

Stephan A. Kaufman, *Jacob of Sarug's Homilies on Elijah*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 18: The Metrical Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug, Fascicles 9–13 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009). Pp xii + 448; \$65.00.

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This thick tome of Jacob of Sarug's cycle of *mēmre* on Elijah reveals the exegete in his most prolific mode in terms of the length and scope of his subject matter. Five fascicles are required to cover the five lengthy *mēmre*, totalling 3774 lines, most located in Paul Bedjan's collections,¹ but informed and supplemented through the examination of other manuscripts by the translator and commentator on these texts, Stephen A. Kaufman.

There is not much that Jacob omits from the Biblical narratives, but as he ensnares the reader in the larger questions of motive and purpose and symbolism, especially those analogies of the Old Testament narratives and personalities with Christ and the Gospel story, a compelling rhythm is established from which the reader finds it difficult to extricate him or herself.

Kaufman's approach to translation is clear and contemporary without being overly colloquial. In particular, his insightful use of English words and expressions to capture the subtle distinctions of the Syriac positively demonstrates the principle that translation is the first act of interpretation. His notes are not burdensome, yet are ample and informative regarding unusual and idiosyncratic expressions in the Syriac, along with references to usages found in other parts of Syriac literature.

OVERVIEW OF JACOB'S *MĒMRĒ* ON ELIJAH

The first *mēmra* begins the Elijah cycle in 1–2 Kings, although this text is not found in Paul Bedjan's collections, but in a manuscript from the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Mardin: CFMM 00137, ff.

¹ *Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug. Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, ed. Paul Bedjan and Sebastian P. Brock, 6 vols. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006). The original edition was published by Paul Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, 5 vols. (Paris and Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1905–1910).

8r–20v.² There is no title, since an unknown first section is missing from the text. Kaufman presumes that the *mēmra* began with Elijah’s appearance and declaration of the drought (1 Kgs 17:1), and the manuscript begins in the middle of Elijah’s bringing the widow’s son back to life, the first line depicting him standing over the dead child. This is probably the longest of the five *mēmre*, reaching 1030 lines in its extant form.

The second *mēmra*, “On Elijah When He Fled from Jezebel,” is number 112 in Bedjan, of medium length, 462 lines.³ Sebastian Brock collated a short section from British Library (BL) 17184, folio 2a. Jacob develops the theme of why Elijah would have been afraid of Jezebel for his life when he had otherwise appeared fearless (1 Kgs 19).

The third *mēmra*, “On Naboth the Jezreelite,” at 1064 lines is the longest extant *mēmra* in the cycle. The text is Bedjan number 113,⁴ and Kaufman notes that Bedjan used BL Add. 14584 and BL Add. 17184 in editing the text. Kaufman has also employed CFMM 00137. Jacob follows the Naboth betrayal by Jezebel and Ahab in 1 Kgs 21–22.

The fourth *mēmra*, “On Elijah the Prophet and the Troops of Fifty,” is the most dramatic of the cycle, 516 lines found in Bedjan number 114,⁵ which depends upon the incomplete manuscript of BL Add. 14590. Kaufman inserted the title and first 122 lines of the text from CFMM 00137, ff. 39v–46r. Jacob follows the narrative of 2 Kgs 1 in which the son of Ahab and Jezebel, Ahaziah, now mortally ill, attempts to destroy Elijah for his judgment upon the king’s inadequate character.

The fifth *mēmra*, “On Elijah and on His Ascension,” is fittingly the climax both in subject matter and in its different literary style. Jacob presents a long opening section in which all of Elijah’s previous encounters are summarized or alluded to as a prelude or explanation of what happens in 2 Kgs 2. The text of 702 lines is

² This library and text have been photo-digitized by the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, St. John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota. Cf. <http://www.hmml.org/>.

³ *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, vol. 4: 133–154.

⁴ *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, vol. 4: 154–207.

⁵ *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, vol. 4: 207–226.

taken from Bedjan number 115;⁶ the provenance is described by Bedjan as two unidentified manuscripts in Beirut and Mardin.

With such lengthy texts, it is not feasible to attempt more than a subjective selection of intriguing passages of Jacob and interesting translation choices by Kaufman. This reviewer will first point out several such passages in each *mēmra*, and then examine Jacob's usage and Kaufman's translations of two important and enigmatic terms, *rāzā* and *remzā*.

MĒMRA 1: ON ELIJAH THE PROPHET

a. Only Child

When Jacob reflects upon the widow's joy at the resurrection of her son, his description of her child as *ihīdāyā*, translated straightforwardly by Kaufman, employs a loaded term in early Syriac monastic terminology.

ܠܝܬܝܢ ܐܝܬܝܠܐ ܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܕܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܕܚܝܒܝܬܐ

The woman rejoiced over the *only child* that she had been mourning. (line 46)

By the use of *ihīdāyā* for the widow's son, did Jacob intend to shape this scenario into a prefiguration of Mary and the *ihīdāyā* at the resurrection?

b. Revivification

After recounting Elijah's resurrection of the widow's son, Jacob turns to the remarkable character and abilities of the prophet. Jacob's hermeneutic continues to interpret Elijah as a prototype of Christ, here as one who sought out the skill of "revivification," as Jacob's phrase and Kaufman's translation subtly distinguish Elijah's act from Jesus' resurrection.

ܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܚܝܒܝܬܐ
ܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܚܝܒܝܬܐ ܚܝܒܝܬܐ

He sought revivification of the dead, and made use of it like the Creator.

⁶ *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, vol. 4: 226–259.

the heroic wrestler went down to Death, defeated it, and came back up. (85–6)

Jacob depicts Elijah as a heroic wrestler—Jacob wrestling with the angel at Peniel?—who imitates Christ in a preliminary harrowing of Hell.

c. Grace As Debt

Throughout these *mēmre*, Jacob does not stop at simple description and typology, but delves into the inner motives of the actors, as well as into the larger purposes of God carried out in the drama of the narrative. The revivification of the widow's son is not just another resurrection, but marks the resumption of a dialogue between God and Elijah.

مَرَدَ لَهُ تَعْمَلُ مَرَدٌ لِّمَحْضًا وَلَا مَحْضًا

He gave him a life and he became obligated for an un-repayable debt. (117)

God has granted Elijah the authority to use his word to effect change, in this case to withhold the rain from the land. Now the rain which Elijah held back is to be released as a result of the boy's revival. The sentence above is the climax of this section. The first "He" is God who has granted the request of Elijah for the soul, Kaufman "life," of the lad. In return, Elijah is now under obligation to God to restore the rain and confront Ahab. Kaufman's rendering, "an un-repayable debt," comprehends the particular sense of *ḥaybūtā*, usually "grace, favour, benefit," but here grace rendered becomes an obligation for Elijah's obedience.

d. He's Back!

Elijah meets the prophet Obadiah who has remained in favour with Ahab and Jezebel, yet has sheltered one hundred prophets of the Lord. Elijah knows Obadiah is empathetic and is also the person to play out the game.

مَرْبُوءٌ وَنَاظِرٌ لِّلْمَلِكِ مَرْبُوءٌ وَنَاظِرٌ لِّلْمَلِكِ
مَرْبُوءٌ وَنَاظِرٌ لِّلْمَلِكِ مَرْبُوءٌ وَنَاظِرٌ لِّلْمَلِكِ

He sent him to tell his master Ahab, 'Elijah is back,'

And that is the reason why it tells what happened the way it did. (255–6)

Kaufman's "Elijah is back" is a superbly simple instance of dynamic equivalency, since for Ahab Elijah is not simply 'here' (הֵן – *hā*), but through a contemporary emphatic expression he has returned, bearing all the aggravations with which he had previously annoyed Ahab. The second line of the couplet is Jacob's summation of the reason all this transpired, but in a quite challenging idiomatic sentence which Kaufman tames well for the English ear.

e. Regurgitation

While Elijah is finishing off the prophets of Ba'al in his inimitable style, this is not just a brutal slaughter, but a liturgical act.

חַסְדֵּךְ חָלָא אִשֵּׁה הֶעֱבִינֵה כִּי הָיִיתָ מֵנִי:
 עֲכָשְׁתָּ בְּרִיטָא וְחָזְרָא בְּחֶכְמֵךְ אֶמְעִילָא

The sinners knelt down beneath his knife while being
 slaughtered,
 And regurgitated the demonic sacrificial meals that they had
 swallowed down so gluttonously. (711–2)

Jacob sees the end result not merely as a set of executions for sin but a violent cleansing of their sinful behaviour and decadent meals. Kaufman animates the sentence to reflect the visceral character of the event.

MĒMRĀ 2: ON ELIJAH WHEN HE FLED FROM JEZEBEL

a. Created Out Of Nothing

Elijah is on the run for his life from Jezebel and finds himself in the desert with nothing. However, he would not be left with nothing.

וְהִנֵּה מַעֲמָלָא בְּאַכְזָהוּ עָלַי לֹא מִכֶּסֶּם:
 מַבְּוֹ כִּסְמָא עָלַי שִׁנְתָּ וְאַל בְּוִחְלָא בְּוִחְלָא
 לְעִנְיָנָא בְּוִחְלָא כִּי חֲכָלָא חֲבִי מַלְאַךְ

The hidden divine will, out of nothing,
 Sent bread and shaped it like an ash-baked loaf.
A snack kneaded on a whirlwind by an angel. (137–9)

who are not known,” as the “incognito.” A few lines later Kaufman uses the expression again as an adjective.

MĒMRĀ 3: ON NABOTH THE JEZREELITE

a. Begging From a Poor Person

Jacob characterizes the motives and actions of Ahab as he connives to appropriate the vineyard of Naboth.

لَوَاسَّأَلْتُ نَبِيًّا، وَنَبِيًّا هُنَّيًّا، نَبِيًّا هُنَّيًّا

He demeaned himself to be like one begging even from a poor person. (73)

Kaufman’s method is evident as he interprets the literal verb, “he lowered himself” to “demeaned himself,” and then understands the literal phrase, “that he might be one lacking,” as “begging.” Kaufman stretches not just for the plain meaning, but to evoke the nuanced intensity that Jacob aims to describe.

b. Fast Now?

Jacob moves on to the deceiving letter Jezebel wrote to the elders in Ahab’s name, calling for a fast which would set up an occasion to expose Naboth to false accusations. The elders are taken back by Jezebel’s order, a person who is the opposite of a fast-er. Kaufman elicits the elders’ surprise via a quite modern English expression.

هَمَّكَ أَفْ، وَحَلَمُوا، وَحَلَمُوا

They probably reacted with some kind of shock: ‘What is going on?’ (150)

Kaufman renders “they spoke as if with wonder” as “reacted with some kind of shock”—extra words not found in the text, but demanding to be uttered in the emotion. “Why indeed?” becomes a more contemporary expression of bewilderment, “What is going on?”

A few lines later, the elders ask the pointed question about the fast, which Kaufman characterizes with a modern, but precisely correct adjective.

هَمَّكَ أَفْ، وَحَلَمُوا، وَحَلَمُوا

So why then this unscheduled fast? (154)

c. Rogation

Jacob perceives the trap laid by Jezebel's unscheduled fast to be a prefiguring of the mock trial of Christ. Naboth was innocent and unsuspecting, but the conspirators were poised to hurl false accusations against the vineyard owner and he was carried off by mob rule.

حَبَّه حَكَمًا وَمَا يُنَاقِصُهُ حَزُونُهُ لَا
 مَوْجِدًا وَلَهُمْ سَنًا حَمَلًا حَتَالًا ❖

They prepared a rogation that when examined turned out to be a confrontation:

A fast sinfully bearing a murderous sword. (195)

Kaufman's translation of *bā'utā* as 'rogation' is anachronistic, yet the technical liturgical term emphasizes the pretence of a legitimate religious service parallel to the circumstances of Jesus' 'trial.'

d. *Īhīdāyā*

Nevertheless, Jacob admits that this typology is not precise, principally because Jesus is a difficult person to type fully.

وَمِنْ يَوْمٍ مَدَنٍ مَعَهُ وَهَتَأًا هَمَّ يُنْقَلُ
 مُسَبِّحًا يَوْمَ هَدَاهُ كَمَا هُوَ لَا يُسَبِّحُ لَا

Our Lord is too exalted for images and pictures,

For [Lord Jesus] is unique and similar only to himself, others not. (241–2)

The imagination of Jacob's poetic theological insight is evident here, which Kaufman enables by the insertion of "only." Here is a different connotation of *īhīdāyā* which Kaufman deftly handles.

e. Substantive Complexity

In 1 Kings 22, Elijah is off stage for a while as Ahab consults another authentic and contrary prophet, Micah. Ahab asks him whether he should go to battle at Ramoth-gilead or not, and Micah has a vision with no good news for the king. Jacob describes Micah's vision, and then continues with a section that Kaufman entitles, "An advanced theological analysis of Micah's vision."

وَقَدْ حَدَّثَنَا عَنْ خَلْقِهِ وَمُطَاعَتِهِ:

ܘܠܟܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܝܚܐ ܕܐܡܪܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ

Here is an examination of what Micah's revelation was,
Which was spoken in substantive complexity. (793–4)

Kaufman's translation may not sound like Syriac, yet it underlines the deeper level of what Micah saw which Jacob was intending to interpret more subtly.

f. Both King and Poor Man

Jacob epitomizes the fundamental, albeit forgotten, essence of Ahab's transgression against Naboth.

ܕܢܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ

Both king and poor man are human beings! (984)

Being human beings, they are equal in God's creation and perception. What is 'accidental' is that one is a king and the other a poor man. Kaufman allows the simplicity of the Syriac sentence to come through.

MĒMRĀ 4: ON ELIJAH THE PROPHET AND ON THE TROOPS OF FIFTY

The second infamous act of prophetic violence in the Elijah cycle occurs when the prophet invokes fire to consume the several troops of fifty soldiers sent by King Ahaziah to fetch Elijah. In contrast to the cleansing of the prophets of Ba'al, this was not a liturgical act, but one of brute divine power.

ܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ
ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ ܕܥܠܐ
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He was cauterizing that paganism with the flame,
And thus having been totally separated from healing,
The fire came down and consumed the fifty men and the
one captain,
While the sick heathen was sending threateningly against
Elijah. (283–6)

Kaufman's translation as "cauterizing" elicits a vivid and precise image for the reader in the midst of this volatile event. The fire

validates Elijah's authentic call as a prophet, but there is only judgment, not redemption, for Ahaziah's guilty bystanders.

MĒMRĀ 5: ON THE ASCENSION OF ELIJAH

As noted above, Jacob's climactic *mēmra* adopts a different style. He begins with a "Call for Inspiration" in his attempt to depict Elijah appropriately, and beseeches God to allow his words to say the right things and encourage others.

a. Leah and Rachel

Typically, Jacob cannot ask such a question without a Biblical model.

אֵלֶּיךָ אֲמִי וְשִׁמְךָ אֵלֶּיךָ וְשִׁמְךָ אֵלֶּיךָ
 מֵיְהוָה חֲכָמָה וְהֵיכָל עֲלִיזָה

May it [my word] be like Leah, who was ugly while her
 children were beautiful
 But let my word not be like Rachel—beloved but
 barren.”(17–18)

Jacob's employment of the Leah/Rachel dichotomy shows his understanding of the complexity of the Biblical depiction of life. It is intriguing that he adopts Leah as the icon for his own narrative.

b. Gazing at God

Shifting from his plea that his own word might be inspiring, Jacob recognizes that nothing works for the reader if one is not open and conscious of the presence and reality of God.

אֵלֶּיךָ אֲמִי וְשִׁמְךָ אֵלֶּיךָ וְשִׁמְךָ אֵלֶּיךָ
 מֵיְהוָה חֲכָמָה וְהֵיכָל עֲלִיזָה

If the mind does not gaze at You, it does not become
 enlightened enough to speak to You
 And if the brain does not hold You in its lap, it cannot sing
 to You. (31–2)

Kaufman's choice of words makes clear that the mind and brain are essential to the life of faith.

c. Apatheia?

Jacob frames the character of Elijah into the model of an ascetic athlete known to his readers. Key to this description is celibacy and Jacob indicates that the essential purpose of the celibate state is to transcend the distraction of the passions in order to focus on the task at hand.

حَحَّاهُ كَدَاهُ لَا مُغَمَّاهُ سَمَحَّاهُ كَحَّاهُ :
فَحَّاهُ لَا كَدَاهُ وَلَا تَلَّاهُ، مَا وَفَّكَ كَدَاهُ

With a passionless chastity similar to that of the watcher-angels

Did he serve God, so as not to be disturbed when he served Him. (219–20)

He describes this virginity with the adjectival expression “passionless,” almost the equivalent of the classic Syriac term *لَا مُغَمَّاهُ* *lā ḡāšūšūtā* for *apatheia*.

d. Doing Something Additional

Waxing eloquently regarding the remarkable qualities of Elijah, Jacob declares that Elijah was never satisfied with doing what was required, but always went the extra mile.

مَعَفَّاهُ كَعَفَّاهُ سَمَحَّاهُ ۚ هُوَ كَدَاهُ حَمَّ تَبَّسَّاهُ :
وَحَبَّ مَعَفَّاهُ مَدَّاهُ لَا قَبَّ وَلَا لَهَّاهُ

He performed one splendid act after another with excellence and never stopped without doing something additional. (307–8)

A literal translation of the second line would be wooden, but Kaufman captures the dynamic equivalency of the idea with a nice turn of modern English.

RĀZĀ AND RĒMZĀ

Jacob utilizes the familiar, yet enigmatic term *rāzā* (‘mystery,’ ‘symbol,’ ‘elements of the eucharist’) in a number of nuanced ways. Kaufman handles these nuances deftly and consistently, again with contemporary English that fits the context. His primary approach is to render the concept of ‘mysteries’ as ‘allegory/-ies’ (1.995/ 2.38/ 2.46/ 2.80/ 2.105/ 2.108/ 2.177/ 5.487). Kaufman does not

limit the term *rāzā* to the literary definition of an allegory, but views it functioning more broadly as an enigmatic image or symbol pointing to a deeper, ineffable reality. Nevertheless, Kaufman does translate several uses of the term as simply ‘mysteries’ (3.761/ 5.637).

A rare expression is ܠܝܬܐ ܕܝܠܐ (3.100), “sharer of mysteries,” (literally, ‘daughter of the mysteries’) indicating someone who has personal and communal possession of the *rāzā*. Ironically, the referent is Jezebel, the reason for the feminine ‘daughter of the mysteries,’ and of course, the mysteries are of other gods.

ܠܝܬܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ
ܐܝܬܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ

Celebrant of all the worthless gods

Sharer, too, of the Mysteries of all the pagan altars’ priests...

(3:99–100)

Rēmzā (‘sign,’ ‘hint,’ ‘gesture,’ ‘wink,’ ‘glance’) does not appear quite as frequently in Jacob’s vocabulary and is more consistent. Five times he employs the phrase ܡܝܠܐ ܡܝܠܐ, which Kaufman interprets as “the hidden divine plan/gesture/will” (1.134/ 1.785/ 2.137/ 2.144/ 5.361).

As noted in a previous review of a volume in this series of Jacob of Sarug’s metrical homilies, there are several ways to read and benefit. If one is not familiar with Syriac, yet wishes to read Jacob for his Biblical exegesis, typology, and theological insight, Kaufman has provided a superb contemporary translation that does not violate Jacob’s original sense for the sake of a nifty phrase. If one does read Syriac, the benefit multiplies for the reader who is able to see how a dynamic equivalent translation is produced both with integrity to the text and creative and graceful renderings into modern English. In other words, one can learn a lot about Jacob and his theology, the beauty of Syriac poetry, and the art of English translation. This is best accomplished by a slow and close reading of the Syriac and English, which—given the length of these homilies—can take a while, but with Elijah it is worth lingering on the journey.