Extracts from two homilies, on receiving communion

Jacob of Serugh (c. AD 451–521)

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A HOMILY of MAR JACOB of SERÛGH ON THE RECEPTION OF THE HOLY MYSTERIES

By DOM HUGH CONNOLLY, O.S.B. JACOB, the "gentle and studious" Bishop of Batnan, chief city of Serûgh, a district which lay a little to the east of the river Euphrates, and south-west of Edessa, was born at the village of Kurtam on the Euphrates in the year 451 a.d. He was for many years periodeutes, or visitor, of his district, and was made bishop only late in life (A.D. 519). He died on November 29, 521 . Jacob was a Monophysite; but he seldom alludes to the great controversy of his day. So little are his writings tainted with the heresy of Eutyches that, like those of his Nestorian contemporary Narsai, many of them are at the present day published without retouching for the use of the Catholic Syrians. Of the remains of his numerous metrical Homilies, all written in the twelve-syllable verse, 145 have recently been published in four volumes by Father Paul Bedjan, to whose accurate scholarship and unflagging energy in editing valuable Syriac texts the world owes so much. The following discourse, which has not before been translated into English----or, so far as I am aware, into any other language----is to be found in vol. in (published 1907) pp. 646ff. It needs no further introduction than the remark that a few passages, which seemed to add nothing to the interest of the poem, have been omitted for the sake of economizing space. A short passage from another Homily is quoted at the end as illustrating the writer's views on the doctrine of the Real Presence of our Lord in the Holy Eucharist.

Come, ye discerning, let us delight to-day in the teaching the taste whereof is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. (p. 648) The Church in the world is a great harbour, full of peace; whoso toileth, let him come in and rest at her table, (p. 649) Her doors are open, and her eye is good, and her heart is wide. Her table is full, and sweet is her mingled (cup) to them that are worthy. Ye lovers of the world, come in from wandering in the evil world, and rest in the inn that is full of comfort to him that enters it. Thou weary labourer, that strivest to enrich thyself by vexatious toilings, why runnest thou after riches that cannot be held fast. O thou rich, that goest astray with thy riches, possess God, and hate the wealth that after a little while shall not be thine. O thou unquiet soul, that cleavest after gold, woe to thee

for that which spendeth thee with thy toiling after it! O thou that art greedy of mammon, incline thine ear hither, and cast from thee that grievous load which profiteth thee not.

(p. 650) Come to prayer, and bring with thee thy whole self. Let not thy mind remain in the market about thy business. If thou art here, let also thine inner man (p. 651) be here within the doors of the crowned (bride). Why is thy thought gone forth and distracted after affairs, so that when thou art here thou art not here, but there? Without amid the markets thy mind is wandering, (taken up) with reckonings and profits; fetch it, that it may come in and ask for its Life. Stand not with one half of thee within and one half without, lest when thou art divided thy prayer lose itself betwixt the two parts. Stand at prayer a united and complete and true man, and all whatsoever thou askest thou canst obtain from God. Why art thou impatient to be off when He has not given to thee? Stay long and knock at the Physician, and beseech Him, and bring the tears of repentance and besprinkle His doorstep; entreat much; and if for love He give not to thee, yet to importunity He will not be able to deny all her requests. Be insistent at the Physician's door, and give not over; for if thou be backward He will not bind thee up. Why standest thou still? Importunity knows how to obtain mercy of Him; and unless He give to her she will not suffer Him to depart.

O thou penitent, be insistent; and whatever thou dost ask, thou shalt receive it from the Giver of all things good. Why art thou impatient to be gone about thy business? (p. 652) Why art thou disquieted to depart and go about thine affairs? Why runnest thou after the world which may not be kept fast? Why hast thou spent thy days in vanity? Why are the hours of the Church esteemed by thee as idleness? Why is not the service accounted by thee as a banquet? Why art thou diligent when thou doest thine own work, but here remiss and cold and slack in asking? Mercy hath brought thee in to this house that is full of profit; think it not loss if thou remain long herein. Be patient and listen to the sound of the Psalms which the finger of prophecy played (lit., "smote") to the words of David. Hearken to the Hymns (Madhrâshê) sung by chaste women with voices of praise, which the wisdom of the Highest has given to the congregations. Hear the Prophets who, as it were through pipes of choice gold, pour forth from their mouths life into the ears of men. (p. 653) Hearken to the Apostles who, like the channels of rivers, arc opened and water the King's garden with lofty streams. Bend thine ear to the pulpit (bêmâ) of the Godhead, and receive from it precious pearls. Learn and give assent to the (two) Testaments, rivers both which hold for thee life unending. Hear the New, and hearken to the Old; and see that in both one truth is spoken unto thee. Lo, thou hearest from the Old of the four rivers which flowed from the blessed source of Eden; and again in the New (thou hast) the Apostles like four rivers, who went forth into the four corners (of the world) and watered them.

Life flows from the service of the house of God; (p. 654) ye lovers of life, refuse not the profit that comes thereof. The soul of man is receptive of impressions (lit., "operations"), and in whatsoever she meditates, she is dyed withal and becomes (the colour) of the same. When she hears the dirges of the wailing women, she overflows with grief and pours out tears over the departed; and when again she hears the songs and jests of the actors she

waxes wanton, that with a loud voice she may pour forth laughter. When she hears evil reports, dread comes upon her; but if she hears good tidings, she is glad. And every wind that blows towards her moves her; and in whatsoever direction it be, each time she turns. When, then, she hears the sound of the service of God's house, spiritually she is moved with love towards God; and as it were she despises the evil world and its affairs, and comes in and mingles with these godly meditations; and she cleaves to and loves that spiritual conversation. She contemns the world and its affairs and its doings; and she is steeped in these voices of holiness, and all carnal thoughts depart from her. And the soul contemns the love of the world and its pleasures, and thoughts of wantonness and remissness. And when she hears these voices that are sung to her, (p. 655) she is chaste and lowly and full of hope and moderation. Wherefore it is right that he who enters in to give himself to prayer should be long in God's house.

The Church in the world is like a scribe to men; and she teaches and makes them wise, and binds up the sores of all who come to her. And from her teaching the soul draws light, that she may overcome the darkness of death when it meets her. Come, enter, ye foolish, that were stained with lusts, and furbish your lives with the doctrine of the daughter of lights. Be not impatient to be gone from the supper which the bride of the whole world has made, that we should delight therein. Go not forth as soon as the consecration is (begun) in the sanctuary; for thou art a son of the household, not a stranger, that thou shouldst depart. When thou hearest: "Whoso has not received the sign (rushmâ), let him depart"; do not thou depart, who art signed, yea, and brought near. Be thou one of the household at the hour of these Mysteries; do not thou get up and go forth and become as one of the externs. Thou art signed with the sign, thou art stamped with the stamp, among the brethren thou art written: why shouldst thou go forth with the unsigned, as one that cometh short? "Him who is not baptised " the priest drives out when he is about to consecrate, not thee does he drive out, who art one baptized in (lit., "of") the Divinity. Baptism, daughter of lights, is the King's sign, (p. 656) and thou hast put on the great sign: why shouldst thou go forth?

With the oil they have signed thee, with the cross of light thy face is signed: it is to " him that is not signed " as thou art signed that they say, "Let him go forth. The sign of life has made thee a brother of the Only-begotten and a son of His Father; and thou art in the household: thou shouldst not go forth. Remain within the door, and cry, "Abba, our Father"; for thou, being a son, it is permitted to thee to cry, "Our Father. "Whoso is not baptized"----for this reason do they drive him out when the consecration is (begun), that it is not permitted to him to call the Heavenly One " our Father. And " whoso is not baptized," his number is not set among the sons; and if he should call the Father " our Father " it is a lie. And for this cause they say, " Whoso has not received the sign, let him depart," that a lie may not be uttered among them that are true. Forth they drive him if he is not born with the second birth, lest he should dare to cry, "Our Father," with the many, and make use of a word that is full of lying in the pure congregation, which daily sings those things that are true. Wherefore, when they drive out that unbaptized one, do thou enter in, for it is easy for thee to cry, "Our Father. Thou art born with the second, the spiritual birth:

it is fitting for thee to cry, ”Our Father”: stay and cry it.

The Bridegroom is coming down to see the bride betrothed to Him; (p. 657) abide, O soul, in the midst of the bride-chamber, that He may see thee here. Go not forth from the chamber of the Bridegroom, the King, who is coming down to see thee, bearing riches from the house of His Father. The priest, whom thou hast sent, has called Him: wait for Him; for if He come and see thee not, He will be angry. Together with the priest the whole people beseeches the Father that He will send His Son, that he may come down (and dwell upon the oblation. And the Holy Spirit, His Power, lights down in the bread and wine, and sanctifies (or ”consecrates”) it, yea, makes it the Body and the Blood. And every one who is in the house bestirs himself, that he may cry,”Our Father”; and the new sons sanctify and bless Him. And by His brooding He mingles them holily, and they become one with Him, as it is written, mystically. But he who goes forth with the hearers , what will he do when they petition Him in in the house, and he is not (there) to cry, ”Our Father.” He has cut Himself off; none (else) has cut him off from the brooding. What then has he found in the marketplaces whither he is roaming? Despise business, and despise profits which cannot be held fast, and at the hour of the Mysteries abide in the house of God. Your enemy is watching, and is athirst for your blood, and so far as he is able he will cut you off from things profitable. (p. 658) When these Mysteries full of life are administered, he fabricates apprehensions of all sorts of losses, and with all manner of devices he, by his subtlety, drives thee forth, that thou mayest be removed from that congregation which is crying ”Holy.”

Satan is distressed by these voices of holiness ; and if he could he would drive the whole world forth.. There would not remain one man in the holy place to cry, ”Our Father.” ... In that hour when the bride cries out, ”Forgive me my debts” he knows that the Bridegroom, the King, is full of mercy, and that He hears her (the bride), and He forgives her who died for her. Wherefore Satan is concerned and uses much pains to drive men out of the holy place at the time of the Mysteries, lest when the whole congregation cries out, ”Forgive me my debts,” the sinner also present himself and be justified. For when the Gift comes forth from God, He gives it to him who is worthy and to him who is unworthy. His grace (or ”favour”), when He pours it forth, is like to the sun and the rain, and He has mercy for sinners and for the righteous. And when the congregation asks mercy of God (p. 659) the sinners also who are therein are enriched from His Gift. When the whole congregation asks grace of God, He withholds it not even from the bad who are found therein. But the Evil One strives to steal away men at the time of the Mysteries, that he may cut them off from the Gift of God’s house; and he darkens the soul with restless and cowardly thoughts, and with worldly notions he chokes the mind. It may be he reminds thee of some business thou hadst forgotten, and chokes the soul with anxety concerning that matter, and with some weak thought stirs thee up to depart from the holy place about the unprofitable business. And that thought from Satan drags thee and pulls thee and brings thee forth and makes thee void of profit.

But (perchance) thou sayest: ”I will go and be about business until the consecration (is begun), and in the hour when they open the doors I will go in and receive. O thou who art

wise, drive away and put forth these notions from thee, and suffer thy soul to have a care for her wounds and bind them up. Say to thy soul: " O thou soul, full of sores, now is the time for thee to receive a medicine for thy wounds. Now is the time for thee to pour out tears before Him who binds up, and He will apply mercy to thy disease which vexes thee. (p. 660. Now is the time when the door of the Great Physician is opened, and He will bind up for naught; bring in thy sore that He may find a remedy for it. Now is the hour for thee to lift up thy voice in supplication; for now the gates on high are opened to prayers. Now is the hour when thou mayest entreat thy Creditor to come forth and cancel the note of hand that is terrifying thee. Now is the hour when the Son of God is sacrificed and set forth upon the table for sinners, to pardon them. Now is the hour when the doors and curtains give way, that the sacrifice may come in and mercy go forth for sinners. Whither, whither wouldst thou go forth, O soul, in this hour when every man enters to gather mercy from the Merciful.

O thou soul, the ewe that fell among robbers, be quiet in the fold, full of healing for the broken. Without the door the wolf is hiding and waiting for th.ee; anoint thy lips with the Blood of the Shepherd, and then go forth and despise him. For the Bridegroom has come down and given thee His Body and sealed thee with His Blood: never shouldst thou go forth from the bride-chamber to them that are without. The way of the world is full of snares and obstacles; the devils are standing on guard at the cross-roads (or "fords") of the earth; and they threaten the soul with rage to destroy it, (p. 661) and they thirst for her blood because of the virtues which are held within her. And with all manner of pretexts and devices they lay snares for her to corrupt her from that virtue which belongs to her. But thou, O soul, hast an armour and a wall, yea, and a Saviour who will not fail thee in the contest. He keeps thee from the pitfalls of the enemy; and he will shew thee a way of life to walk therein. He brings thee in before His Father, that thou mayest see His place; and He shews thee that He is a sacrifice on behalf of sinners. Make thy petition in the name of the Son: offer it to His Father; and He will receive it for the sake of the sign of His Only-begotten.

"When the Body of the Son of God is set upon His table, bring in before Him all thy petitions earnestly. Reveal thy plagues, O thou sick soul, and show thy diseases, and pour out tears before the table of the Godhead. In that hour when the priest sacrifices the Son before His Father, gird thyself, enter, O soul, and ask for pardon with a loud voice. Say to the Father, "Behold Thy Son, a sacrifice to reconcile Thee: pardon me in Him who died for me and was buried. Behold Thine Oblation: accept from my hands Him who is from Thee." (p. 662) With these affections stand, O sinner, at the time of the Mysteries; and beg mercy and receive forgiveness, and then go forth. At the hour of the sacrifice, when it is being offered for thee, do not leave him who is offering and depart. When they drive out "him who has not received the sign," do thou enter; keep thyself within and hearken to the whisperings of the priest, and hear how he begs mercy for sinners and pardons them; (p. 663) and if thou art in need of pardon, why then dost thou go out? Another bows down and asks mercy for thee; why art thou in haste to wander among the markets in that hour? When those who have not received the sign of the Bridegroom enter her, the Church drives them out and shuts the doors until

He comes. She fears lest He should find in her a stranger when He appears in her, and she removes and expels all externs. The bride shuts the doors and eats the Bridegroom who has espoused her; and no stranger may taste of Him, for (this) she does not permit to him.

Who ever saw a bridegroom sacrificed at the marriage supper, or brides eating their betrothed? The Son of God has done a new thing in the world, which no man ever did but He alone. His Body and His Blood He has set forth at the feast before them that sit at table, that they may eat of Him, and live with Him without end. Meat and drink is our Lord at His marriage supper: blessed is He who has given us His Body and Blood, that in Him we may delight. [End of the Homily.] The following passage gives us some idea of the doctrine and sentiments touching the Holy Eucharist which were prevalent among some of the early Monophysite Syrians. It is taken from one of a scries of discourses on Holy Week which are to be found in vol. ii of Jacob of Serûgh's printed Homilies. The passage begins on p. 484. The writer has just come to the subject of the Last Supper.

The bread and wine our Lord made Body and Blood; which (thing) Melchizedek also thus depicted mystically. The high priest who was more excellent than Abraham sacrificed bread and wine to God, and nothing besides; and he taught the earth that the bread and wine is the Body and Blood which the Son of God gave to the world to be pardoned withal; and on the eve of the passion the Mystery shone forth from our Saviour, who broke His Body and gave to His Apostles, as we have said. Here let the soul of him who is to speak clothe itself in awe-; for save with awe the Son of God may not be spoken of. Let our mind glow with the fire of love that eats up stumblings and doubts, and then let it look upon the Son of God. With Faith, that leaps over pits and gulfs, our discourse shall run, and thus it shall not have fallen among the disputers.

His Body with His hands our Lord divided upon the table; and who is he that will dare to say now that it was not the Body? He said "This is My Body"; and who will not affirm it? For if he affirm it not he is no disciple of the apostleship. The Apostles assented to Him; and while He was alive and reclining with them they ate Him; and dead whilst living they knew Him (to be), without doubting. If He were not dead, then His bread was not His Body; (p. 485) and if He were not alive He would not have broken His Body and given to His Apostles.

He brake the bread, and made it the Body, and gave to His Apostles; and the taste of the Body, wherein was life, was in their mouths. From when He took it and called it Body it was not bread , but His Body, and it (or "Him") they were eating whilst they marvelled. They eat His Body, and He is reclining with them at the table; and they drink His Blood, and they hear the voice of His teaching. They affirm that He is slain, whilst they look upon Him alive and speaking; and He is mingled with them whilst they eat Him, without doubt. And faith is bright and stands manfully, and doubts not either that He is alive or that He is slain. And He reclines slain at the table, and is not investigated; and they drink His Blood and affirm that it is Blood, while He is alive. And there are not there, neither pryers nor disputers, (p. 486) nor investigators, nor yet scribes of wise (opinions). They were not questioning, when there was place to ask: "Dost Thou indeed call it Body, Lord, when lo, it is bread? " Faith

stoops not to questionings: she knows to affirm; to investigate she has never learned. The Apostles were anxious to assent to the Son, not to investigate or question as daring (men). The bread that He brake and called His Body, Body they knew it (to be); and thus they thought, that yea, in truth His Blood was dropping (there).

Who would have been able to sacrifice the Son before His Sire, unless He had sacrificed Himself by His own hands before He suffered? He, our Lord, is the High Priest of the perfect Sacrifice; and therefore He sacrificed Himself before His Father. He is the Dead who when dead was alive, and was not investigated, Priest and Burnt Offering, whom to examine is too high for the disputers. He brake and divided His Body with His hands to His twelve, who, if they had not seen how He brake, would not have broken. He stood as Priest and performed the priest's function upon Himself among His disciples, that He might depict a type to the priesthood for it to imitate. He taught them how to break His holy Body and distribute it to the sons of the household of the faith, (p. 487) He made known to them how they should drink the cup of His Blood, and give the nations and worlds and regions to drink of it. With His Blood He sealed the new Covenant, which He made that it might be for remission of debts for ever. Simon He taught, and to John He gave an example, that as He did they should be doing when He was taken up.

[Footnotes moved to the end and numbered]

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.