna, quail and water to the Israelites when they were in the desert (B IV, 139: 80-91). The Creator feeds the living ones daily.

Jacob in the homily on the Praise at the Table (B IV, 140) explains word by word very well how a seed becomes a plant and at the end the bread (B IV, 140: 19-56). God is very much careful that He organized the creation so, that the ploughman works properly to sow the seeds, and He arranged the earth to work for the breaking and decaying of the seed thus to germinate a new plant, then there is rain and wind for the plant to grow. The clouds make the grains grow. He has so created the plants that the grains of the wheat are hidden under the spikes.

So also God takes care of wine. He made the vine in a special manner, so that there is wine in vine (B IV, 140: 63-100). It is amazing that Jacob goes into very details of God's creation. In the same Homily, Jacob treats how bread and wine produced is. In both cases he gives details about the growth of both plants and the production of grains and wine.

In what manner has the Creator of everything brought forth juice in the vine.

And with the branches, he draws, transplants, makes them to raise.
And he casts grapes out of them and hangs up in their branches.
And he extends the leaves as a veil upon their faces (B IV, 140: 67-70).

He brings forth also other creatures, which are used for yielding up of bread and wine. For Jacob, the natural powers are created for the purpose of the growth of all other creatures.

And His sign poured little by little their needs
And as He encloses the juice within their hollows in the wineskins.
And the sun visits His servants to take care of them
He, in his rays, kindles, makes fervent, fashions them.
And within the bunch of grapes, the summer ripens in it the juice
That by the fire of the sun, they will become wine to the world, that it will
drink (B IV, 140: 75-80).

In his homily on bees, Jacob continues that «the glory of the Creator of everything watched His action; and the world will perceive that in the smallness it shows its power» (B IV, 142: 59-60).

«He (Lord) invoked the creation and established them upon your service» (B IV, 142: 82). Jacob reiterates this idea in all these 8 homilies again and again, that everything is created for the sustentation of human beings. The creation is astonishing and the divine providence is limitless. God cared very much for the nourishment of human beings. He has particular concern over very minute things.

Conclusion

Jacob of Serugh was a poet theologian. He treated not only theological themes, but also other themes. He was more concerned about his people, but not about the theological controversies of his time. He wrote to encourage and make firm the people to grow in faith and to admonish them against the evil doings. He wanted the people to thank the Lord for everything, especially for the food. Through baptism one becomes the son of God and the brother of the Only Begotten. Baptism leads one to the Eucharist. For him, the Eucharist is the life giving bread which came down from heaven. Man lives not only of bread and water but also of the living word and the body and blood of the Son of God. God created man in His image and likeness and cared for him and provided him all other creatures and creation. It is only because of the divine providence that the human beings can lead a good life. Jacob ends his eighth homily on the praise at the table:

You nourish, you give life and you are food
And from you, there are all gladness; glory to you (B IV, 146: 95-96).