Book Reviews

Philip Michael Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East. A Study of Jacob of Serugh*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, XVI+322 p., ISBN 978-0-19-882645-3

The author of the East Syrian *Ecclesiastical History*, Barḥadbshabba ‘Arbaya (second part of the 6th c.), when praising the ascetic and literary accomplishments of one of the most prominent leaders of the Church of the East (the so-called Nestorians), Narsai, admits that it was the “heretic” Jacob of Serugh who provoked Narsai’s activities in composing 365 metrical homilies for each day of the year in defense of the “Nestorian” faith. By means of these poetical productions, Narsai aimed at diminishing the influence of Jacob’s homilies, which, though “joined closely to heresy”, did not fail to have an effect, as Barḥadbshabba acknowledges, due to the “pleasant composition of enticing sounds” (F. Nau (ed.), PO 9:5, 1913, 612). This high assessment given by a representative of the competitive group in the Christological controversies of the 5th–6th centuries provides suitable lenses for the first look at Jacob of Serugh.

Born about 451, he was a student at the School of Edessa and in the early 6th century he accepted the appointment as rural bishop of Ḥawra. In 519 he was consecrated bishop of Batnan in the region of Serugh (today Suruç in south-eastern Turkey) about forty kilometers from Edessa near the border of modern Syria where he remained in office until his death in 521. Apart from the collection of 43 letters, the most essential part of Jacob’s oeuvre constituted his metrical homilies (Syriac *mimrē*), reported to have numbered 763. Barḥadbshabba’s statement suggests that Jacob successfully made use of his poetic talent in the Christological strife following the Council of Chalcedon in 451. His opposition to Narsai, however, does not clarify to which of the other two groups – the Miaphysites or the adherents of the Council of 451 – he belonged.

This question has divided scholars for many years, the main problem being the apparently differing evidence of Jacob’s homilies and his letters. Moreover, it is precisely one of these two points that Forness primarily addresses with his investigation: basing himself on the joint witness of the homilies *and* the

letters of the Syriac poet, Forness outlines some of Jacob's Christological views in the last part of his life and carefully reconstructs the historical contexts of each piece of evidence. Secondly, the case study on Jacob's writings raises a methodological claim of demonstrating "a method for contextualizing homilies without a known historical context" (p. 225).

The monograph, which is a revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation submitted in 2016 at Princeton Theological Seminary under the supervision of Kathleen McVey, consists of six chapters, an introduction, and a short conclusion.

In Chapter One, Forness deals with the audience and readership of Jacob's homilies. Chapter Two explores the juxtaposition of the miracles and sufferings of Christ before the Council of Chalcedon, in the *Tome* of Pope Leo I (449 AD), in Emperor Zeno's *Henotikon* (482 AD), and in the post-Chalcedonian Christological debates with special attention to Jacob's Miaphysite contemporaries Philoxenos of Mabbug, John of Tella, and Severus of Antioch. Since tracing various understandings of the juxtaposition (another term Forness uses is "pairing") of miracles and sufferings is the backbone of the book, it is worth paying it closer attention.

From the beginning of the 5th century, one of the most crucial questions of the Christological controversies remained: who or what is to be thought as real subject(s) of the actions performed or endured by Christ? The answer given at the Council of Chalcedon was: the only person acting and suffering is the person of the Son of God or the hypostasis of the divine Logos. At the same time, the human and the divine natures of Christ are complete and real without separation or mixture so that it is possible to distinguish the operations and the wills of each of them since the natures retain their respective properties in the one person of the Son of God.

Illustrating the latter idea in his famous *Tome*, Pope Leo I uses what Forness calls "the pairing (or juxtaposition) of miracles and sufferings": "For each form [*forma* = μορφή, equivalent to nature, D.B.] does what is proper to it with the participation of the other, namely, while the Word performs what is of the Word, the flesh also carries out what is of the flesh. One of them flashes with miracles; the other succumbs to violations" (p. 66). Forness duly elaborates on the pro-Chalcedonian usage of this Christological argument demonstrating a whole number of occasions in which the respective authors put strong emphasis on their faith that both the miracles and sufferings were of one and the same Word of God (p. 73–76).

The Miaphysite theologians (here and further on I refer to Philoxenos of Mabbug, John of Tella, and Severus of Antioch who, according to Forness, provide the nearest context for Jacob of Serugh, cf. p. 86 and passim) did not have

any difficulties with this statement since they completely shared it; their disagreement with the Chalcedonians concerned the number of natures after their union in the person of the Son of God in the incarnation. The adherents of the Council believed, as we have seen, that Christ had two complete natures, the human and the divine, each retaining its proper operation and will in full; the Miaphysites confessed the only one and single divine hypostasis and nature of Christ which has transformed his human flesh in its own glory and operation.

Emperor Zeno's *Henotikon*, which was designed to reconcile the Chalcedonian and Miaphysite Christological parties, adopted the formula of the pairing of miracles and sufferings as having their subject in one person of Christ without, however, giving further clarifications in favor of one or another group: "For we say that both the miracles and the sufferings, which he willingly endured in the flesh, are of one" (p. 71). At the Miaphysite synod in 511 at Sidon, it was agreed that "the *Henotikon* could only serve as a basis for unity (with Dyophysites, D.B.) when coupled with the rejection of Chalcedon and Leo's *Tome*" (p. 77). Forness consequently shows that, when using the pairing of the miracles and sufferings formula, the Syriac Miaphysite authors including Jacob depend on the wording of the Syriac translation of the *Henotikon*.

The rest of the book under review is dedicated to analyzing a chosen number of Jacob's letters (Chapter 3) and homilies (Chapters 4–6) with this background in mind while focusing on how Jacob uses the pairing of miracles and sufferings in them. Forness states the firm connections in Christology between the two groups of texts as well as between Jacob and the other Miaphysite polemicists of his time mentioned above. Jacob's correspondence with the monks of the monastery of Mar Bassus (Chapter 3) and especially his *Homily on the Council of Chalcedon* (Chapter 4) clearly testify to his Monophysite proclivities in the last ten years of his life. Both these conclusions, as well as the dating and contextualizing of the texts under scrutiny, are quite cogent and make a significant contribution to our knowledge about Jacob and his position in the Christological controversies of the 5th – early 6th century. The same can be said about the attribution of the *Homily on the Council of Chalcedon* which, according to Forness' analysis and against the opinions of some previous scholars, should be viewed as an integral part of Jacob of Serugh's corpus.

The exclusive concentration on the pairing of miracles and sufferings as a feature of Jacob's Christological language involves both obvious advantages and some disadvantages. The main advantage is, of course, that Forness was able to collect a huge amount of pertinent material and succeeded in writing an eminently readable monograph about one of the most important Christological arguments made by Jacob and his milieu. In some cases, however, one misses a somewhat broader Christological introduction and background to be

capable of understanding Jacob's position. For instance, Forness often reiterates that the object of Jacob's criticism was the "dyophysites" (e.g. p. 128). A clarification of this term is given rather casually and without further explanations on p. 169, n. 53 ("Chalcedonian and Church of the East authors"). An explanation, however, is all the more needed as Jacob's anti-Dyophysite polemic, when taken in a literary sense, does not always apply to the adherents of the Council of Chalcedon. For instance, in *Letter 16*, Jacob summarizes the position of his opponents by stating: "He (i.e. Christ, D.B.) is the one who appeared in the flesh from Mary so that two hypostases (*qnūmē*) might be known in Emmanuel: one recipient of suffering, and one, the performer of miraculous feats" (p. 97). Forness' comment that "Jacob uses the juxtaposition of miracles and sufferings to criticize dyophysite Christology" (p. 98) might be right in the sense that Jacob did *believe* that the two Dyophysite parties taught this way without any distinction; it may also not be ruled out that he *generalized* for polemical purposes. Neither possibility, however, has been taken into consideration nor is it mentioned that, as a matter of fact, the teaching of two hypostases (Syriac *qnūmē*) of Christ is a characteristic feature of the Christology of the Church of the East ("Nestorians") which has never been shared by Chalcedonians.

Another case where the term "dyophysite" likewise needs more precision is the *Letter to the comes Bessas* (N° 35). Jacob explains here his own position: "Of the same only-begotten are all the things that he encountered on the way of his economy: of him are the miraculous feats that he performed and of him are the sufferings that he endured" (p. 113). Forness' comment that Jacob "offers a thoroughly miaphysite Christology with anti-dyophysite polemic throughout" (p. 114) is not exactly to the point since, as has been demonstrated above, the mere attribution of miracles and sufferings to the one person or hypostasis of the Son of God is not enough for distinguishing between the Miaphysite and Chalcedonian Christological teachings, that being their shared belief.

Letter 21 provides one more important testimony of Jacob's Christology. Addressing some unknown abbots, Jacob says: "Then no division nor numbers nor the discernment of natures (*kyānē*) are sought so that they might be known in Christ after the unity. Because he was one with his body, of him are the miraculous feats and of him are the sufferings" (p. 132). In this case, as Forness rightly observes, the "polemical edge" is intentionally as well as terminologically directed precisely against both dyophysite groups (p. 132). The question to be answered remains, however, why Jacob this time uses exact terms, including the characteristic technical specification "after the unity", while in other cases his Christological language is rather blurred.

Moving to the second focal point of the investigation – the attempt to contextualize homilies without a known historical context – we leave Jacob's letters but not entirely his Christology. Since Jacob's preaching admittedly does not contain much concerning his physical audience, Forness' search for new ways of distilling historical information from his *mimrē* is highly justified. Refreshingly, Forness turns to the transmission of homilies which, in some cases, yields valuable information mostly related to the circulation of the Christological homilies among people interested in interconfessional polemics. Following previous scholarship, Forness distinguishes between the assembled listeners and the readership as well as between three possible settings of spoken sermons (to ecclesiastical leaders, catechumens, and mixed settings including laity), but his results impress most in cases where he uses the historical-critical method as, for example, in the interpretation of the *Homily on the Council of Chalcedon* as a possible reaction to the establishment of the feast of the Council of Chalcedon in Constantinople in 518 (p. 148–154). Few readers will probably be particularly surprised by the conclusion (p. 169) that the *Homily on the Faith* might have been spoken before any of three different kinds of audiences mentioned above.

Forness seems to consistently mistrust information about Jacob's life which is later than the year of his death (cf. his statement about the poetic competition between Jacob and Narsai transmitted by Barḥadbshabba, p. 52). Though there is much in favor of this approach, yet in some cases, one might rather expect that relevant traditions from late sources would at least be referred to. This applies, for example, for a number of late hagiographical sources that mention the *mimrā* 'On the Chariot' as being spoken by twenty-two year old Jacob in the presence of several bishops who intended to verify the orthodoxy of his teaching.¹ Reliable or not (I am not aware of any study dedicated to this question), this tradition perfectly fits with Forness' search for the audiences and settings of the sermons of the Syriac poet and deserves mentioning.

The indisputable merit of Forness' study is that it contributes a great deal to modern scholarship on Jacob of Serugh, probably the most important Syriac poet and theologian of late antiquity after Ephrem the Syrian. Forness' reconstructions of historical contexts of some of Jacob's letters and homilies, establishment of Christological parallels between the letters and homilies, and gaining new certainty in the attribution of some homilies to Jacob makes his

1 See e.g. Paul Krüger, "Ein bislang unbekannter sermo über Leben und Werk des Jakob von Serugh", *Oriens Christianus* 56, 1972, 80–111, here pp. 85, 16–87, 16 (Syriac text), 100–102 (German translation).

book a landmark among modern studies dedicated to this Syriac author. Forness sets a high standard for the future of studies on Jacob of Serugh with his philological meticulousness, extensive use of manuscripts, impressive knowledge of pertinent sources, and linguistic competence. The book can also be commended as a summary of modern approaches to Christian homilies of late antiquity. If they prove to be less successful in the case of Jacob of Serugh, this is due to the material and can by no means be seen as a fault of the author.

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