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TRAVELING TO CONVERT THE HEARTS: SCRIPTURE AND WONDERS
AS ASCETIC'S TOOLS OF CHOICE

Among many important publications by Prof. Svetlina Nikolova there are studies on scriptural and para-scriptural traditions in their Old Bulgarian translations. In my contribution to the volume honoring Svetlina Nikolova's research, I will discuss the role allotted to the Bible, in its two components, the Old and the New Testament, in different cultural circumstances – those of late antique stories of Christian ascetics who read their Bible in Syriac translation and in the course of their travels were involved in attempts to strengthen the faith of other Christians and to convert various “others”. This issue warrants a comprehensive mapping effort and comparative investigation. Thus, my essay, focusing on 5th–7th centuries Syriac sources, is just an invitation to look at it closer in various cultural-historical contexts.

I will highlight the tension between the Bible and the ascetic's miraculous prowess as two powerful, and sometimes competing, “marketing tools” of choice. That Scripture's function in conversion enterprise may be problematized we learn from late antique Christian authors themselves. Let me quote one telling example, the *The Story of My Master Īsō'sabran* (ܐܝܫܘܫܒܪܢ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܫܘܫܒܪܢ) discussed in an earlier shared study with Reuven Kiperwasser (Kiperwasser, Ruzer 2012), as well as in our joint book with Aryeh Kofsky (Kofsky, Ruzer, Kiperwasser 2016: 123–162). The treatise, penned by the Catholicos Īsō'yahb III in the mid-seventh century, refer to events that took place a few decades earlier, before the Muslim conquest, but possibly also reacts to the new realities and the demise of Zoroastrian rule¹:

¹ Ca 620 CE; see Chabot 1897 (Preface and French abstract: 485–502, esp. p. 501); Jullien 2004. See also Chaumont 1960; Pigulevskaya 1971: 40–41; Greenfield 1974; Jong 1997: 72–73; Becker 2006: 205–206; Secunda 2009. The quote is from Chabot 1897: 523–525.

At that time, as the blessed Īšō’sabran was at the height of righteous behavior and was walking in his mortal body upon the earth as if in heaven, the thought of martyrdom sprang up in his heart again... He applied the strength of his contemplation to martyrdom for the sake of the Messiah... “I would rather return to the house and the place of contest (ܩܘܠܘܬܐ, Gr. ἀγών, ἀγωνία) so that if the grace summons me, I will be found ready.” In the vigilance of the strengthened thought, he then hurried down from the solitude of the mountains to the theater of the world (ܩܘܠܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܢܐ).

He thought that he should devise and put upon himself an invincible armor of the Holy Scriptures’ spiritual iron, the one that would not only be catching the arrows [shot] by those who adhere to false worship but would also cause delight to the eyes of contemplation through divine knowledge. {Having considered that, he approached the very priest who loved him (ܩܘܪܕܐܢ ܕܩܘܠܘܬܐ) and was his teacher, and the priest had a young son, whose name was Īšō’zaka. The blessed (Īšō’sabran) beseeched him (the priest), saying: “If it seems good to you, O master, give me this youth to be my beloved brother and son in the capacity of teacher and instructor in the divine scriptures (ܩܘܠܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܠܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܠܘܬܐ)”. The priest then answered him most lovingly, saying: “...Let him therefore be for you as you requested”.

As the beginning of the passage indicates, the study of Scripture is perceived here as disconnected from the protagonist’s conversion – Īšō’sabran had not only embraced Christianity earlier but already become an accomplished ascetic (see also Chabot 1897: 509–517, 521–523). What then is the role of his belated schooling in the Bible? It turns out that it is supposed to prepare him for the future polemical battle with Zoroastrians and, eventually, martyrdom. Īšō’sabran, who has already reached a high level of perfection on the basis of his prayers and ascetic praxis, is now to return with Christian mission to his former Zoroastrian brethren – it is for that task with its possible tragic outcome of martyrdom, that the protagonist needs “the Holy Scriptures’ spiritual iron”. The answer to the question “why Scripture” is spelled out here: while not crucial for his own spiritual awakening, it will provide the protagonist with arguments vis-à-vis people belonging to the competing religious tradition and cause him delight in these arguments. This, in turn, will strengthen his spirit in the time of distress. In other words, though Scripture may be at best secondary in the ascetic path itself, it becomes instrumental in the context of the missionary enterprise.

I will turn now to the test case of the Syriac *Vita of Barsauma*, a monophysite archimandrite, originally from the region of Samosata². The *Vita*³, referring to events of fifth century CE, was probably composed a century later; it collates – as befits a hagiography – the memory of historical events and fiction to serve the author’s religious-political agenda. The overarching objective of the narrative is to establish Barsauma as the charismatic, ascetic and authoritative founder of an important monastery⁴. In this context, Barsauma’s travels to the Holy Land provide an almost “required curriculum” for establishing his credentials as a true, zealous “athlete” (ܐܬܠܬܐ) of the faith.

However, unlike the Syriac hagiographic *topos* of initiation through a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (Bitton-Ashkelony 2010), the *Vita* describes Barsauma, in his repeated visits to Palestine, as an already accomplished holy man and a mystic, who performed miracles throughout his long journey “from Lower Persia to the Roman Sea”⁵. In addition to his miraculous feats, the preliminary stages of his pilgrimage are also distinguished by a chain of punitive acts against deviant Christians, thus testifying to the inherent tension between the “foreign” holy man from the East and the local communities (Kiperwasser, Ruzer 2013: 44–48). So, in one of the Syrian cities on Barsauma’s way, the local Bishop and his entourage first doubt the ascetic’s miraculous prowess in exorcising demons. Yet, following Barsauma’s successful healing of the possessed, his authority is acknowledged by the church establishment too (*Vita* 60). This tension would reach its apogee once he arrives in Jerusalem.

Whereas in most cases Barsauma polemically interacted with local Christians, one episode delineates the boundary between the Christian community and the seemingly non-Christian “strangers”. When an Isaurian man (called “barbarian” in the *Vita*) convinces a local woman belonging to an ascetic group, ܒܬ ܩܝܡܐ (*bat qyama*) (Griffith 1993; Griffith 1995), to renounce her vows and marry him (Feld 2005), Barsauma sends his disciples to “rescue” the woman and return her to her commune. And after citizens of the city manage to preempt their mission, Barsauma retaliates by striking it with a decimating plague, thereby emphasizing the crucial importance of religious demarcation lines (*Vita* 66). The devout woman characteristically acts here as a liminal figure prone to lapses from ascetic values.

² Also related to in our earlier studies, see Kiperwasser, Ruzer 2013; Kofsky, Ruzer, Kiperwasser 2016: 181–216.

³ MS. British Library Add 12174.

⁴ This image is corroborated by ecclesiastical sources relating to his participation in the Second Council of Ephesus in 449 CE, see Vööbus 1960: 196–204.

⁵ *Vita* 77.1. References to the *Vita* throughout this essay are according to Palmer 2020; Nau 1913; Fauchon 2010.

Barsauma's prime objective, therefore, as already established at an early stage of his biography, is to rectify the broken state of Christianity, which has desperately deteriorated and succumbed to demonic forces. We are dealing with what may be called an intra-Christian mission, which makes it even more uncompromising and violent. One notes that all the "feats of rectification" are based on Barsauma's miraculous-magical powers with no appeal at all to the authority of Scripture. The narrative's depiction of Barsauma as edifying various communities along his journey prepares for the climax in the Holy Land, where the range of "others" will expand to include such additional targets as Samaritans, Jews and the representatives of imperial power⁶.

The narrative of the second pilgrimage (ca 419–422 CE) describes particularly violent acts against Samaritan and Jewish synagogues, as well as the burning down of pagan temples. The episode in Rabat Mo'av⁷, where Barsauma and his fellow monks destroy both the local synagogue and the pagan shrine (Nau 1927: 191), is a telling example of that narrative tendency. While the *Vita* associates the synagogue there with the past glory of Solomon's Temple, the construction of the pagan sanctuary is ascribed to the biblical "giants from before the flood" (cf. Gen 6:4). This combined biblical reference serves the author's discourse of appropriation of the biblical past. Yet this past is evaluated negatively – the worth of the contemporary Jewish synagogue is annulled exactly due to its link to the ancient Jerusalem temple, justly destroyed by divine punishment. It is also instructive that in this episode the biblical imagery is not invoked in the context of any missionary activity – no such attempt is mentioned, and the destruction is here the whole story of the encounter with Jews, Samaritans, and pagans, bonded as the collective "other".

In his later visits to Palestine, Barsauma's conduct continues to be ferocious, though no acts of vandalism are reported. This may reflect historically the introduction of protective measures by the authorities, following various incidents of synagogue destruction and appropriation by Christians across the Empire (Dilley 2010; Mommsen, Rougé, Delmaire 2005). The *Vita* therefore focuses now on Barsauma's encounters with representatives of various segments of the collective "other", considered significant by the author in the contest for sacred space.

⁶ Radical asceticism accompanied by militant social-religious activism, a prominent combination appearing throughout the *Vita*, seems to have been characteristic of Syrian monasticism under Sassanian rule (Vööbus 1951).

⁷ Also known as Areopolis, the modern-day er-Rabba. Some archaeological evidence may corroborate this account: a church-like building, facing west, was excavated there, tentatively identified as the synagogue destroyed by Barsauma and later restored as a church (Zayadine 1971: XL–XLII). See Nau 1913: 382.

Barsauma's visits to Jerusalem constitute the high points of his pilgrimages; they also provide the scene for continuation of his wondrous feats. First, he exorcises a demon in the atrium of the Holy Sepulcher crowded with pilgrims spending the night there⁸. This cleansing of the holy place positions the ascetic monk from the East as the one destined to purify the *locus* controlled by the Jerusalem clergy, which is unaware of its desecrated condition. The agenda of the redactor of the *Vita* is clearly at work here – the protagonist is portrayed anachronistically as a staunch monophysite fighting the Chalcedonian clergy, though up to Chalcedon (451 CE), both the local Church, headed by Bishop Juvenal (422–458 CE), and its patroness Empress Eudocia sojourning in Jerusalem actually belonged to the monophysite camp (Honigmann 1950).

According to the *Vita*, Barsauma's last two visits to Jerusalem coincided with Eudocia's presence in the city (438, 444–460 CE), and the relations between the two constitute one of the narrative's *foci*. During the early encounters, the Empress is depicted as seeking the ascetic's advice on matters of piety and as completely submissive to his instructions. It is at this stage that Barsauma, engaging in a tranquil conversation with Eudocia, backs his guidance with a reference to Scripture (*Vita* 83). First he reprimands the Empress using a quote from Dan 4:27: "Pay for your sins with almsgiving and for your wickedness with mercy for the weak!" In Daniel, these are the words addressed to the evil king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, but even the unflattering comparison did not move Eudocia from her compliant stance. Further on, Barsauma backs Daniel's advice with references to Jesus's words in the Gospel (Matt 25:31–46):

Then all the inhabitants of the earth shall assemble in his presence; and he will separate one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats... The King will open his mouth and say to those righteous ones on his right: "Come in peace, blessed ones of the Father! Enter and inherit the Kingdom which has been prepared for you from the beginning! For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a foreigner and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you nursed me, in prison and you visited me".

When the Empress heard this, she exclaimed: "Now that I have it on your unerring authority, that there is indeed hope for sinners such as me, I shall practice this virtue with all my strength. I understand that this is the way for me to earn salvation" (*Vita* 83.23).

⁸ For exorcism in the Anastasis, see Jerome, *Letter 46*.

This reliance on Scripture contrasts with the collision further on concerning the imperial attitude toward the Jews in the Holy Land. It is told that Eudocia – softened by the supplications of Galilean Jews, added by lavish gifts they had brought – allowed their brethren to congregate on the Temple Mount and mourn the destruction of their ancient sanctuary. The Jews interpreted this permission, annulling the old proscription⁹, as a sign that their redemption, the ingathering of the exiles and the restoration of their hold on their sacred patrimony were imminent. They, therefore, sent missives to their co-religionists throughout the empire, calling for a mass pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the upcoming Feast of Tabernacles to establish the New Kingdom of Israel (*Vita* 91.4):

To the great and strong people of the Jews from the priests and leaders of Galilee: warm greetings! We write to inform you that the time of the diaspora of our people is past. Behold, the day has arrived on which our tribes shall be reassembled. After all, the emperors of the Romans have decreed that our city, Jerusalem, is to be restored to us. Make haste, then, and come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, because our reign will then be established in Jerusalem!

The complicated question of the historical backdrop to this description of Jewish messianic upheaval, in the context of our anachronistic narrative, is not the issue of this discussion (Holum 1982: 217–218; Ir-Shai 1995; Kiperwasser, Ruzer 2013: 65–68, 70). Important for us is that in the *Vita*'s narrative, Barsauma's arrival in Jerusalem on the first day of Tabernacles is designed to preempt the schemes of the Empress and her Jewish collaborators.

The ultimate confrontation between Barsauma's militant entourage and the Jewish pilgrims takes place, poignantly, on the Temple Mount. For the Jews, this is the place where the Temple of Solomon stood, whereas for the monks traveling with Barsauma it is rather the locus of Jesus' temptation by Satan (see Matt 4:5–7)¹⁰. We witness here a collision between two competing hermeneutics regarding the Temple Mount – the Jewish one, focusing on the past glory of the site and Old Testament based expectation of its restoration as the seat of God's presence (*Shekhinah*); and the Christian perception, prompted by Matt 4:5–7 (cf. Luke 4:9–13), of the Mount as the damned place of Satanic temptation, justly destroyed following Jesus' prophecy (e.g., Matt 24:1–2 and par.) by God's wrath. The latter tendency is likewise attested in the account of the Bordeaux Pilgrim (333 CE), as well as in the anonymous *Short Description of Jerusalem* from

⁹ See discussion in Ir-Shai 1995.

¹⁰ The author provides the improbable number of 103,000 Jews present on the Mount praying for the restoration of their Temple, indicating a mass response of Diaspora Jews to the call of their leaders.

the early sixth century (Geyer 1965). However, the idiosyncratic polemical emphasis on the “Satanic site” motif – ignoring the obvious ancient sanctity of the place – is peculiar to our *Vita*¹¹.

The scriptural themes – the Temple and Jesus’ temptation – are thus present on the background, but they have no function in resolving the matter: no Scripture-centered dispute with the ingathered Jewish pilgrims is reported. Instead, in the ensuing skirmish, many of them would be killed; according to the *Vita*, it happened through direct angelic act. It seems that in light of strong Old Testament support for the restoration idea, on the one hand, and lack of the option to argue with Jews relying on gospel texts, on the other, the Bible has to take the back seat, while the appeal is made to what is presented in the narrative as wondrous heavenly intervention.

Not everyone, however, was ready to embrace such a version of the events. Even the local authorities and clergy initially accepted the Jewish view of what had happened – namely that those were Barsauma’s zealous monks, who conducted the massacre on the Temple Mount. The monks were duly arrested and brought to justice before Eudocia; their accusers charged that the culprits were Mesopotamian foreigners who by their violence had disgraced the monastic garb (Nau 1914: 121). However, after lengthy deliberations and Eudocia’s original inclination to punish the monks by death, the truth of heavenly intervention prevailed, and the hero and his flock were acquitted (*Vita* 94.9).

The ambivalence of the narrator regarding the local clergy is notable: as with the secular authorities and Eudocia herself, they are portrayed, at first, as collaborating with the Jews. It is only later on, following the unexpected turn of the interrogation, both they and the people from the Empress’ entourage led the efforts to release the prisoners. Again, this unexpected turn of events has nothing to do with appeal to biblical authority – instead, another supernatural feat visits upon a Jewish woman, one of potential witnesses against Barsauma and his entourage, who drops dead (*Vita* 94.1).

Though the local clergy finally sides with Barsauma, their concurrence is restricted to opposing the Jewish claim for the Jerusalem holy places only. Otherwise, for the author of the *Vita*, the bishops and priests continue to potentially represent a theological deviation. Not only are they portrayed as denying the accounts of Barsauma’s charismatic feats (*Vita* 133.1), but also labeled as “demons’ lovers and brothers” who, as demons proclaim, have opened for them “the gate of heresy”

¹¹ Other Christian reports just append the Satanic link motif to the main significance of that location as the site of the remains of the Temple of Solomon, who, significantly, also subdued demons, see *The Bordeaux Pilgrim* 7 (Geyer 1965). *On the Place of Jerusalem* 7 (Geyer 1965) mentions the tower as the Temple’s sole remnant, without reference to Jesus’ temptation. Cf., Anonymous. *On the Place of the Holy Land* 11 (Geyer 1965).

When the blessed Barṣaumā came to Samaria, he happened to be in a certain Samaritan village on the Sabbath day, and all the local inhabitants had come to see him. Those Samaritans were disputing with him... denying both the resurrection of the dead and the Son of God. What is more, they said that there existed neither holy spirit, nor angels. The blessed Barṣaumā disputed with them on the basis of the Torah, because the Samaritans do not accept any other Scriptures, only the Law of Moses. He went through the Torah word by word, from the beginning to the end, proving his point to them.

This time, the nature of the Torah-centered disputation is clarified, i.e., the idea of the resurrection of the dead, for which Barsauma – contrary to the Samaritans – finds proofs in the Pentateuch¹². Following the pattern used in the previously discussed passage, the narration here also starts with textual interpretation, evolving later on into a miraculous act, Barsauma raises from the dead a recently deceased youth, which brings about a mass conversion of the Samaritan “others”. This conversion may be seen as a narrative act of power, delegitimizing the Samaritans’ claim to be heirs and guardians of the biblical past in the Holy Land and of the correct interpretation of Scripture, a strategy that is tailored to enhance the supersessionist Christian position. It can be argued that the author of the *Vita*, though recognizing the kinship between Samaritans and Jews, nevertheless identifies the Samaritans as a distinctly separate and preferred group. The story of their mass conversion may reflect an anachronistic retrospect of the large-scale conversions following the two disastrous Samaritan revolts in 484 and 529 CE (Segni 1993; Segni 1998).

The absence of a historical – even if anachronistic – example of a parallel mass Jewish conversion could partly explain the lack of a similar interest in Jews in the narrative, where no missionary effort directed at the Jews is mentioned. Thus, during all his travels, Barsauma never goes to the Galilee, replete with Christian holy sites in the midst of a dense Jewish population, seemingly to further accentuate the importance of Jerusalem as the focus of the supersessionist claim for the sacred space. The only conversion of a Jew reported in the *Vita* – that of the skipper of the ship bringing Barsauma to the shores of the Holy Land – is not described as resulting from Barsauma’s conscious efforts. It rather occurs as the Jew’s independent reaction to the ascetic’s wondrous acts on the high sea; and again, no Scripture-centered arguments are evoked.

¹² Cf. *m. Sanhedrin* 10.1, where these are Sadducees who refuse to see the notion of resurrection in the Torah.

CONCLUSION

While the measure of Barsauma's *Vita*'s historicity continues to be debated, my analysis focused on the author's narrative strategies. A peculiar collation of motifs is discerned here – usual pilgrimage patterns are combined with a strong missionary theme. The missionary efforts are directed inter alia at the inhabitants of the Holy Land, including local Christians who need to be converted to the monophysite outlook and away from their Jewish sympathies. The Bible-related arguments in the *Vita* are characteristically reserved for tranquil interactions, be it with Empress Eudocia before she succumbed to Jewish influence, or with Samaritans who dwell far away from Jerusalem and do not threaten the Christian control over the Holy City (though in the latter case, the evidence from Scripture had to be backed by the ascetic's miraculous deeds too). Alternatively, when the core issues of the composition are at stake – fateful competition with the Jews over the Temple Mount or the uncompromising war against non-monophysite Christian outlook – the Bible takes back seat, with Barsauma's wondrous feats and heavenly interventions functioning as the only “missionary arguments”. Further investigation can clarify whether this telling tension between textual authority and ascetic wonders reflects a broader phenomenon.

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(Summary)

This essay addresses two late antique Christian texts, the protagonists of which are engaged in various missionary activities directed both outside the Christian communities and against what is perceived as deviations within them. The discussion outlines the complex interplay – and the division of work – between the missionary strategies appealing to Scripture and those relying on the ascetic’s wondrous powers. It is suggested that this characteristic interaction discerned in the two texts under discussion may point to a broader pattern – a topic that warrants a separate study.

Keywords: Late Antiquity; christian asceticism; missionary strategies; Bible versus miracles.

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