CHAPTER 13

The Pentecost Feast in Sixth-Century Antioch

The Evidence of Patriarch Severus (512–518)

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The four homilies and eight hymns on the Feast of Pentecost composed by Severus of Antioch (512–518) provide valuable evidence of the development of the liturgical celebration of the feast after 451 CE, as well as Severus’ place in the Greek-speaking tradition before him.1 Liturgical evidence for the Feast of Pentecost in the sixth century is otherwise sparse; we have two homilies of Leontius, presbyter of Constantinople,2 and one kontakion of Romanos the Melode.3 After this there are no surviving Greek homilies on Pentecost for another four centuries until Emperor Leo the Wise (886–912) preached on the feast and composed a closely related homily on the Holy Spirit.4

To be noted is that Homily 25 was delivered by Severus on the Sunday of Pentecost, whereas the other three homilies, 48, 74, and 92, were preached on the Friday after Pentecost, called in the rubrics Golden Friday.5 While these

1 On Pentecost in Severus’ time see Frédéric Alpi, La route royale: Sévère d’Antioche et les Églises d’Orient (512–518), 1, BAH 188 (Beirut: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2009), 558–559.
5 This designation is found also in the liturgical calendar of the Coptic and Syrian Nestorian churches: see Venance Grumel, Traité d’études byzantines, 1: La chronologie, BBByz (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), 334 and 341. It is attributed to the Syrian (including
rubrics in general seem to be sound, we cannot discount the possibility that with regard to the designation “Golden Friday” they reflect liturgical practices, particularly in Syria, later than the sixth century. Severus’ homilies, and also his hymns, survive to us in early Syriac translations from the Greek, but even so we discern a sophisticated and able dogmatician, exegete, pastor, and preacher.6

1 Homily 25

Homily 25, delivered on Sunday 26 May 513,8 opens with the observation, repeated later, that all church feasts commemorate the abolition of the sentence that hangs over humanity.9 Severus stresses the fifty-day period between the Resurrection and Pentecost, which, like the Pasch, was also celebrated by the Jews, and adduces Lev 23:15–16 to prove his point. However, whereas the Jews began the celebration on the day after they offered the sheaves of the harvest, Christians count the fiftieth day from the day after the harvest, which is precisely the day of the resurrection.10 The two loaves of offering

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8 Possible readings for this feast were: Exod 31:8, Lev 23:10–17, Bar 3:38, Ps 199 (which the congregation is said to sing), and John 16:12–15.

9 Initial mention in PO 37/1:146.1–14 (text) and 147.1–14 (trans.); subsequently at 146.20–23 (text) and 147.20–23 (trans.); 158.21 (text) and 159.21 (trans.); 160.6 (text) and 161.6 (trans.); 160.26 (text) and 161.26 (trans.).