

# Jacob of Serugh and His Times

Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity

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## TO WHOM DID JACOB PREACH?

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Jacob of Serugh is known especially through the huge corpus of his *mimre* (verse homilies), several hundred of which survive to us.<sup>1</sup> Preached over a career of some decades amongst villages, towns, and monasteries in the district of Serugh, to the southwest of Edessa, these homilies cover a wide array of topics, biblical, monastic, theological, liturgical. Scholars have generally focused on these homilies as the work of a master poet and theologian. They have analyzed Jacob's poetic craft, his theological acumen, and his

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<sup>1</sup> See the index of first lines in *Homilies of Mar Jacob of Serugh / Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Serughensis*, Paris/Leipzig, 1905; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006 (ed. S.P. Brock), vol. 6, 372–99.

In this article, I use the following abbreviations:

Bedjan = *Homilies of Mar Jacob of Serugh / Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Serughensis*, Paris/Leipzig, 1905; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006 (ed. S.P. Brock), 6 vols.

DR = *Downside Review*

FH = *Jacob of Serugh, Select Festal Homilies*, intro. and trans. Thomas Kollamparampil, Rome: Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies, 1997.

HTM = Holy Transfiguration Monastery

MFC = Message of the Fathers of the Church

OCA = Orientalia Christiana Analecta

PO = *Patrologia Orientalis*

SVTQ = *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*.

I have occasionally altered the older translations used here, for clearer sense.

articulation of the varied strains of Syriac biblical, doctrinal, and liturgical traditions woven into the tapestry of his teachings.<sup>2</sup>

But what do we know about the content of Jacob's homilies these sermons? Sometimes the content of Jacob's homilies indicates a monastic audience; sometimes Jacob is clearly addressing an urban church, or perhaps the smaller civic setting of the scattered villages and towns that dotted the landscape of his region. At times, he preaches in terms that seem inclusive of both the monastic and the civic lives, as if trying to present a sermon that would speak to both locations, with their differing daily lives and demands. Most often, it is impossible to know where, or when, or to whom he was preaching. Many of his biblical sermons, for example, seem addressed to any and every Christian, no matter their profession, vocation, age, gender, or social status. It is precisely this timeless—or even, generic—quality that caused Jacob's homilies to be cherished and chanted over many centuries, recited in vigil services or daily offices with little concern for their relevance to any immediate context.<sup>3</sup> Like the Bible itself, Jacob's homilies could stand outside of time in the wisdom they offered. This same timelessness is often frustrating for historians, however,

who must strain to find any hint of historical setting, place, or event; any reference to the turbulence and tumult indelibly woven into the times in which Jacob lived.

But Jacob did preach, to real people in real lives, in real places. Jacob's audience was important, for without them these homilies would not have been written or delivered. How might the various congregations to whom Jacob preached be visible to us? Who were they? How did they affect his homilies? How were they present in his preaching?<sup>4</sup> And why should they matter to us now, so many centuries later, in our continuing appreciation for Jacob's work? The answers to these questions may help us consider anew the legacy of Jacob's homiletic wealth.

### 1. THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

Jacob of Serugh chanted his homilies during the late fifth and early sixth centuries, in the easternmost part of the Roman Empire. It was “the best of times, and the worst of times” for Christians in this region.<sup>5</sup> Christianity reigned triumphant as the state religion of the Roman Empire; liturgically and institutionally, the church was blossoming into its full glory. Monastic life was well-established, the canonical ranks of the clergy clarified, and the integration of church life with family and civic duties everywhere apparent. For Jacob, the fullness of God's creation was only now apparent, with the ascendancy of Christianity over the other religions of the Empire's realm:

<sup>4</sup> Important discussion of related evidence for late antique congregations is well treated in Cunningham, Mary B., and Pauline Allen. *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics*, Leiden: Brill 1998, esp. Mayer, Wendy. “John Chrysostom: Extraordinary Preacher, Ordinary Audience,” 105–38; Maxwell, Jaclyn. *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and his Congregation in Antioch*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Taft, Robert. *Through Their Own Eyes: Liturgy as the Byzantines Saw It*, Berkeley, CA: InterOrthodox Press, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the opening line of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Alwan, Khalil. *Anthropologie de Jacques de Saroug: l'homme 'microcosme', avec une bibliographie générale raisonnée*, Jounieh, Liban: Imprimerie Moderne “Kreim” / Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1988; Bou Mansour, P. Tannos. *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug*, Kaslik: Université Saint Esprit, 1993; Goltzian, Alexander. “The Image and Glory of God in Jacob of Serugh's Homily ‘On that Chariot that Ezekel the Prophet saw’,” *SVTQ* 47:3/4 (2003): 323–64; Papoutsakis, Manolis. “Formulatic Language in the Metrical Homilies of Jacob of Serugh,” in Lavenant, René, ed. *Symposium Syriacum VII*, 445–51, OCA, 256, Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1998; Harvey, S.A. “Bride of Blood, Bride of Light: Biblical Women as Images of Church in Jacob of Serugh,” in Kiraz, George, ed. *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Festschrift for Sebastian P. Brock*, 189–218, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Barsoum, Patriarch Ignatius Aphram I. *The Scattered Pearls: A History of Syriac Literature and Sciences*, trans. and ed. Matti Moosa, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., 77, 92, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias press, 2003.

