

# THE PEARL OF VIRGINITY

## DEATH AS THE REWARD OF ASCETICISM IN MĒMRĀ 191 OF JACOB OF SERUG

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### ABSTRACT

*Jacob of Serug's mēmṛā, "On the bat qyāmā, a pure virgin, who departs from this world," appears to be a funeral oration written on the death of a consecrated "daughter of the Covenant." Jacob counsels those mourning that death is not the end, but the entrance into the angelic realm, the reward for a life of asceticism, virginity, and devotion to Jesus, the ʾIḥīdāyā, her betrothed. The metaphor of the pearl applied to her virginity illustrates how she has ascended out of the iniquity of the world/sea to the glory of heaven through the power of her virginity and asceticism.*

- [1] Jacob of Serug, the Flute of the Holy Spirit, played seemingly innumerable tunes in dodecasyllabic meter, 763 verse homilies by one count. His poetic *mēmṛē* did not pretend to an historical dimension, as did some of Ephrem's *mēmṛē*. Best known for his long Biblical expositions, Jacob also explored ascetical themes frequently. This is the second paper examining several of these

ascetical *mēmre* attempting to reconstruct Jacob's theology of asceticism.<sup>1</sup>

[2] *Mēmra* 191 in Paul Bedjan's edition<sup>2</sup> allows us to hear Jacob's voice a little more intimately. Not that this voice is absent from 700-odd other *mēmre*, but here we have a good idea of the occasion and environment to which his words were addressed. The title is "Concerning the *bat*<sup>3</sup> *qyāmā*, the pure virgin who departs from this world." It is a funeral oration, addressed to the mourners of an exceptional, but anonymous, consecrated virgin.

[3] That the setting is funeral becomes clearer upon examining a later document published recently by Sebastian P. Brock: the "Order for the burial of *bnāt qyāmā*, or the burial of nuns (*dayrāyātā*)" existing in a single manuscript copied by a priest Joseph, presumably in Tur Abdin in 1980.<sup>4</sup> Brock notes that the term *bat qyāmā* in modern times often refers to the wife or widow of a priest. Whether the *bat qyāmā* had to be celibate, a virgin, still needs to be examined. Lucas van Rompay has drawn attention to the modifier "the pure virgin" in Jacob of Serug's title, which may indicate that the two statuses are not equivalent. The use of the modern term "nun"—a female monk—as a translation of *bat qyāmā* may be too restrictive.

[4] With such a late document, there is no way to determine whether the original liturgy is preserved out of which context Jacob wrote. Jacob clearly is referring to a virgin *bat qyāmā*, so that the use of such a liturgy for wives and widows of priests may be a development and adaptation or simply a reflection of the broad definition of the *bnāt qyāmā*. There is little indication that the modern liturgy is not derived from one intended for virgins. While Jacob does not directly follow the sequence of the liturgy, there are

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<sup>1</sup> R. A. Kitchen, "A Practical Theology of Asceticism in Jacob of Serug's *mēmre* on the Solitary Ones," presented at North American Patristics Society, Chicago, May 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *Homiliae Selectae*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1910), edit. Paul Bedjan. *Mēmra* 191: 821-836.

<sup>3</sup> The feminine form of 'bar' is written 'bart,' however, the *rēsh* is usually elided, resulting in the pronunciation 'bat,' which will be the transliterated form used in the remainder of the article.

<sup>4</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, *Burial Service for Nuns (Mōrān 'Eth'ō 4; Kottayam, India: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1992).*

echoes of the terminology and themes of the liturgy embedded in his *mēmṛā*.

- [5] Unfortunately, the only place the technical term *bat qyāmā* appears is in the title,<sup>5</sup> and Jacob tells us little to add to the profile of the *bnāt qyāmā*. That a *bat qyāmā* would be normally a virgin is no revelation, so we have to listen a little more attentively to Jacob's characterization.

- [6] Bedjan utilizes a single manuscript, British Library Add. 14608,<sup>6</sup> of 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century provenance, that contains a series of 14 *mēmṛē* by Jacob (ff. 3a-69a). These *mēmṛē* bear the common thread and theme of death—funeral sermons for youth, a priest, a meditation on death, and on the end of the world. This cycle is enclosed by metrical discourses by Isaac of Antioch on the plague in the days of King David (ff. 1-3a); a *mēmṛā* by Ephrem on the departed/dead (69a-72a); and five more discourses of Isaac of Antioch on the death of youths, the evils of the world, life in the time of plague, and on the rich of the world (72b-96b). A single leaf from a *mēmṛā* by Jacob, probably entitled "On the Resurrection" (f. 97), adds a theological punctuation to the contents of the manuscript.

- [7] Our *mēmṛā*, 11<sup>th</sup> in the series (40b-48a),<sup>7</sup> has the title as listed in Bedjan's edition. Consisting of 319 lines,<sup>8</sup> it is of medium length for Jacob's *mēmṛē*. The sense units are two-line couplets of 12

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<sup>5</sup> The same phenomenon occurs in an Armenian translation of one of Ephrem's hymns (number 46 in *Patrologia Orientalis* 30.1, 214-217), translated into English by Robert Murray, "A marriage for all eternity": the consecration of a Syrian bride of Christ," *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 11 (1989) 65-69. Murray believes that the hymn refers to a *bat qyāmā*, but the term or its Armenian counterpart does not appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, Vol II (London, 1882), p. 733, DCCLXVI. Also cf. Arthur Vööbus, *Handschriftliche Überlieferung der Mēmṛē-Dichtung des Ja'qob von Serug*, vol. 1 (CSCO 344; Subsidia 39; Louvain, 1973) 52.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Arthur Vööbus, *Handschriftliche Überlieferung der Mēmṛē-Dichtung des Ja'qob von Serug*, vol. 2 (CSCO 345; Subsidia 40; Louvain, 1973) 12. Vööbus has mistakenly dittoed the fourth *mēmṛā*, adding one more to Wright's list.

<sup>8</sup> 822:6 is a single line unit.

syllables each, and the *mēmṛā* is divided into 10 sections of varying lengths.

### **MĒMRĀ 191: CONCERNING THE *BAT QYĀMĀ***

[8] Section 1. (821:4-822:8) Jacob declares immediately that this occasion of a funeral is not tragic, but a time of celebration and accomplishment. “Admirable is the departure when it adorns itself gloriously/It is without suffering for whoever lives prudently✠ Beloved is death when righteousness accompanies it/It does not sadden him when it enshrouds a person of God✠” (821:4-7) Aiming to dispel the reputed power and finality of death, Jacob transforms it into an anticipated entry into the kingdom of heaven.

[9] Jacob establishes the metaphors that permeate the rest of the *mēmṛā*: the world is depicted as the sea,<sup>9</sup> the traditional realm of chaos, in which many evils churn like the waves. Death is a haven, a sheltered cove, in which one finds protection from the tumultuous waves and storms.

[10] Alluding to the spices, oils, and flowers used to prepare the body for burial, Jacob speaks of the sweet, but unnatural smell all these foreign substances emit. “The supposed fragrance from roots and from flowers/a foolish person smears on, but he is not praised by wise ones✠ They know that the good smell is not his own/but that of the oil that he is anxious to acquire through his licentiousness.” (821:16-19) The righteousness of a person is like the smell of choice oil that is a true natural odor of the person, far more pleasing to the wise and discerning ones who surround her.

[11] Section 2. (822:9-824:8) Jacob explains his reordering of the sequence of authentic life. “The day of death is better than the day of birth/Every discerning person looks forward to death so that he may be victorious in it✠” (822:9-10) When one is born, the mighty and evil are equal with the weak and good—the proverbial clean slate. But at death, one’s labor and valor are now known, and for the good ones, “the beauty of their crowns shines” (822:14).

[12] Worldly possession is not equivalent to glory, for as everyone knows you can’t take the former with you at death. However, glory

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Burial Service for Nuns*, First Service, 7 [Syriac text: 6:1-2]:

“It is he who has granted you  
to pass over the sea of sins (*yamā dahṭābē*) in  
purity.”

does accompany whoever acquires it. There are different rules in play.

- [13] Section 3. (824:9-825:17) Jacob turns his attention directly to the deceased. “The virgin who departed from within the world to God/the day of her death was not controlled by lamentations and weeping❖” (824:9-10)

- [14] Death ruins the hopes of those who become betrothed to others in the world. No wonder, because when people love this untrue, inauthentic world, they are disturbed and unsettled at the thought of death and separation. Not so for the virgin, Jacob declares, for she has betrothed herself to the “faith of the Cross” (825:2)—an expression utilized several times in the *mēmra* as a synonym for Christ. A banquet is prepared for her in the other world; she is a bride in the realm of death.<sup>10</sup> Yet this is not the realm of despair, and anyone who weeps for her should be ashamed. There she will receive the dowries of her betrothed, along with the ring that his body and blood gave her. She leaps for joy in the glory of her husband.

- [15] Section 4. (825:18-826:15) Because the virgin despised transient rewards in this world the bridegroom rewards her in the other world.<sup>11</sup> The watchers (ܐܠܗܝܡ) or angels are rejoicing, for they witness that she despised intercourse on account of her love for the *Īḥidāyā*, the Only Begotten.

- [16] Section 5. (826:16-829:6) The longest section fills out the nature of this relationship. The virgin made a covenant (*qyāmā*) with the *Īḥidāyā* who died for her sake, and she wore on her forehead a sign of mourning, a rag of passions (ܐܘܪܬܐ ܕܥܡܝܢܐ), as do all the wise pure maidens. Wearing black garments—the

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<sup>10</sup> *Burial Service*, First Service, 7 [Syriac, 6:5-7]:

“The Royal Son has prepared for you  
the bridal chamber (*gnūnā dḥatnā*) on high;  
enter it, sister, and find joy,  
give thanks to him who has held you worthy to  
behold him.”

<sup>11</sup> *Burial Service*, Third Service, part Seven: Madrasa, 35 [Syriac, 34:17-22]:

“The virgin who rejected  
the marriage crown which is subject to corruption  
has gained the bridal chamber of the just  
which the children of light yearn for.”

darkness of the crucifixion and night—was a sign of the covenant (*qyāma*) of virgins who have betrothed themselves to the “faith of the Cross.” (827:7-8) “And like that day that became dark in the crucifixion/She became dark so that she might also become light through the Son in the new world❖” (827:15-16)

[17] Upon her departure/death she is able to finally see her betrothed in whose name she had resided, and then her mourning subsided and she put on the crown of glory and the garment of light. She felt no pain in her death and spoke to one of her mourners that she had escaped the evil world and had reached the serene place.

[18] Jacob revives the imagery of the world as the tumultuous sea. The virgin ascended from the snares/nets of the world/sea, the serpent whispering to her and laying traps for her, but she did not become weak or listen.<sup>12</sup> The *Ḫidāyā* guarded her steps from the murderer, and she crossed over the sea of evil passions and death became a haven of rest from the waves.

[19] Sections 6.-7. (829:7-830:10 & 830:11-831:14) The next two sections both deal with the reception of the virgin by the watchers or angels into their company. They rejoice in the pearl (ܡܬܬܝܢܐ) that the virgin brings to the royal bridegroom as a wedding gift. All the heavenly host welcome her into their midst when the bridegroom introduces her after she has defeated Satan through virginity.<sup>13</sup>

[20] The angels marveled at her virginity because her accomplishments were similar to theirs. They perceived their own virginity existing in an earthly being, and now she is like a relative or neighbor to them, living ‘without suffering/passion’ (ܡܬܬܝܢܐ) (831:14) in their ranks forever.

[21] Section 8. (831:15-833:6) Jacob expresses his own laments and fears to the virgin. Your death is not like my death. I am afraid to

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<sup>12</sup> *Burial Service*, Second Service, 29 [Syriac, 28:3-4]:

(addressed to Satan)

“Cunningly and clearly

you laid your snares (*paḥē*)

in order to make humanity captive.”

<sup>13</sup> *Burial Service*, First Service, 11 [Syriac, 10:7-8]:

“Lead her by the hand of the peaceful

angels to the blessed abodes of

your saints.”

die. Yet Jacob knows the Lord leads and guides her. "Death is bitter and sweet is the smell of glory/but now I have both tastes from you. When the bitterness of death wafts up to me from your departure/may the sweet smell of your virginity perfume and enclose me" (832:10-13).

- [22] Finally, he has recognized the effect of her asceticism. "Resurrection renders death null and void/and therefore, there is no way to bring your virginity to naught" (833:3-4). Virginity is not just an earthly trait; it is the status of the angels, and so is eternal in nature.

- [23] Section 9. (833:7-834:19) The penultimate section is an exhortation to those attending the funeral, probably many who are *bnāt qyāmā*, that they may imitate the departed's example and so share her reward.

- [24] When her pearl is honored in the treasury of the king, it will bring benefit to all who rejoice with her. The king guards the good people who have died like treasures in a living storehouse full of light. Like the virgin, righteous people pass from struggle and fear in this world at their death to the wedding feast of the king. Death is a place of comfort to the wise virgins who are full of light and have oil for their lamps (Matthew 25:1-13).

- [25] Section 10. (834:20-836:5) In this concluding section, Jacob spells out the metaphor of the pearl of virginity. Deep in the dark sea, no one knows about the qualities of the pearl until it brought to the surface to light. In this way, "the pearl depicts a type of virginity<sup>14</sup>/for the sea is the world and as long as the pearl is in [the

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<sup>14</sup> Ephrem utilizes the pearl as metaphor/type in a series of the Hymns on Faith, commonly known as "The Pearl." Ephrem describes the origins of the pearl in the sea, being given birth by a virgin mother in the bosom of the sea who 'knew her not.' The pearl is then addressed as "the exact type of the Only Begotten" (Hymn 82.5). J. B. Morris, translator & J. Gwynn, editor, *Selections translated into English from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian and from the Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Oxford, 1898). Cf. also Edward G. Mathews, Jr., "St. Ephrem, Madrase on Faith, 81-85: Hymns on the Pearl, I-V," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38 (1994) 45-72. Mathews offers a different translation of 82.5:

"Our Lord had siblings, yet He was without  
siblings  
for He is the Unique One, O singular one,

sea] its beauty is unknown” (835:12-13). While in the evil world, the beauty of this woman’s virginity is hidden, although the angels are joyously aware of it.

- [26] Two trajectories are presented. At death the virgin ascended from the world/sea and brought up with her the pearl just as a diver might do from the darkness of the deep dark sea. Then in reverse, death descends after her and makes her ascend to the high places. Death has lost its sting and is now the agent who brings the righteous to eternal life.

### THE ASCETICISM OF DEATH

- [27] Alas, the funeral is over and we do not know as much as we would like about the *bnāt qyāmā*. However, Jacob has told us a great deal about the context and nature of asceticism along the way.

- [28] Asceticism as a form of death to this world finds the metaphor fully realized in Jacob’s *mēmra*. Death is an act of grace-full asceticism. As such, it is both an act of personal effort—the virgin ascends from the world with the pearl and attains the goal of death; and as the reward—grace—when death descends to fetch her. In several instances in the *mēmra*, death is personified as the benevolent agent of eternal life.

- [29] The only ascetical discipline mentioned in the *mēmra* is virginity (ܠܗܠܠܐ). This is the renunciation of sexual intercourse, which is specifically mentioned, but also implied is the renunciation of the various evils of this world.

- [30] Physical, earthly virginity is a mirror image of the nature of the angelic life. The angels are said to rejoice greatly over our *bat qyāmā* because her virginity is so similar to theirs in heaven (Luke 20:34-36). After physical death, she is received into their company. Does she become literally an angel in substance? Jacob does not venture there, though I am not sure anyone has figured out the precise dimensions of angelic life.

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a great mystery whose unique type  
you are. On a king’s crown  
you have brothers as well as sisters.”

Robert Murray notes that the pearl is seen as the symbol (*rāṣā*) of virginity, as well as a title of Christ. Cf. Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge, 1975) 148, 359.



[31] Nevertheless, she lives with the angels eternally. “They exult in her and she rejoices with them with their crowns/She lives *without suffering/passion* (ܠܐ ܥܠܡܐ) forever among their ranks✥” (831:13-14) The expression “ܠܐ ܥܠܡܐ” is not the fuller term ܠܐ ܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ—the Syriac equivalent of *apatheia*—but it must reflect the same state of mind and soul. Certainly, to possess *apatheia* on earth is to anticipate the angelic status. Our virgin now enjoys this blessed state eternally in the realm of the Resurrection.

[32] The famous pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45-46) for which the merchant in the parable sold all he possessed to buy it ties together the entire *mēmra*. The pearl is her virginity that she brings up from the dark sea of the evil world, avoiding and eluding all the nets intended to entrap her and her pearl, to present finally as a wedding gift—her dowry—to her betrothed, Jesus the *Īhīdāyā*.

[33] By Jacob’s funeral exhortations to the mourners, it is apparent how important the concept of betrothal was to the *bnāt qyāmā*. Virginity is, after all, an act of renunciation, of not engaging in a certain activity. The *bnāt qyāmā* actively engage themselves in betrothal to the *Īhīdāyā*. Wearing black clothes and the rag of passions on their foreheads are the signs of their allegiance to the crucified Christ, as well as anticipation of that day when they will be united to their betrothed. Indeed, Jacob plays on the word *qyāmā* several times to indicate that this betrothal to the *Īhīdāyā* is the content of their covenant. “She made a covenant with the *Īhīdāyā* who died for her sake/for she clings to him, there shall be no other for her✥” (826:15-16)

[34] Once the bride meets the bridegroom after death, he receives her into all he has, places the crown of eternal light upon her (825:20), and shares the wedding feast with her. While Jacob is not explicit, could there now be a type of union with the *Īhīdāyā*—“so they are no longer two, but one flesh” (Matthew 19:6)?

[35] Virginity as simple renunciation of sexual intercourse is not mature asceticism. The *bnāt qyāmā* utilize their virginity as signs of their betrothal to the Only Begotten, an ascetical discipline that awaits fulfillment in the next world, the place of death that contains the reward of eternal union with the *Īhīdāyā*. Virginity is a manner of death in the natural world, a negation of the cycle of sexual relations and continuation of human life. This turning upside down of human patterns results in another reversal in the next world in which the virgin becomes perfectly alive in the realm of death.

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