

CONFERENCE REPORTS

SYRIAC PAPERS AT THE NORTH AMERICAN PATRISTICS SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

- [1] Following is a brief report of matters relevant to Syriac studies from the North American Patristics Society (NAPS) annual meeting at Loyola University (Chicago) May 23-25, 2002. First of all it should be noted that Syriac studies is a notable growth area among members of the society. This can be seen not only from the number of papers on Syriac topics presented during the meeting but also, as reported by Elizabeth Clark, from an increase in the number of articles on Syriac topics being offered to the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*. Having said this, Syriac studies is far from adequately represented and it would be nice to see more Syriac specialists attending the meetings.
- [2] Before listing the relevant papers, it is of interest to note that it was announced that Sidney Griffith (President of NAPS 1986-88) has retired from the editorial board of the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*. Professor Lucas van Rompay was invited to join the board in his stead, where he serves together with Professor Susan Ashbrook Harvey (President of NAPS 1998-2000) to ensure that Syriac and Oriental Christian studies will continue to be expertly represented in the journal.
- [3] When we look at the papers presented at the meeting, we find not only a session dedicated to Syriac Patristics (chaired by Alexei Khamin, Drew University), but also a further seven papers of direct or related interest to Syriac studies included in sessions on Hermeneutics, Arius and Anti-Arians, Asceticism, Christological themes, and Chalcedon, Chalcedonians, and Anti-Chalcedonians. In addition, Dr. George Kiraz was given a special session at the beginning of the meeting to talk about the Syriac Digital Library Project known to us all as eBeth Arké.
- [4] Following is a list of the most relevant papers as well as some selected abstracts:

Pauline Allen, "The Rehabilitation of a Heretic: The Case of Severus of Antioch" (Plenary Address).

Adam Becker, "The School of Edessa: A Reassessment of the Evidence."

Robert Hill, "His Master's Voice: Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Psalms."

Cornelia Horn, "Fighting with the Devil: The Central Function of Women in John Rufus' Anti-Chalcedonian Polemics."

Jaehyun Kim, "Body and Soul in Ephrem the Syrian (306–373)."

Robert A. Kitchen, "A Practical Theology of Asceticism in Jacob of Serug's *Memre* on the Solitary Ones."

Christine Shephardson, "Defending Nicea: Ephrem in the Context of Empire."

Stephen J. Shoemaker, "The Council of Chalcedon and the Origins of the Dormition and Assumption Traditions."

Stephanie K. Skoyles, "Aphrahat the Persian Sage: Who Can Be 'the Temple of God'?"

Susan E. Ramsey, "An Exploration of Pneumatic Cousins: The Holy Spirit in Pseudo-Macarius and the Dead Sea Scrolls."

Robert E. Winn, "'Why Did Christ Appear in the Flesh?' Christology in the Sermons of Eusebius of Emesa."

- [5] A complete list of papers presented at the conference can be found at the following web site <http://moses.creighton.edu/NAPS/Conference/conference.html>.

SELECTED ABSTRACTS

THE SCHOOL OF EDESSA: A REASSESSMENT OF THE EVIDENCE
ADAM BECKER

- [6] In this paper Becker suggests that scholars have employed evidence from the sources for the School of the Persians uncritically by ignoring the polemical context in which these sources were composed. He suggests a reassessment of the evidence and then argues that a more historically plausible way of understanding the school is as an ethnically based voluntary association, like the various guilds or clubhouses attested in antiquity, that was expelled

from the city of Edessa only when it had become a more formal institution with a particular theological tendency.

A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF ASCETICISM IN JACOB OF SERUG'S MEMRE ON THE SOLITARY ONES

ROBERT A. KITCHEN

- [7] The practice of asceticism is seldom affected by doctrinal stances. In two long *memre* or Syriac poems in his characteristic dodecasyllabic metre, Jacob of Serug (451-521) develops a practical theology of asceticism around *ibidaye* or "solitary ones" [P. Bedjan, edit., *Homiliae Selectae* (Paris, 1908) vol. 4: 818-871]

By the sixth century, the term *ibidaye* was no longer used exclusively for hermits and solitary ascetics, but had become the general label for those monks who resided in monasteries. The singular form of the word *ibidaya* is also the Syriac word for "Only begotten One" (*monogenes*) used to describe Christ. These ascetics are those who attempt to imitate the nature of Christ—"singles in God's service" to use Sidney Griffith's translation.

In examining the ways in which Jacob adapted the language and images from the eremitic heritage of the *ibidaye*, I want to demonstrate how Jacob presented the essential spiritual characteristics needed by those who have renounced the world, not for the solitary cell, but for the monastic community.

By means of an extended exegesis of Matthew 6:25-33 in the first *memra* on the Solitaries (137: 818-836), Jacob identifies Jesus' admonition—"Let no one be anxious"—as the primary characteristic of the *ibidaye*. Jacob does not use the Evagrian term *la hashbushuta* (*apatheia*), but he does refer to the impassible/apathetic ones (*la hashbushé*) as the ideal practitioners. Poverty, by which one does not become anxious of possessing things, is the second characteristic.

In another extended Biblical exegesis on Genesis 19:26, Lot's wife becomes the negative model for the *ibidaye*, one who could not take off the anxiety of the world and leave it behind. The prudent solitary one needs to imitate Lot and renounce the world, not being tempted to look back at it once committed to the monastic life.

The second *memra* (836-871) portrays the life of the *ibidaya* as a continual battle with the Evil One, a wrestling match, in which the first weakness of the monk is laziness (*manuta*). Jacob does not

mention names of particular *ibidaye*, but he is familiar with the spiritual pitfalls of the cenobitic life and addresses each of them.

THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON AND THE ORIGINS OF THE
DORMITION AND ASSUMPTION TRADITIONS

STEPHEN J. SHOEMAKER

- [8] It is widely assumed that the origins of the earliest traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption were in some way connected with the opponents of the fourth council. While some scholars holding this view appear to mean that anti-Chalcedonian Christians first shepherded numerous already existing traditions from the margins into the "mainstream" of Christianity, others have gone so far as to propose that the story of Mary's Dormition "found its first written narrative expression among those communities of Syria and Palestine, in the late fifth century, which opposed as irreligious the Council of Chalcedon's description of Christ," as one interpreter has recently proposed. Nevertheless, these rather commonly held views are simply not supported by the current state of our evidence.

The position that the Dormition traditions were first composed by opponents of Chalcedon is called strongly into question by the existence of Syriac manuscripts copied in the later fifth century, which are themselves translations of earlier Greek narratives. On this basis alone it seems likely that the earliest Dormition traditions preceded the events of the fourth council. Moreover, a number of the earliest narratives bear strong evidence of contact with some form of early "gnostic" Christianity before their eventual adoption by "orthodox" Christianity at the close of the fifth century.

The alternative view, that preexisting traditions of Mary's Dormition were first ushered into the Christian "mainstream" by opponents of Chalcedon, is comparatively more likely, but there is in fact no clear evidence suggesting this connection. The earliest narratives themselves seem deliberately to avoid taking a position on the debates over Christ's humanity and divinity that issued from the council of Chalcedon. Instead, they are larded with the sort of theological commonplaces that were acceptable to those on both sides of this debate, while the language and formulae of the controversy over Chalcedon are completely absent. On a few occasions, one even finds theological formulae representative of

various efforts to heal the theological rift occasioned by Chalcedon. Not only then is there no evidence to support an anti-Chalcedonian origin, but the contents of the narratives themselves seem to contradict such a hypothesis.

- [9] Next year members of the society will attend the International Conference on Patristic Studies at the University of Oxford in August 2002. For more information see, <http://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/news/patristics.shtml>.

Kristian Heal, Brigham Young University