THE DEPENDENCE OF ROMANOS THE MELODIST
UPON THE SYRIAC EPHREM: ITS IMPORTANCE FOR THE
ORIGIN OF THE KONTAKION*

BY

WILLIAM L. PETERSEN

The scholarly world has been greatly enriched by the continuing
publication of the hymns of Romanos, "the Melodist". The fifth of
the projected seven volumes has appeared, and was recently reviewed in
these pages. The edition is consistent with the high standards we have
come to expect from Sources Chrétiennes. José Grosdidier de Matons of
the Sorbonne is to be applauded not only for his meticulous care in
editing the hymns, but also for his most helpful monograph, Romanos
le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance.

Some readers may be unfamiliar with the name Romanos and his
significance. It is partially indicated in the title of Grosdidier de Matons'
monograph—les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance—for
Romanos is credited with the invention of the genre which became the
crowning jewel of Byzantine poetry, the kontakion.

Grosdidier de Matons must be regarded as one of the two experts in
the world on the kontakion. His views, therefore, will be influential and
often accepted as definitive. He regards the kontakion as "une création originale du génie grec". According to his investigations,
Romanos did not use sources written in Syriac, nor did Romanos
employ the Syriac works of Ephrem as a source. This is a striking revers-
al of the opinions of earlier scholars, who regarded the kontakion as an
offshoot of Syriac poetry, grafted onto the tree of Greek verse.

As happens so often—and understandably—when studies in an area
are little advanced, there are several issues here which have not been
properly distinguished. As we will see, this lack of definitional clarity
has led to confused conclusions. There is also the more serious matter of
hard evidence, for it is clear that Romanos not only knew but also
quoted the Syriac works of Ephrem, the gospels in the harmonized form
of the Diatessaron of Tatian, and the Syriac versions of the NT. The
evidence presented below will show the error of Grosdidier de Matons’ assertion regarding Romanos’ use of the Syriac works of Ephrem, and, as a consequence, may lead one to question his attribution of the kontakion to “(le) génie grec”.

Our information about Romanos is slight, but has great value for the question at hand. Therefore, we shall begin our study with a brief look at the life of the poet.

Romanos was born in Syria, in the city of Emesa, c. 485 CE. It would seem that Emesa was bilingual, and there is reason to presume that Romanos was, as well. The hymn for Romanos’ feastday (October 1st) informs us that he was “of the Hebrew race”. Leaving home, he trained as a deacon in Berytus (modern Beirut). From there he moved to Constantinople, where he gained fame for his hymns, which he composed in Greek. He died sometime after 555 CE, having composed, according to legend, more than a thousand hymns.

Romanos’ fame rests squarely on the kontakion, this new genre of hymn. The kontakion was a sung, metrical sermon, and was revolutionary for three reasons. First, it is credited with the introduction of the accent metric (“Byzantine metric”) into Greek verse. Eventually, this system would replace the quantitative metric (“Hellenic metric”) of Classical Greek verse. Rather than each vowel having a particular assigned metrical value (“long” or “short”), as in Classical poetry, the accent metric of the kontakion generally paralleled the spoken word, reckoning metre on the “accented” or “unaccented” status of the syllable, much like contemporary poetry.

But the kontakion did more than introduce this new system of reckoning metre. Its second achievement was to introduce new metrical structures. Rather than being constructed along Classical lines, with predictable metrical patterns (such as Homer’s dactylic hexameter), a kontakion consists of cola of varying numbers of feet, and within the strophe the cola themselves follow no regular pattern.

Finally, the kontakion introduced a new vibrancy into ecclesiastical poetry. This was achieved by the use of dialogue between characters in the story. These characters were given a hitherto unknown psychological depth. By heightening the drama of the situation depicted, the hymns took on a new immediacy for the listener.

The kontakion is now recognised to have been the pinnacle of Byzantine poetry. As the apparent originator of the kontakion, Romanos’