

*The Sinful Woman: a memra by Jacob of Serugh**

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A large number of Jacob of Serugh's liturgical poems have been translated into English in recent years.¹ These translations have encouraged a growing awareness of the importance of Jacob's poetry for the history of Syriac literature. Often obscured by Ephrem's preeminence, Jacob is enjoying more and more the attention his work demands: besides the many translations now available, a major study of Jacob's theology has recently appeared in two volumes.²

The present translation is an attempt to bring to an English readership Jacob's *memra* on the biblical story of the Sinful Woman who washed and anointed Jesus. Four different versions of this event survive in the Gospels, and contrary to earlier poems on this story that concentrate on one version of the story alone, such as a *memra* attributed to Ephrem, Jacob deftly interweaves details from all four versions.³ For example, while the overall setting of the poem corresponds to Luke's version, which is set at the house of Simon the Pharisee, Jacob includes Judas Iscariot in his narrative, who appears only in John's version. Jacob's willingness to interweave the biblical versions gives his *memra* its unique character among the Syriac poems on the subject.⁴

In his *memra* Jacob emphasises the repentance of the Sinful Woman. He uses her example to encourage the reader not to 'abandon the door of repentance, / Because even the prostitute, when she knocked on it, received salvation' (404.7-8). He writes at length about the desperate state of the Sinful Woman's soul before 'our Lord laid a trap of mercy to capture her' (409.10) and he compares her willingness to repent to Simon's judgmental attitude

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in the Gospel of Luke (416). The Sinful Woman becomes a model for all Christians, and in her 'baptism' – that is, her humble anointing of Jesus with oil and tears – she prefigures the baptism of the whole world symbolically (422).⁵

I have referred in the notes to as many scriptural allusions and quotations as were obvious to me, but there are probably many more. The original Syriac text is that of Paul Bedjan: the numbers in the margins correspond to his page numbers.⁶ The words in parentheses are parenthetical statements originally in the text, but I have added the words in brackets for the sake of clarity. The paragraph titles are also my additions.

Jacob's prayer of repentance

402 Lord, I long for your forgiveness to come to me.
Give to me tears so that I may ask for mercy while there is an opportunity [lit. place].

I thirst for mercy and without it I cannot exist.
Sea of Mercy, pour out on me the streams of your kindness.

The confused sins of an evil world are traps to me;
By your mercy, Lord, destroy them, and I will be delivered.

Like a legion [of demons] thirsting for blood, my sins have surrounded me.

Come, Mighty Warrior, to the aid of a humble worker.

The King of Error has poured down his arrows [aiming at] my death.⁷

Commander, apply to me your remedy by which I may be healed.

Your treasury is not too little to give mercy to those who do not deserve it:

Because you even loved the prostitute dearly, when she approached you.

For none but crushed people seek your remedy;
And he who does not even need it, mercy is not dear to him.

403 The good physician, however, is not glorified but by ulcers.
For what does he add to a sound body if it comes close to him?

[It is] in wounds [that] he shows the power of his skill.
He rightly takes his fee and glory according to his healing power.

The physician shines in the stricken ones when they are healed.
And your great compassion [shines out] in sinners when they are absolved.

Because you have mercy, I acquired sins, and thus I expect
That whenever you pardon me, your compassion will shine in me.

I do not say that my transgression is too great to pardon,⁸
Because your compassion is greater than the sea: purify me in it!

I prepared the work for your mercy every day when I was a sinner,
So you should not be idle from forgiveness, because it is lovely to you.

For the physician wishes that the ulcers might increase in his vicinity,
So that he might acquire from them both profits and praises.

Here are some wounds: bring your medication so that it might shine in me,
Because it is very beautiful to you when you heal the stricken ones.

You do not look for a fee, Lord, so that it might be returned to you,
For what did that prostitute give when you loved her?

She offered oil and tears alone when you healed her.
Your promise wiped out a great wound with a meager payment [lit. bribe].

The river of fire that was threatening the defiled woman,
In a drop of tears that she sprinkled on it, she quenched it.

404 The negligible water that the eyes of [this] woman, full of blemishes, poured forth
Fell upon the flood of flame and stopped it.

Heed the example of the Sinful Woman
I will speak of her whose story is loved by members of her rank,
For when they listen it will sprinkle hope on their infirmities.

The homily is received by the penitent, who will heed it,
For they also thirst for forgiveness as she did.

Let no one abandon the great door of repentance,
Because even the prostitute, when she knocked on it, received salvation.

Let whoever sins not come close to losing hope,
But let him be bold like the prostitute, and then he will be pardoned.

Whoever repents, if he sins again, he should once more make supplication,
For there is no limit or special time for repentance.

If he is soiled ten thousand times, he can be purified.

And however often he falls, he can stand up again if he tries hard.

If one sins and returns to supplicate, then he will be received,
Because there is not a time when the door to repentance is closed.

Even if my brother goes astray seventy-seven times, I will forgive him.
How much more [then] will the Merciful One forgive the one who seeks him?

Do not be wearied by making a petition [for mercy], no matter how much you have sinned.
It does not weary the Compassionate One when he forgives you.

[Even] if you do not have pity on your body, increasing its ulcers,
It is easy for the physician to heal you, however often you seek him.

405 And [even if] you do not hate that you increase the wounds on your body,
Your physician is skilled and will shine out in your recovery.

If it is pleasing to you, every day you may be both a destroyer and a builder.
It does not weary him to receive your labour, however much you seek him.

Even if you know that time is left to you before the end,
Do not doubt your forgiveness, if you repent.

Even if the time of your death were not secret from you,
Atonement would not be far from you, if you repent.

If you repent seventy-seven times in one day,

They will not shut the door in your face once you knock.

If a sin wounds you at night on your bed,
Go to the Physician's house in the morning, and he will cure you.

If you discover another ulcer by daylight,
Tread on the Physician's threshold in the evening, and he will heal you.

For the one who is perfected [already], my pointless speech is a vexation,
But for those in need, my homily – full of hope – is beautiful.

The Lord of the House is good for his part to the one who seeks him,
[For] even if your eye is evil, he will not harm it.⁹

Or does he not have authority over his treasury-house, since it is his,
To make rich from it without hindrance everyone who is in need?

Ask, sinful one, because he who takes pity on everyone is good in his part.

406 However much you seek him, he will yield, for he is not wearied.

Sprinkle a drop of tears on sin when it bites you,
And believe that your wound will be eradicated [lit. uprooted], if you wish.

Gush forth a river of tears against iniquity, and the river will stifle it.

Let weeping enshroud it just like a dead man, and you will escape from it.

Unless you weep, he will not sympathise in your recovery.

There will not even be a need for a Physician to bandage your wounds.

Has habit led you to come and pray, but you fail to receive?
It is because only by [true] suffering are the ulcers of iniquity healed.

Even the prostitute really wept when she was healed.
For the pain of iniquity was swelling in her, [wanting] to leave.

She offered her tears as a fee to the Physician so that he would heal her iniquity.
He bandaged her in forgiveness, and she reached recovery.

She bore her weeping as a great gift and entered his presence;
He greatly increased her honour, both in forgiveness and in reputation.

Tears stand as a token of love when they are seen,
And for this reason they are loved by him who made atonement for all.

The body is loved when it is stricken with wounds.
It moves the eye to weep for its beloved.

For the Merciful One seeks for love to be presented to him.
He does not take a gift from anyone when he heals him.

407 He runs to a good intention to love it.
For it takes the place of sacrifice and libation.

It was not to judge the world that he came when he was sent.
He devised a way to vivify the world because he is full of mercy.

He was conversing with the sinners and prostitutes,
For the Physician is useful to these, to bandage them.

In order to remit sins, our Lord set his path in the world.
And he was loving everyone who needed forgiveness.

He came from his place to take the iniquity of the whole world.
And in wounds he shows the strength of his sweetness.

The Lord seeks sinners
The Feeder of Families had been invited to Simon's house.¹⁰
His love led him down to be a wayfarer, just as he was invited.

He was affable and (although pure) mixed [with sinners]; he was peaceful and full of mercy.
He was everything with everyone so that he might gain everything wisely.¹¹

If they invited him to the tax-collector's house, then he would mix [with them].¹²
And if the Pharisees called him, again he would go.¹³

They sought bread, and he multiplied it in the desert without a baker.¹⁴
They invited him to eat, and he went along with them, just as a neighbour would.

Those who were in need sought recovery and received it from him.
They sought atonement and he, as the Good One, offered it to all who asked him.

The seekers took everything they asked for from his treasury-house,
408 So on every side he was full of mercy to those who asked him.

Simon invited [Jesus] and he went with [Simon] to supper.
The Sinful Woman sought out forgiveness for her sins and took it from him.

She who was a snare for men in the places she walked
Caught them, as if with traps, in order to corrupt them.

She who was a choice bow for the Accuser,
From her he rained down arrows of desire upon onlookers.

She who took men captive through her lustful beauty,
After her young men wandered from their normal lives, as into
a pathless desert.

She who hated the pure path of sexual intercourse
In her prostitution wickedly destroyed the law.

She who wasted many of her days in depravity
With liars acted immorally in her corruption.

She who ambushed [men] on the streets like a brigand
Caught the merchants with her beauty in order to crush them.

She who made a division between husbands and their wives
In such conflicts took away the life of the spouses.

She who laboured in prostitution from her youth
Established a festival for adultery in a place and polluted it.

She to whom seven demons (lovers of adultery) adhered
Through them hunted young men to make them fornicate with
her.

409 She who was an abode of iniquity, which would be celebrated
in it,
Falsehood dwelt within her, and it had rebelled against justice.

She who despised both noble living and chastity,
Behaved lustfully in her actions.

She whom the Evil One set in Judah as a target for iniquity,

The lovers of adultery were aiming at her in their affairs.

She who loved vanity along with the emptiness of prostitution
Hated pure marriage which ought to have been honoured by
her.

It was for her, the vain woman in her acts and deeds,
That our Lord laid a trap of mercy to capture her.

The Hunter entered and resided at the home of Simon because
Simon had invited him.
And he sent and incited that dove in her nest to come to him.

Mercy went away to hunt down the rebellious woman,
Who had fled from the cultivated land to the great desert.

The Hunter ran and set traps in the streets [she frequented].
He bound her with love so that she might not wander in vain.

He was spreading out a great net of repentance before her.
And she slithered and entered its great womb in naïveté.

The message of salvation was bait for the wild woman.
And when she was engrossed in it, she came into the net of the
House of God.

The news of Jesus was spread out in front of her, and it excited
her.

410 And when she was pasturing in it she was captivated by it to
be [made] his.

She learned in her diligence that our Lord was forgiving sins;
Since she was needing forgiveness, she ran to his appointed
place.

Iniquity lay in ambush in the form of a Lion, [ready] to crush
her,¹⁵

But she ran to Jesus the Physician so that he might devise [a remedy] for her.

Her sins afflicted her with a multitude of wounds.
And she sought healing from the greatest of all physicians.

The sagacious woman took with her a choice oil;
She arrived at Simon's house and entered the presence of our Saviour.

She was not ashamed in front of the many people reclining there,
For no one is ashamed before the doctor to confess his ulcer.

Weeping served as pure incense for her, and she brought it in with her.
And by her groans she kindled it to make it smoke in the house of atonement.

She was a priest for herself who would advocate forgiveness.
She offered her will with feeling for reconciliation.

She, the mistress of sins, stood behind Jesus,¹⁶
And she made a petition in sighs to offer to him.

The Sinful Woman asks for healing
Such words as these were spoken by the prostitute
When she was praying to the Forgiver of Sins, that he might be reconciled to her:

'Lord, I know that mercy sent you to come to the land.
It directed your path to sinners, that you might show pity.

Show your strength to me, a wretched woman, because I need it;

411 And so that the world, which needs redemption, might be instructed through me.

The Ulcer of Iniquity destroyed me every day and increased my pain.

Good Physician, bandage the sick woman who petitions you.

The Evil One buried traps for me and caught me with his cunning.

Hunter of Truth, crush them, and I will be yours.

The Winter of Sins stripped bare my beautiful branches.
Lord, make blessed hope blossom in you just as in Nisan.

Into the clear soul which the demons that adhered to it muddled,
Enter, Strong One, and expel them so that I might escape.

I have been a field of thorns in my sins for quite a long time now.
Plowman of Truth, weed out the bitter things from your field.

The Accuser bound me to his yoke to collaborate with him.
Lord of Truth, give me freedom, for I am looking to you.

A robber beat me and then drew me into a scandalous life [that lasted] for a long time.
Great Saviour, bring me into your fortress so that I might be sheltered by it.

The world is an ocean that in its swells took me to kill me.
Haven of Life, let me be drawn in by you from the storms'.

Words of passion were born from the penitent woman.
And mercy was poured out by the Merciful One for [her] forgiveness.

In the fire of her love she kindled tears like spices.
And the fragrance (which was abundant) of her repentance grew sweet.

Our Lord was to her like a mirror and she looked into it.
 412 She saw herself, that she was stricken with wounds.

It was dark when she drew near to the Luminary,
 And as she saw herself terror seized her because of how ugly
 she was.

The soul in darkness

When someone sins he really forgets what he does,
 And in the darkness of error he commits iniquity, although he
 is unaware of it.

Sin enters and blinds the soul and perturbs it.
 [The soul] does not see that there is an odious mark which is
 cultivated in it.

If the soul had not really been following after iniquity,
 The sin in the soul would not have been committed because
 [the soul] is refined.

[The soul] hates to commit sin, but in error opportunities [to
 sin] enter.
 [Error] perturbs the soul, then [the soul] errs and is seduced.

The Evil One enters and covers [the soul] with his cunning.
 Then sin hands [the soul] over to darkness so that it might
 cleave to [sin].

[Sin] places upon [the soul's] transparency the filth of its
 bitterness.
 And when [the soul] is perturbed then it sins unwittingly.

A cloud of iniquity covers [the soul's] face when sin belongs
 to it.
 And [the soul] wanders in darkness and does not understand
 what it has done.

But when the light from grace reaches the soul,

It is startled so that it will leave the stumbling-blocks through
 which it was erring.

It sees the iniquity and understands that [iniquity] is an odious
 blemish.
 And it flees from it when it finds shelter in repentance.

413 [The Sinful Woman's soul] was astonished at how deep it had
 sunk when it was seduced.
 And it calls out diligently in pain that it might return to its
 own.

And the soul is enlightened when it draws near to repentance.
 And it runs to attain its former beauty which had been
 corrupted.

Contrition and tears fall from it after it recollected
 The kind of spots that iniquity made on it when it drew near to
 [iniquity].

All kinds of bitter groans were born inside it,
 For it saw the ulcers of iniquity that had multiplied in it.

For this reason, 'Blessed are those who weep', as it is
 written.¹⁷
 One does not weep unless he has seen his wounds.

The prostitute's rebirth

The prostitute wept because she saw that her wounds were
 many.
 Her soul understood, and terror seized her because of her
 corruption.

Jesus the Sun rose and gave her light powerfully,
 And he showed her that her path was blocked by offences.

'Light had shined in the darkness' over the wretched girl,¹⁸
 And she took hold of his feet and repented to him lovingly.

The radiance of the Father shined and gave light to her who was gloomy,
And in the beams of light she drew near to him so that she might be purified through him.

[Her] soul saw the glorious image of the Great Light,
And it took from the Light brightness so that it might flee from darkness.

414 She saw herself corrupted by odious iniquity,
And she shed tears upon the Physician so that he might heal her wounds.

She uncovered her many wounds to bring them near to him,
And she shed tears with passion to show that it was bitter to her.

She sprinkled the Physician with excellent perfume when he was healing her,
So that everyone might see a token of her love in the fragrance of the oil.

She poured this oil on both his head and his feet,¹⁹
Because on every side he was full of mercy to the one who approaches him.

He offered himself to the one full of blemishes to approach him,
And, just as she had sought to do, she caressed him discerningly.

She took hold of his head, and he did not forbid this defiled woman from doing so.
She grasped his feet, and he let her do as she wished.

She sprinkled him with tears, and he did not draw back from the wretched girl.

She kissed him with passion, and, although she was a prostitute, he did not drive her away.

Whenever she wanted she drew near and grabbed [him] shamelessly.
And because she trembled from [her] love, she was allowed to approach.

The whole Treasury of divinity was let open in front of her,
In order that she might be a model in her proximity [to the Lord] for those who repent.

She descended there to the baptismal font so that she might be purified.
If she had been ashamed, she would have left without forgiveness.

Oil and tears she poured out there upon the Holy One,
With the result that the entire ritual of baptism was completed.

415 The excellent oil and the little water were mixed.
The Great High Priest made atonement for the defiled girl by performing his own part.²⁰

The wise woman knelt before the Forgiver,
In order to come to spiritual birth, which she lacked [lit. because she was deficient].

She bent her head over to wipe his feet with her hair.
And just as in baptism she received holiness from the Holy One.

She entered into the second womb, the place of atonement,
So that in new birth she might become beautiful in a spiritual sense.

She grasped his feet to find a Sea of mercy at the banquet.

She was baptised [lit. dived down] in him, and he cleaned and polished her, and she arose pure.

She exposed her soul before the Great Flood of holiness.
He poured forth on her waves of his mercy so that she might be atoned.

She presented herself to the Living Fire clothed in the body.
It burnt the thicket of her soul and [the evil] vanished completely.

Her love brought [her soul] into the crucible of mercy and smelted it there.
Its [refined] gold showed its beauty so that it might be a cast ornament to the Lord of Kings.

The Lord at Simon's table

Our Lord was reclining to eat the supper of the Pharisee.²¹
His love moved the Sinful Woman so that she might draw near to him.

He was hungry to forgive because of his mercy which is woven into him.
And at the banquet of Simon he found what he hungered for [lit. wanted].

- 416 They invited him as a prophet to eat supper.
But he made use of forgiveness like God.

The weeping which he heard from the prostitute was more pleasing to him
Than the preparations that Simon brought to present to him.

The tear drops which he received there were more lovely to him
Than all the drinking that came with the meal.

The sound of the groans that were being poured out was more beautiful to him
Than what Simon had prepared for the supper.

The dinner party makes inquiries about the food that was set out.
But our Lord gives heed to the prayers which are murmured.

Everyone was expecting to get the beverage [lit. to attain the drinking] that will delight him.
But Jesus drinks in the melodies of suffering that are sung unto him.

They were engrossed in the delicacies that Simon brought in.
[Jesus] was delighted in the repentance which he loves.

He eats with them, but his attention is directed at the prostitute,
For he was very hungry for [her] supplication, that it might be presented to him.

At that time Simon was divided about the True One.
He considered him ignorant of the things [she] had done.

The ignorance of Simon assailed the Omniscient One,
And he was considered to be ignorant of the hidden things.

- The ignorant one was doubting the Knower,
417 Because if he was a prophet he would know (so it says) who approached him.²²

Simon understood that the woman who had entered was sinful.
And he did not allow the polluted woman to draw near to

Overleaf: 'They were engrossed in the delicacies that Simon brought in. Jesus was delighted in the repentance which loves': the sinful woman at the feet of Jesus

himself.

If [Jesus] had been close to divine revelations [so Simon thought]
He would have rebuked the polluted woman, and she would have fled from him.

If he had a secret eye that could see mysteries,
He would have recognised her blemishes for she is so foul.

If he had an intellect that controlled the hidden things.
He would not give permission to the polluted woman to grasp his feet.

It is obvious indeed that he is not at all a prophet;
He did not restrict the Sinful Woman from himself since he did not recognize her.

Simon seethed with these thoughts for he did not understand.
And he was divided concerning the Omniscient One, whom he himself had invited.

The Good Physician was eager to heal the polluted woman.
And he was rejected by the onlookers when he healed [as if] he did not know her.

If he is a prophet he would know (so they say) who this woman is.
And [Simon] would have called him a prophet only on the strength of [recognising the woman].

Before his doubts the Pharisee, who had invited [Jesus], called him a prophet.
But after he had doubted, [Jesus] was considered [by Simon] to be not even a prophet.

[Simon's] integrity was divided even when he set out from the start.

418 Therefore, he was susceptible to the doubt which assailed him.

When [Simon] honoured the Lord of the Prophets [by inviting him], he reckoned [Jesus] a prophet.
[Simon] was divided because the emotion of his love was wanting.

If he had acknowledged from the beginning that the son is the Son,
[Certainly] not at the end would he have not even regarded him as a prophet.

The foundation of his faith was empty.
Therefore it was powerless against doubt when doubt struck it.

'If he is a prophet, he would have known', as one may say,
'For he is not even a prophet, though I supposed that he was a prophet'.

Simon is tested

But the Knower turned to Simon calmly:
'I have something to tell you: judge rightly'.²³

The Good Shepherd holds his sheep lovingly,
So that when he seeks to find one, he will not lose another.

He had visited to drive out the offence from [Simon] with various tricks,
So that [Simon] might also repent, together with her, that is, the woman he [already] found.

'I have something to tell you,' he said.
And Simon answered to our Saviour, 'Speak, Rabbi'.²⁴

He caught [Simon] humbly so that he might be judged because he doubted.

But it was lovingly that he himself said to him, 'Speak, Rabbi'.

The Wise of Mind made Simon into a judge,
So that he might accuse himself because he was divided concerning the True One.

419 'There were two debtors to one creditor.
One owed 500 and the other owed 50.

And because they did not have anything to give back to him,
he remitted both.
Which of these do you say should love him more?'²⁵

Simon said, 'The former should love him more;
His debt is greater than that of his companion.

His love for the remitter should be as great as the remission.
It is appropriate that he love the creditor more'.

Simon became a judge for his own soul concerning the hidden things.
He did not understand the hidden speech from his own mind.

He accused himself and was proud that he was appointed to make a judgment.
He was not good enough, yet he considered himself a judge.

He entered his verdict and was eager to settle [the case] uprightly.
But because the truth surrounded him justly, he emerged guilty.

The judge was judged – he was found guilty by himself –
While thinking that the verdict he entered referred to another.

He entered his verdict and he was found guilty and he emerged not knowing [what had happened].
He became a judge and he accused himself, but he did not understand.

He judged rightly, but did not know he would be found guilty,
Lest he exalt himself over the One who knows the hidden
things.

Both he and the Sinful Woman were considered the two guilty
ones.

420 He entered an opinion, but by it he was exposed as guilty.

The Wise of Mind trapped him in his words just like David.
He was found guilty by his own words, just like the Son of
Jesse, when he was asked.

The prophet Nathan condemned David through his
responses.²⁶
And the Lord of Nathan similarly condemned the Pharisee.

The prophet and his Lord judged the king and the Pharisee.
And they condemned them through their own words, when
they were interrogated.

The judges were judged by their actions.
And they pronounced condemnation for themselves.

The woman full of sins grabbed by his feet the One who is full
of compassion.

But when Simon had found fault with her, he was judged
wisely.

Our Lord began to explain to him how things really are;
And he showed him that the verdict he entered is not another's
[but is for Simon himself].

[Jesus] turned his face to the prostitute in great love.
And he began to explain to Simon about her.²⁷

He sought to display her great love in the presence of those
who were reclining;

[And] how much had her love exceeded the discrimination of
the one who had invited him.

'I entered your house,' he had said to the Pharisee.
'But you did not even bring water for my feet, to offer it to
me.

But she drenched them discerningly with her tears.
She in truth offered me the very hair of her head instead of a
cloth.²⁸

421 You did not kiss me so that everyone might see the sign of
your love,
But she did not cease from kissing my feet.²⁹

You did not anoint me although it was demanded from your
[absent] discernment,
But she sprinkled me lovingly with excellent oil.³⁰

Your discernment was very much weaker [lit. lighter] than
what is acceptable,
But she showed her love to me in many ways.

You brought before me a feast of bread and wine,
But she offered her prayer, her tears, her perfume, and her
hair.

You mix the kind of thing [i.e. wine] that comes to nothing,
But she kissed my feet all over.

You showed your love in perishable tastes,
But she repeated her petition with penitent cries.

Her love is greater than your meal and your delicacies,
And because she loved so much, her sins, which were many,
are forgiven'.³¹

The Sinful Woman's conversion

Oh woman, full of blemishes, you whose beauties are many!
I am amazed at you, and how I shall describe [lit. call] you I
do not know.

Happy mother, who conceived iniquity and gave birth to
deceit,

But who in forgiveness gained purity and holiness.

Lover of falsehood, who passed many years in it,
But whose effect is magnified [through the Gospel story], just
as the apostles in their preaching.

422 Mistress of sins, who was polluted by her own deeds,
Jesus with his hyssop purified and cleansed her, and she
became pure.

Putrid spring, out of whom sprung every kind of evil.
But mercy converted her, and streams which were bitter
became sweet.

Troubled of soul, who had become dark through her offences.
Jesus the Light shined and made lucid her gloominess.

A vulture, who snatched up shamelessly everyone who met
her.

Christ the Eagle made her a dove after she saw him.

A stone, which was a stumbling block of iniquity for everyone
who came to her.

But behold! she was set upon the foundation of apostleship.³²

A she-wolf, who approached the Chief Shepherd.
But after she saw him she became a ewe in his field.

A woman, who transgressed through many evil deeds,
Sings lovingly her own name as gospel.

Hater of life, whom iniquity covered most of her days.

But Christ adorned her to become a princess of the beautiful
things.

All of creation was represented in the defiled woman,
Who through the advent of Jesus became beautiful and pure.

In the oil and tears that she poured out there on the Saviour,
She prefigured the baptism of the world for the world
symbolically.

423 The fragrance of her excellent perfume was scattered over
those who were reclining.
The house was exceedingly full of the pleasant smoke.³³

The nostrils [of those present] fell short [of being able to take
in] [lit. from] its fragrance and feared its greatness,
For it blazed up powerfully in the whole house.

Those who were reclining marvelled at the sweetness of the
excellent oil.
Its novel fragrance, which was abundant, overcame them.

The matter of the oil and its choice fragrance alarmed them.
And they began to argue at the table about it.

There was one man who set its value at 300 gold pieces and he
claimed that was its worth.³⁴

There was another man who said it was worth 200 and asked
why it should perish.

Judas had longed for its value because he was a thief.
He suggested a high price because he was greedy [lit. his need
was excessive].³⁵

The fragrant oil

What was the fragrance of the oil that made it so great?

And why was its force [such] that [one suggested] it would go for 300, if not [that, then] for 200?

What spices were crushed into it, or what roots?
Seeing that [the oil] had acquired so great a fragrance and power.

Through what [special] force did it capture the apostles who were reclining?
So that just as with great astonishment they would ask why it should perish.³⁶

From the Great Tree of Life, upon which it fell,³⁷
[The oil] took its power and acquired its fragrance and intensity.

424 The good perfume of the believing woman fell upon Jesus.
The fervour and power fell also [lit. were increased] upon those who were reclining.

She had stirred up the Sea of Perfumes when she approached him.
And excellent incense went up from him powerfully.

She anointed the holy Christ with oil discerningly,
And a sweet fragrance arose from him and amazed them.

She lit with love the Lord of the Censers lovingly.
He begat an incense so that it might also involve the apostles in the astonishment.

It was from its roots that the oil receives the excellent fragrance
and becomes powerful in accordance with the strength of the ingredients.

Thus, Isaiah called the Messiah a root

That would arise from an arid land [i.e. the Virgin] without sexual intercourse.³⁸

It was upon this Root of Life that the oil fell,
And it was from him that [the oil] received its wonderful and ineffable fragrance.

The Son of the Virgin was the Root in the thirsty land.
And he introduced the fragrance into the oil that fell upon himself.

And although the perfume of the blessed woman was excellent,
It was from the Living One that it acquired the additional element, when it anointed him.

For this reason [i.e. the fragrance] those who were reclining were amazed at the oil
That had no peer in the world which could be as great as this one.

425 It was because of [lit. for] the strength of its choice fragrance that they put a high price on it,
For they did not know what to say about it.

Treacherous Judas made use of his habitual trick,
He who was trying to find a way to steal the value of the oil.

'Why was this oil not sold for a lot of money?
Its value would be such as to be beneficial to the poor.'³⁹

When [this] evil will spoke, our Lord restrained it
So that the utterance which the treacherous one sang out might not be praised.

He said, 'Leave her alone. This woman acts according to her will,

And there is also a need for this act [i.e. preparation for burial].⁴⁰

It is the corpse she entered to anoint here, before the [fateful] days.
For after I am crucified, no one will anoint or put balsam on me.

Oil is useful for the day of my burial and, behold, this is from today.
She did this while there is an opportunity [lit. place] [given] by [my] crucifiers.

The deadly sword has not yet come to scatter you [disciples] away.
She has anointed me because after you have fled no one will.

Behold, she is labouring instead of you before the event.
Let her do that which was your task to fulfill.

It is a beautiful act that she performed for me, because I am slain.
It is the order that she fulfilled, she who will not at all be slighted by me.

For this reason her story will go out into the whole world.
And with my gospel her remembrance will shine out'.⁴¹

426 Our Lord healed all of the blemishes which were near to him.
He healed in his compassion the iniquity of the soul and the diseases of the body.⁴²

He cleansed the Pharisee's body from its marks,
And he cured the prostitute's soul because she was sick.

It is the former from his leprosy and the latter from her evil deeds,

[whom] he cleansed and forgave both hidden iniquity and manifest leprosy.

Her soul and his body were purified;
He who is a Great Physician and Forgiver met with both of them.

He forgave the 500 and he forgave the 50 because he is compassionate.
[He forgave] the soul its iniquity and the body its leprosy, which was scarred.

The debtors even paid him back [lit. repaid him recompenses] for their forgiveness.
They weighed out and gave to him [their] love instead of their debt-contracts.

He, whose manifest leprosy was cleansed, honoured the Lord manifestly.
And in his visible preparations he made a banquet.

She, whose secret iniquity was atoned, loved him secretly.
And with groans, passion, and tears she sought forgiveness.

And the Compassionate One gave forgiveness to both of them.
The former he cleansed and the latter he atoned, because [they both] sought him.

Cry tears of repentance
Not even today is his treasury lacking in forgiveness.
It is full just as it has always been, and its door will be opened for the one who seeks him.

427 Whoever has pains in his body should run unto him.
And whoever iniquity of the soul has marked should take shelter in him.

Bring tears, just like the prostitute, to the house of God.

And receive, just like her, forgiveness of sins for yourselves.

Kiss his gates and draw near to his threshold, just as she did.
And sprinkle with your tears the ground of the house of atonement.

It is here [in the house of atonement] that Jesus is the one loved by the prostitute.

And he stands ready to forgive hidden sins for those who invite him.

He who is needing forgiveness for his deeds,
Let him sprinkle tears on his threshold and, behold, he is forgiven.

He who is bitten by the serpent who killed Adam,
Let him drink the cup of Jesus who conquered [the serpent's] poison.

He who has made a mark on his soul through free-will,
He has a Physician who will freely heal him.

He who willfully went astray and fell, let him also wish to stand up.
For it is your choice to run your course according to your wish.

Make a petition, just like the Sinful Woman, and bring it to him.
For in him is his mercy every day and every moment.

Weep just as she wept, loving as she loved,
And you will receive from the Giver the same atonement as hers.

Jesus is today and he was yesterday and will always be.⁴³
Just as he forgave, he will also forgive the one who seeks him.

428 His gate is open and his love is poured out to the penitent one.
Blessed is the Compassionate One, the story of whose mercy cannot be contained.

¹ Most of these translations come from the American journal *The True Vine* (1989); for a complete list of these and other translations, see the following bibliographies on Jacob's life and works: S.P. Brock, *Syriac Studies: A Classified Bibliography (1960–1990)* (*Parole de l'Orient* 21, 1996), pp. 156–60; idem, 'Syriac Studies: A Classified Bibliography (1990–95),' *Parole de l'Orient* 23 (1998): pp. 302–3; and P.K. Alwan, 'Bibliographie générale raisonnée de Jacques de Saroug,' *Parole de l'Orient* 13 (1986): pp. 313–84.

² T. Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug* (Kaslik 1993–9).

³ See Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, Luke 7:36–50, and John 12:1–11.

⁴ In addition to the present *memra* there are a few Syriac poems on this theme: the above mentioned *memra* attributed to Ephrem and two dialogue poems, one dating to the fifth or sixth century and another that clearly belongs to the Middle Ages; for the Ephremic *memra*, see E. Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers, Sermo De Domino Nostro*, vol. 116, CSCO (Louvain 1966), pp. 78–91 (text); idem, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers, Sermo De Domino Nostro*, vol. 117, CSCO (Louvain 1966), pp. 99–113 (German translation); and J. Gwynn, *Selections Translated into English from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian and from the Demonstrations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage* (Edinburgh 1898), pp. 336–41 (English translation); for the dialogue poems, see S.P. Brock, 'The Sinful Woman and Satan: Two Syriac Dialogue Poems,' *Oriens Christianus* 72 (1988) pp. 21–62 (texts and English translations). There is also a *kontakion* by Romanos on the same theme: see J. Grosdider de Matons, *Romanos le mélode: Hymnes 3, nouveau testament (21–31)*, *Sources chrétiennes* (Paris 1965), pp. 13–43 (text and French translation); and R.J. Schork, *Sacred Song From the Byzantine Pulpit: Romanos the Melodist* (Gainesville 1995), pp. 77–85 (English translation).

⁵ On the Sinful Woman being a representative of all of humanity, see S.A. Harvey, '2000 NAPS Presidential Address – Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001), pp. 105–31.

⁶ P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* no. 51 (Paris and Leipzig 1906).

⁷ Cf. Eph. 6:16.

⁸ Cf. Gen. 4:13.

⁹ Cf. Matt. 5:29.

¹⁰ Cf. Luke 7:36, Matt. 26:6, and Mark 14:3.

¹¹ Cf. 1 Cor. 9:22 and 10:33.

¹² Cf. Matt. 9:9–13, Mark 2:13–17, and Luke 5:27–32 and 19:1–10.

¹³ Cf. Luke 11:37–54.

¹⁴ Cf. Matt. 14:13–21, Mark 6:30–44 and 8:1–10, and John 6:1–13.

¹⁵ Cf. 1 Pet. 5:8.

¹⁶ Cf. Luke 7:38.

¹⁷ Matt. 5:4.

¹⁸ John 1:5.

¹⁹ Cf. Matt. 26:7, Mark 14:3, Luke 7:38, and John 12:3.

²⁰ Cf. Heb. 4:14–10:31 for Christ as a high priest.

- ²¹ Luke 7:36.
²² Luke 7:39.
²³ Luke 7:40 and 43.
²⁴ Luke 7:40.
²⁵ Luke 7:41–2.
²⁶ Cf. 2 Sam. 11–2.
²⁷ Luke 7:44.
²⁸ Luke 7:44.
²⁹ Luke 7:45.
³⁰ Luke 7:46.
³¹ Luke 7:47.
³² Cf. Matt. 16:18.
³³ Cf. Gen. 8:21.
³⁴ Mark 14:5 and John 12:5.
³⁵ Cf. John 12:5–6.
³⁶ Cf. Matt. 26:8.
³⁷ Cf. Rev. 22:2.
³⁸ Isaiah 53:2.
³⁹ Cf. Matt. 26:8–9, Mark 14:4–5, and John 12:5.
⁴⁰ Cf. Matt. 26:12, Mark 14:8, and John 12:7.
⁴¹ Cf. Matt. 26:13 and Mark 14:9.
⁴² Cf. Ps. 103:3.
⁴³ Heb. 13:8.

Reviews

Man and the Environment: A Study of St Symeon the New Theologian, by Anestis G Keselopoulos (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 2001, pp. 192, US \$13.95/£10.99 ISBN 088141221X)

Anestis Keselopoulos' newly-published study of the theology of cosmology, seen from a patristic perspective, is both thoughtful and thought-provoking. Its dedication to 'my son' focuses the reader's attention on the responsibility owed to future generations by those who may attempt to wrest control of the physical world for ignoble and human ends. However, Keselopoulos takes as his model for a contemporary response to the world an eleventh-century hegumen, who warns his pupils they should not dare to write of divine matters without having first experienced divine illumination. The quandary facing every modern writer on Symeon is thus a Prufrockian 'how do I presume?' Keselopoulos tackles this with a determined and informed reliance on his sources, and a scholarly approach to referencing and cross referencing which has only occasional lapses from consistency. Keselopoulos invites us to consider how Symeon the New Theologian proleptically warns of the dangers of ecological hybris, in that it attempts to reorder a divinely shaped creation against the laws of God and nature. The five chapters move us from a consideration of God's plan for creation, as exegeted by Symeon and others (Maximus the Confessor makes frequent appearances), through an engagement with the human stewardship of that world, the appropriate and inappropriate uses of natural resources, and finally to an incarnational and sacramental understanding of living and worshipping in the world.

Keselopoulos strikes a healthy balance between patristic citation and interpretation of his sources, developing his own theological understanding of his mentor's doctrines. He is

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