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Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition[1]

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Biblical women have a distinctively prominent verbal role in late antique Syriac homilies and hymns. Syriac writers granted these women a rhetorical voice often lacking in their biblical narratives, through the favored technique of imagined speech; and those words found a performative voice when women's choirs sang certain of these hymns in the liturgies of civic churches. This study asks how women's speech was represented in these Syriac texts, how that representation functioned in Christian teaching, and how the ritual performance by women's liturgical choirs contributed to the social meaning of women's voices in the late antique Syrian Orient.

I. WOMEN'S SILENCE, "WOMEN'S" SPEECH

In his collection *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem Syrus devotes substantial space to words sung by the Virgin Mary.[2] In Ephrem's verse, Mary sings praise to God for his mighty works;[3] she sings lullabies to her infant son;[4] she sings to humankind;[5] she sings to history.[6] In all these verses, Mary's voice carries the weight of explaining the mystery of God's salvific

1. I am grateful to Joseph P. Amar, Sebastian P. Brock, Kathleen E. McVey, and Stanley K. Stowers for their generous assistance and discussion on this project. All remaining problems are my own.

2. *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, ed. and tr. E. Beck, CSCO 186–87, Scr. Syr. 82–83 (1959), hereafter cited as HNat. I follow the translation in Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 61–217.

3. E.g., HNat 2.7; HNat 5.19–20; HNat 15.

4. E.g., HNat 6.1–4; HNat 8.3, 7; HNat 16.

5. E.g., HNat 17.

6. E.g., HNat 19.

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work in the incarnation of his Son, wholly God and wholly human. With characteristic humor, Ephrem finally grants Mary a verse in which she prays to be silent. She addresses Christ:

> . . . Great Nature
> that cannot be interpreted, permit Your mother
> to be silent about You, for her mouth is weary.
> Withhold Your gift from Your lyre,
> that it may rest a little. Since You have taught me
> everything I have said, teach me
> how to be silent. Since you have wearied me,
> let me rest. Glory be to Your Father![7]

These are arresting words, coming as they do from a Syriac author writing within a literary tradition and an ancient culture not known to value women's speech.[8] Yet the claim to verbal exhaustion of Ephrem's Mary befits the labor this hymnographer, among others, extracted from her character in the service of Christian teaching. How might we assess her voice?

Late antique Syriac writers took profound delight in interpreting Scripture through the elaboration of biblical stories, a delight they shared with their Christian and Jewish counterparts writing in other languages.[9] In

7. HNat. 19.18–19; tr. McVey, *Ephrem*, 169–70.

8. There is serious question as to whether or not any surviving Syriac literature was authored by women. One possibility is an anonymous *mimra* on Sarah and the sacrifice of Isaac, discussed below, refs. in nn. 33 and 35. A sixth-century hagiography, the *Life of Febronia*, claims female authorship, but the claim is also necessary for the narrative and may be no more than literary artifice. See the discussion as well as translation and bibliography in the updated edition of Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), preface, and 150–76, 192–93. As the material collected in Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*, indicates, there is no reason to think that Syriac women did not write, since their monastic tradition clearly valued literacy. How to assess the absence of texts, or even the presentation of women's speech in texts purporting to record historical events, remains deeply problematic for all literatures of the late antique Mediterranean world. For important discussion on this point, see Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 128–38; Elizabeth A. Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn'," *JECS* 6 (1998): 413–30; eadem, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Antique Christianity," *JECS* 2 (1994): 155–84.

9. The significance of this practice is highlighted in Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), esp. at 47–88. I have found helpful treatments

particular, biblical women as characters were of great interest to Syriac homilists and hymnographers. The literary genres here are significant, for explorations of biblical characters in the liturgical context of homily or hymn differed from related presentations one would find in extracanonical narrative literature. The vehicle of homily or hymn provided for an immediate context of the gathered Christian community in its ritual setting of worship, and a clear didactic purpose of instruction on church doctrine. A good story could be an effective way of preaching, and a good hymn an efficient way of teaching.[10] But further, in the context of the liturgical event, the story's content became implicated by and in the ritual process in which it was embedded.

It is well known that the genius of Syriac literature is to be found in its poetical texts, its hymns and verse homilies made famous by the likes of Ephrem Syrus and Jacob of Serug, although a large body of such texts also survives by anonymous writers. There were two basic categories. *Madrashe* were stanzaic poems of different meters that dealt with doctrinal matters. The verses were usually sung by a soloist, punctuated with a choral response; or, the stanzas would alternate with verses of the Psalms in antiphonal singing.[11] *Mimre* were verse homilies chanted in a simple

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in Adam Kamesar, "The Evaluation of the Narrative Aggada in Greek and Latin Patristic Literature," *JTS* n.s. 45 (1994): 37–71; Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael E. Stone and Theodore A. Bergren, eds., *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998); Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Gerald Bruns, "Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1987), 625–46.

10. On the early and immense importance given by Syriac writers to the didactic qualities of hymnography, see H. J. W. Drijvers, "Solomon as Teacher: Early Syriac Didactic Poetry," in *IV Symposium Syriacum*, ed. H. J. W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant, C. Molenberg, and G. J. Reinink, OCA 229 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 123–34; and Kathleen E. McVey, "Were the Earliest *Madrase* Songs or Recitations?" in *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J. W. Drijvers*, ed. G. J. Reinink and A. C. Klugkist, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 89 (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 185–99.

11. According to the fifth-century Rabbula Canons, the antiphonal singing was divided between male and female choirs: the Sons of the Covenant (*Bnay Qyama*) chanted the verses of the Psalms, and the Daughters of the Covenant (*Bnat Qyama*) chanted the verses of the *madrashe*. "Rules of Rabbula for the Qeiama," canon 20; ed. and tr. Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism* (Stockholm: ETSE, 1960), 41. I am grateful to Joseph P. Amar for explication on this point.

meter, for example, couplets of 7 + 7.[12] Among the favored devices of these Syriac liturgical genres was the use of dramatic dialogue. Speeches or dialogues of different lengths were often incorporated into homilies or hymns even when these might be primarily narrative and exegetical or theological in content. Moreover, a much-loved tradition of late antique Syriac hymns was the dialogue poem, the *soghitha*, a subset of *madrashe*, consisting of a two-character dialogue framed by a brief narrative introduction for context and a closing doxology. Sung antiphonally, the stanzas alternated between two conflicting voices who argued over precedent or conviction. The genre had deep roots in ancient Near Eastern literature, and in its Christianized form proved a popular and effective method of congregational instruction.[13]

The presence of biblical women in Syriac homiletic and hymnographic literature is notable on several fronts. First, these women were often granted a prominence by Syriac writers distinctly lacking in the biblical narratives from which they came, a prominence not necessarily shared in the related traditions of Greek or Latin writers (or, where relevant, by Jewish commentators). Second, because of the favored literary forms of Syriac homilists and hymnographers, these women were granted a dialogic voice, sometimes extensively so. Even where the biblical text gave a woman no words, the Syriac writer would provide first-person speeches, sometimes as interior monologues but more often as external dialogues with other, usually male, biblical characters. Third, it was the practice of late antique Syriac Christianity, at least between the fourth and sixth centuries, to have the hymns—the *madrashe* and the *soghyatha*, the dialogue poems—sung by women's choirs in the civic churches of village,

12. For a brief introduction to these poetic forms, see Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 36–39. On Syrian church music, see Heinrich Husmann, "Syrian Church Music," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (Washington: Groves Dictionaries of Music, 1980), 18:472–81; Milos Velimirovíc, "Christian Chant in Syria, Armenia, Egypt and Ethiopia," in *New Oxford History of Music*, vol. II: *The Early Middle Ages to 1300*, ed. Richard Crocker and David Hiley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3–25; and James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 92–95.

13. See, e.g., Sebastian P. Brock, "Dialogue Hymns of the Syriac Churches," *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 5 (1983): 35–45; idem, "Dramatic Dialogue Poems," in *IV Symposium Syriacum*, 135–47; idem, "Syriac Dispute Poems: The Various Types," *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literature*, ed. G. J. Reinink and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 42 (Leuven: Peeters, 1991), 109–20.

town, or city.[14] In the case of biblical women, then, late antique Syriac writers granted two voices, one rhetorical—the words placed in their mouths—and one performative, as women's choirs voiced those words in the liturgical settings of the gathered church community.[15]

In this study I will focus on the voices Syriac writers fashioned for three biblical women: Sarah in the incident of the binding of Isaac (Gen 22, where the biblical narrative omits mention of her altogether); the Virgin Mary (where, because of the Gospel of Luke, there is some biblical basis for her speech); and the Sinful Woman who anointed the feet of Christ (Luke 7.37–50 and parallels, where the Woman is silent throughout). In these cases, there is no question of anything historical being preserved, such as might arise in accounts of women saints.[16] Instead, we must ask other questions of our texts. In the instruction of the Christian congregation, when were representations of women's words needed, and why? Who, or what, was the "I," the subject, granted to biblical women in their first-person speech, and what was its function? Finally, how might we assess the ritual component of the women's choirs who voiced these words, or who chanted responses to the male soloist? My concern is what light constructed speech and performative meaning might shed on the interplay between ritual and social lives for late antique Syriac Christians.

II. FASHIONED SPEECH

The Syriac appreciation for dramatic dialogue, with or without narrative to add texture to the story, echoed broader rhetorical traditions of the Greco-Roman world. The imaginative exploration of invented, historical, or mythical characters through the device of hypothetical speech was a favored technique taught in the rhetorical schools.[17] It was commonly

14. As indicated by the Rabbula canons. See the discussion below, n. 83, and references therein.

15. I have been helped by the suggestive discussion in Laura R. McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

16. The problems attending the presentation of women's speech in hagiographic literature about women saints are enormous. See especially Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words"; eadem, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman.'"

17. On *prosopopoeia* and *ethopoeia* in general see George A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 66–67, 139–40, 168, 202, 205–6, 238, 251. Quintilian indicates the flexibility of *prosopopoeia*: Quin. *Inst. or.* 9.2.29–37. Stanley K. Stowers, "Romans 7.7–25 as a Speech-in-Character (*prosopopoeia*)," in *Paul in His Hellenistic World*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 180–202, and idem, *A Rereading of*

employed in both Greek and Syriac homilies of late antiquity.[18] Biblical texts provided numerous characters for such treatment, and were often approached through this means. Invented speech was similarly employed in Jewish midrash, again as a rhetorical device that allowed vivid and engaging exploration of important biblical figures for teaching purposes. The rhetorical techniques of speech and dialogue blended easily with pervasive patterns of narrative imagination. Greek and Jewish novels, for example, shared themes that shaped the stories Christians told in their literature. The pattern of relationship-crisis-resolution (or reconciliation), common to the dramatic adventures of novels and apocryphal acts (or other narrative literature),[19] provides the narrative frame used or assumed as contextual for the speech interaction found in Syriac hymns and homilies, as often in Greek ones.

What we see in Syriac hymns and verse homilies is the utilization of rhetorical and narrative features familiar in the larger hellenized culture of the Roman Empire, with its normative moral interests, and articulated through the particular genius of Syriac poetical forms. This background of rhetorical and narrative techniques and themes is as important to

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Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 260–72, demonstrates the importance of these rhetorical techniques for early Christian moral instruction.

18. On the social significance of the dialogue form in late antique homiletics, see Averil Cameron, "Disputations, Polemical Literature and the Formation of Opinion in the Early Byzantine Period," in Reinink and Vanstiphout, *Dispute Poems and Dialogues*, 91–108. The relationship between the rhetorical techniques of *prosopopoeia* and *ethopoeia* to verse homilies remains understudied. There is a surviving papyrus from Egypt containing what appears to be a school exercise of *ethopoeia*, in verse, on a theme from the Old Testament (the words of Cain at the death of Abel): J. L. Fournet, "Une éthopée de Caïn dans le Codex des Visions de la Fondation Bodmer," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigrafik* 92 (1992): 253–66. I am indebted to Stanley Stowers for this reference. Sebastian Brock, following a restricted definition of *ethopoeia*, sometimes does and sometimes does not see it employed in the Syriac dialogue poems: S. P. Brock, "An Anonymous Syriac Homily on Abraham (Gen. 22)," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 12 (1981): 225–60, and idem, "Two Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac," *Mus* 99 (1986): 61–129. It seems to me that the broader pattern—the imagined speech of a biblical (mythical) character for purposes of moral instruction—shows affinities that are helpful for understanding the cultural context in which such a presentation was written, performed, and received by an ancient audience.

19. See, e.g., Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 47–119; Tomas Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); James Tatum, ed., *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

understanding the presentation of biblical women in Syriac literature as is the foreground highlighted here, of genre (verse homily and hymn) and performative location (liturgy). The exploration of female biblical characters through intoned and musical expression conformed to familiar didactic models even when specific texts offered unusual content.[20]

For the present study I have chosen Syriac texts where the purpose is conveyed wholly through characters defined by their speech, and whose speech is presented as occuring within a framing narrative story. That story may or may not be explicitly included in the given text, since in the case of biblical characters it could often be presumed.[21] These are texts in which discursive exegesis, moralizing extrapolation, or explication by a homilist are absent. Instead, the framing story and the drama of verbal interchange within it are the means by which the instructional purpose of the occasion is presented. The figures of Sarah, Mary, and the Sinful Woman each represent a distinctive character whose normative social relations have been profoundly challenged because of a divine action. Through speech and dialogic exchange, each negotiates the disruptive crisis to allow a resolution that will re-establish social order, but with a religiously significant change in circumstance.

Sarah and the Sacrifice of Isaac

Both Christian and Jewish writers of late antiquity gave attention to Sarah's glaring absence from the account in Genesis 22 of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac.[22] Most of the time that attention was negative.

20. The debate about possible Syriac influence on Greek hymnography especially in the area of dialogue poems has been vehement and ongoing. Perhaps more helpful is the approach of Sebastian Brock, who stresses the fluidity of cultural interaction in a region so deeply bilingual as the late antique Syrian Orient; see his "From Ephrem to Romanos," *SP* 20 (1989): 139–51; and idem, "Syriac and Greek Hymnography: Problems of Origin," *SP* 16 (1985): 77–81. An important study on Romanos, emphasizing the significance of the dialogue technique in liturgical hymnography, is Gregory W. Dobrov, "A Dialogue with Death: Ritual Lament and the *threnos theotokou* of Romanos Melodos," *GRBS* 35 (1994): 385–405. See further Reinink and Vanstiphout, *Dispute Poems and Dialogues*, especially Cameron, "Disputations, Polemical Literature and the Formation of Opinion," 91–108.

21. David Konstan has argued that it is the element of shared and known common reference that differentiates this type of story variation from fiction properly speaking. See David Konstan, "The Invention of Fiction," in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative*, ed. Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance, and Judith Perkins (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 3–18.

22. For discussion of the Syriac treatment of Sarah and Genesis 22 in relation to Jewish and Christian traditions, see Sebastian P. Brock, "Genesis 22 in Syriac Tradition," *Mélanges Dominique Barthélemy*, ed. P. Casetti, O. Keel and A. Schenker,

Commentators and homilists speculated that Abraham did not inform Sarah of the divine command to sacrifice their only son because, in her womanly weakness, she would only have hindered his obedience to his call. In notable contrast to this prevalent line of thought, Ephrem Syrus had offered a different possibility in his *Commentary on Genesis*. Discussing the episode, Ephrem remarked,

> But [Abraham] did not inform Sarah [of the command to sacrifice Isaac] because he had not been commanded to inform her. She would have persuaded him to let her go and participate in his sacrifice just as she had participated in the promise of his son.[23]

Ephrem's brief consideration bore fruit in subsequent Syriac texts. In one anonymous *mimra* on the episode, Abraham takes Isaac to the mountain. En route he tells himself that, since God did not command him to tell Sarah why they were going, it was not his place to do so.[24] In other texts, however, Sarah is given to speak for herself.

In one dialogue hymn (*soghitha*) on the sacrifice of Isaac, Sarah is presented both in speech with Abraham and by reference when she is discussed in dialogue between Abraham and Isaac.[25] First Sarah questions Abraham about his preparations: "Might it be that you are going to sacrifice our son?"[26] This interchange follows:

> 6. Abraham says, "Sarah, be silent:
> you are already upset, and you are vexing me.
> This is a hidden mystery,

Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 38 (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1981), 1–30; idem, "Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac"; idem, "Reading Between the Lines: Sarah and the Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis, ch. 22)," in *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night*, ed. Léonie Archer, Susan Fischler, and Maria Wyke (New York: Routledge, 1994), 169–80. For a sense of the long-lasting popularity of the theme throughout Mediterranean cultures, see Margaret Alexiou, "Reappropriating Greek Sacrifice: *Homo necans* or *anthropos thusiazon*?" *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 8 (1990): 97–123.

23. Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis*, 20.20; tr. Joseph P. Amar and Edward G. Mathews, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, FC 91 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 168. The Syriac is edited with Latin translation in R. M. Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii*, CSCO 152–53, Scr. Syr. 71–72 (1955).

24. Brock, "Anonymous Syriac Homily on Abraham."

25. Translated with discussion and commentary in Sebastian P. Brock, "Syriac Poetry on Biblical Themes, 2: A Dialogue Poem on the Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22)," *The Harp* 7 (1994): 55–72. The most recent critical edition was edited by Brock in his *Soghyatha mgabbyatha* (Glane: St. Ephrem Monastery, 1982), 7–12.

26. Stanza 5; tr. Brock, "Syriac Poetry," 63.

which those who just love men cannot perceive."
7. SARAH "You are not aware of how much I endured—
the pains and birth pangs that accompanied his birth.
Swear to me on him that he will not come to any harm,
since he is my hope. Then take him, and go."
8. ABRAHAM "The mighty God in whom I believe
will act as a pledge to you for me, if you will believe it,
that Isaac your son will quickly return,
and you will be comforted by his youthfulness."[27]

Later, on the mountain, Abraham explains to Isaac that Sarah's testing is a type for the Virgin Mary's trial still to come at Christ's passion and resurrection.[28]

An anonymous *mimra* (verse homily) tells the story in fuller fashion, with Sarah speaking on several occasions to different characters.[29] She begins by questioning Abraham about his preparations and intentions, reminding him that she has been his faithful companion through all their wanderings and in their dealings with divine messengers, sharing his mind and purpose: "We were as one person with a single love."[30] Abraham fends her off with the promise of returning to her with the fleece of the animal they will sacrifice on the mountain. Sarah is not to be fooled:

You are drunk with the love of God—who is your God and my God—
and if He so bids you concerning the child,
you would kill him without hesitation.[31]

Later, after events have followed their familiar course, Sarah greets the returning men, questioning Isaac and his attendants as to what had taken place. When Isaac responds, Sarah faints from horror and then recovers, weeping as she sings a hymn of welcome and thanksgiving for her son who was slain and yet returned to her: "The fingers which fashioned you in my womb have now delivered you from the knife. / Welcome in peace, light of my very self, who has added new light to me."[32]

Here is Sarah, then, presented as dutiful wife and mother, whose faith in God endures grave testing. Articulate in her expression of a mother's devotion—indeed, of the fragility of women's maternal joy—Sarah's speech conforms to normative social and religious models for women's behavior.

27. Stanzas 6–8; tr. Brock, "Syriac Poetry," 63.
28. Stanzas 19–35; tr. Brock, "Syriac Poetry," 65–66.
29. Memra 1, ed. and tr. in Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 100–116.
30. Memra 1, l. 11; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 108.
31. Memra 1, ll. 37–38; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 109.
32. Memra 1, ll. 177–78; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 111.

Yet the seeds behind this story—Ephrem's musing that Sarah would have demanded full participation in God's command had she known Abraham's purpose—could lead to less familiar territory.

Another anonymous verse homily survives about this episode.[33] Interestingly, it opens with a call that appears to identify the homilist as female: "Give me your attention, O hearers, to this fine narrative: / I begin to lay down before you the story of holy people."[34] The speaker here seems to be identified by a first person feminine singular verb form (which could alternatively be a rare form of the masculine singular).[35] In this extraordinary homily, Sarah sees Abraham's preparations with Isaac and, with dread in her heart, questions his intention. Abraham replies, "This secret today women cannot be aware of."[36] But Sarah will neither be put off nor shirk the truth she sees. Admonishing Abraham "with a groan and great feeling," she identifies his purpose and begs to join him. Unlike Abraham who is portrayed as acting without thought of the implications, Sarah brings the situation into full view.

> Let me go up with you to the burnt offering
> and let me see my only child being sacrificed.
> If you are going to bury him in the ground
> I will dig the hole with my own hands,
> and if you are going to build up stones,
> I will carry them on my shoulders;
> the lock of my white hairs in old age
> will I provide for his bonds.
> But if I cannot go up to see my only child being sacrificed
> I will remain at the foot of the mountain until you have sacrificed him and come back.[37]

Sarah then speaks to Isaac, exhorting him to obey his father and explaining to him exactly how to present himself as willing victim so that Abraham's sacrifice will not be blemished. She ends with a prayer offered in tears, "May the God who gave you to me return you to me in safety," and, taking Isaac by his right hand, leads him to Abraham and says farewell.[38] Later, on the mountain as he prepares to die by Abraham's

33. Memra 2, ed. and tr. in Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 117–29.

34. Memra 2, ll. 1–2; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 122.

35. The word *mshryn*, a shortened form of the pa'el participle with first person suffix, standing for the first person feminine *mssarryan*. Brock discusses the form and its complexities in this instance at Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 98–99.

36. Memra 2, l. 18; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 123.

37. Memra 2, ll. 25–30; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 123.

38. Memra 2, ll. 31–42; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 123.

hand, Isaac yearns for his mother: "Sarah was wanting to see me when I was bound like a lamb / and she would have wept beside me with laments and by her tears I would have received comfort. / O my mother Sarah, I wish I could see you, and then be sacrificed!"[39] Events take their course, and all comes out well on the mountain top. But the homilist continues the story.

Returning home, Abraham decides to test Sarah one more time. He tells Isaac to stay back, "and I will see how she receives me; I will spy out her mind and her thought."[40] Alone, Abraham enters Sarah's presence. She greets him,

> Welcome, O blessed old man, husband who has loved God;
> welcome, O happy one, who has sacrificed my only child on the pyre;
> welcome, O slaughterer, who did not spare the body of my only child.
> Did he weep when he was bound, or groan as he died?
> He was greatly looking out for me, but I was not there to come to his side;
> his eyes were wandering over the mountains, but I was not there to deliver him.
> By the God whom you worship, relate to me the whole affair.[41]

To this speech, Abraham replies that the sacrifice had gone peacefully, and that Isaac had indeed remembered her as he lay upon the pyre. In response Sarah speaks again,

> May the soul of my only child be accepted, for he hearkened to the words of his mother.
> I was wishing I was an eagle, or had the speed of a turtle-dove,
> so that I might go and behold that place where my only child, my beloved, was sacrificed,
> that I might see the place of his ashes, and see the place of his binding,
> and bring back a little of his blood to be comforted by its smell.
> I had some of his hair to place somewhere inside my clothes,
> and when grief overcame me I placed it over my eyes.
> I had some of his clothes so that I might imagine (him), putting them in front of my eyes,
> and when suffering sorrow overcame me I gained relief through gazing upon them.
> I wished I could see his pyre and the place where his bones were burnt,
> and could bring a little of his ashes and gaze on them always and be comforted.[42]

39. Memra 2, ll. 68–70; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 124.
40. Memra 2, l. 96; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 124.
41. Memra 2, ll. 99–105; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 124–25.
42. Memra 2, ll. 112–22; tr. Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 125.

As Sarah then sits in silent mourning, Isaac suddenly enters. With tears of wonder Sarah greets him. After hearing his account of what transpired on the mountain, she ends the homily with a prayer of thanksgiving to God who returned her son to her. Abraham is not mentioned in this final portion of the homily.

Here Sarah is used to convey the story's emotional movement—from love, to terror, grief, and joy—but she is also its true hero, far exceeding Abraham's performance. Twice tested, she both wittingly gives up her child and without complaint accepts his death as finished. In her lament we are given untraditional words, for Sarah does not bewail Isaac's untimely death nor her sad lot as bereaved mother.[43] Instead, she muses on the comfort she gains by bodily acts of remembrance: the touch of his hairlock, the sight of his clothes, the longed for smell of his blood and sight of his ashes all to comfort her. While we would expect the female character to represent body as well as emotion, Sarah's speech is unconventional both in content and in function. It is offered in response to a test required of her not by God but by her husband Abraham. Yet the story's turn suggests again the typological relationship between Sarah and the Virgin Mary, since it would be Mary's lot also to mourn the death of her son not knowing that he would return to her. Abraham's absence from the final portion of the homily is less a condemnation of his (admittedly heinous) act of deception, than it is an absence that sets in relief the typological parallels of Sarah: Mary and Isaac: Christ. Sarah's fortitude and faith are thus demonstrated twice over, with ringing pathos, and in her the congregation receives a moral exemplar of profound proportions.

The Virgin Mary

If Sarah's words offered the model of absolute faith and unequivocal obedience—matters of right conduct for the life of devotion—Mary's

43. Compare the discussions of women's laments in Greek tradition: Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Again, there are interesting parallels from Romanos (who, in his own treatment of Abraham and Sarah, draws upon the Syriac tradition, as discussed in Brock, "Two Syriac Homilies," 66–82); cf. Dobrov, "Dialogue with Death," and Alexiou, "Reappropriating Greek Sacrifice." As these discussions make clear, the Greek tradition of women's laments was (and still is) fraught with immense social tension, for the lamentations often carried content disturbing to the social order. See further the questions raised in Gary L. Ebersole, "The Function of Ritual Weeping Revisited: Affective Expression and Moral Discourse," *HR* 39 (2000): 211–46. I am grateful to Muhammed Qasim Zaman for this reference.

words are used most often in Syriac hymnography to address matters of theological import, especially through play upon the wondrous paradoxes of her condition as virgin mother of God (exquisitely demonstrated in Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity*, for example).[44] In some hymns and homilies, however, Mary's speech as an act in itself takes on heightened significance. The narrative assumed behind her words is that which ties the events of Adam and Eve in Eden to Mary's situation at the incarnation.[45] For Syriac writers, the power of Mary's speech lay in its contrast to Eve's alleged silence; in their view, Eve had listened to the Serpent and received his words uncritically, that is, in silence. To undo the fall, a woman was needed who would listen, question, and speak in order to initiate God's saving plan. As one anonymous *mimra* put it:

> 8. From among those below (=mortals) it was not a male
> who was appointed to repay the debt,
> but a female, one chosen from among women.
> She listened, spoke, and established something quite new,
> thus gaining renown in the world.
> 9. Instead of the serpent, there stood Gabriel,
> instead of Eve, Mary the Virgin.
> On that first occasion it was not a man who spoke,
> and because of this no male
> was appointed to pay the debt.[46]

In some texts, Mary's act of speech is described and praised at length, yet no words are actually quoted as hers.[47] Indeed, the theme of Mary as Second Eve, whose words brought salvation from the Fall, presented Syriac writers with certain dilemmas. There was no controversy in Mary singing praises to her baby as Ephrem, for one, had portrayed. But the importance of Mary's words with the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation and with Joseph shortly after presented a more problematic scenario. In

44. On Mary in Syriac tradition generally, see Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 144–50, 329–35; Sebastian P. Brock, "Mary in Syriac Tradition," in *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue*, ed. A. Stacpoole (Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1982), 182–91; idem, "Mary and the Eucharist: An Oriental Perspective," *Sobornost* 1 (1979): 50–59.

45. See Robert Murray, "Mary, the Second Eve in the Early Syriac Fathers," *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1971): 372–84.

46. Tr. Sebastian P. Brock, *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches*, Moran 'Eth'o 6 (Kerala: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994), Hymn 26, pp. 89–91, at 90. All hymns I quote from this source are of unknown authorship.

47. E.g., Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymns 9, 15, 26, 28.

one anonymous *mimra*, for example, Mary receives Gabriel with suspicion, asking how his words announcing her conception of a son could be true. The angel replies, "Mary, keep silent, / for your Husbandman needs no seed / He will come down and sow Himself into your womb."[48]

In other anonymous *soghitha*, the dialogue between Mary and Gabriel takes on a humorous tone.[49] The Angel greets Mary with gracious announcement; Mary is not impressed: "Who are you, Sir? / And what is this that you utter? / What you are saying is remote from me, / and what it means I have no idea."[50] Gabriel tries again; Mary is nonplussed. Gabriel cites the authority of God who sent him; Mary will not be moved. By this point, the Angel is exasperated: why, he asks, is she answering back? How can she question the message he was sent to bring? Mary refuses to accept what sounds to her impossible. The angel pleads, "It is appropriate you should keep silence, and have faith too, / for the will of the Father cannot be gainsaid."[51] Mary wrestles until finally she receives the Holy Spirit overshadowing her, and by that action is convinced.

In another anonymous *mimra*, God prepares Gabriel for exactly such an encounter. In his charge to the angel, the divine Father admonishes him bluntly:

> Do not stand up to [Mary] or argue,
> for she is stronger than you in argument;
> do not speak too many words to her,
> for she is stronger than you in her replies. . . .
> If she starts to question you closely,
> disclose to her the Mystery, and then be off.[52]

In a dialogue poem between Mary and Joseph, the roles are reversed as Mary now argues the position of faith and Joseph that of reason which cannot believe.[53] Unlike the humorous tones of the dialogue with the angel, here the exchange is heavy with pain as virtuous bride opposes righteous husband. Mary explains her conception by the Holy Spirit; Joseph orders her to be silent. She will not: "I repeat the very same words— / I have no others to say."[54] Joseph replies, "You should not contradict"; Mary answers, "You should believe my words."[55] The dispu-

48. Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 27, pp. 92–97 at 94.
49. Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 41 "Mary and the Angel," pp. 111–18 at 113.
50. Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 41 "Mary and the Angel," v. 12 at p. 113.
51. Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 41 "Mary and the Angel," v. 25 at p. 114.
52. Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 45, pp. 135–40 at 136.
53. Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 42 "Joseph and Mary," pp. 118–24.
54. Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 42 "Joseph and Mary," v. 10 at p. 120.
55. Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 42 "Joseph and Mary," v. 11–12 at p. 120.

tation continues in bitter if stately argumentation until Joseph finally is persuaded. In triumph Mary sings, "Now I shall pour out my words."[56]

It is Jacob of Serug in several *mimre* on Mary who reflects at length on the paradox of her action by speech.[57] The point, he insisted, was that Mary had to choose obedience by her own intelligent free will and not in silent, unthinking acquiesence as Eve had shown to the serpent. Mary's real beauty lay in this, her perfect virtue and freedom: "However great be the beauty of something from God, / it is not acclaimed if freedom is not present." In Mary's case, "she rose up to this measure on her own."[58] What wonder, Jacob marvelled, that Mary stood in argument with Gabriel, "One humble daughter of poor folk and one angel. . . . One woman and the prince of all hosts. . . . Maiden and Watcher met each other and conversed in argument on the matter until they abolished the conflict between the Lord and Adam."[59] Eve had willingly kept silent; but Mary "inquired, sought, investigated, learned and then kept silent."[60] Jacob's words are ironic, for Mary's actions here are precisely those that characterized the heretical activity of "investigation" as Ephrem had earlier described and condemned it.[61] Yet in Jacob's rendering, it is Mary's words with Gabriel that bring us salvation—first by their very articulation, and second by the instruction Mary then presents to the faithful:

> Blessed Mary, who by her questions to Gabriel
> taught the world this mystery which was concealed.
> For if she had not asked him how it would be,
> We would not have learned the explanation of the matter of the Son.[62]

In Jacob's handling of the scene of the Visitation between Mary and Elizabeth, the women speak and understand while their men are silent and uncomprehending.[63] Moreover, in his rendition, not only do the

56. Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 42 "Joseph and Mary," v. 38 at p. 124.

57. Jacob's homilies on Mary are edited in Paul Bedjan, *S. Martyrii, qui et Sahdona, quae supersunt omnia* (Paris/Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1902), 614–719. I follow the English translation in Mary Hansbury, *Jacob of Serug on the Mother of God* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998).

58. Jacob of Serug, Homily 1, tr. Hansbury, *Jacob*, 17–42 at 25, 38.

59. Jacob of Serug, Homily 1, tr. Hansbury, *Jacob*, 17–42 at 29.

60. Jacob of Serug, Homily 1, tr. Hansbury, *Jacob*, 17–42 at 33.

61. The theme of "inquiry" or "investigation" as the activity of heretics is pervasive in Ephrem's hymns. See, e.g., his *Hymns on Virginity* 16, tr. McVey, *Ephrem*, 329–32; or, more broadly, his *Hymns against Heresies*, ed. and tr. Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses*, CSCO 169–70, Scr. Syr. 76–77 (1957).

62. Jacob of Serug, Homily 1, tr. Hansbury, *Jacob*, 38.

63. Jacob of Serug, Homily 2, tr. Hansbury, *Jacob*, 43–64.

women speak, but they read the Scriptures and interpret the prophecies. Speaking, reading, interpreting, telling, narrating, prophesying, revealing: with a multitude of verbal actions Mary and Elizabeth express and explain God's salvific plan in a celebration of words. When Mary returns to Joseph, she must then convince him, in ardent dialogue, of what she and Elizabeth know to be true. Having established this jarring picture of Mary's strength of speech, Jacob then constrains her into a more appropriate mode. Mary's speech, he tells us, had in fact been in the privacy of domestic space. Had she dared to speak in public,

> she would have been scorned, hated, caluminated.
> She would have been slandered, persecuted and stoned; she would have been regarded as an adultress and a liar.
> Because of this, divine providence had sought for her a just spouse to be her husband. . . .
> a "head" to protect her and to shelter her and to defend her because of her conception.[64]

Mary's speech far more than Sarah's raised problems in the Syriac mind. To stress adequately the active role Mary had played in the salvation drama required the exaltation of her words. In the dialogue hymns as in Jacob's verse homilies, Mary's words are powerful: they can undo the work of Eve, they can bring about or stymie God's intended action. In these hymns and homilies, the social discomfort raised by Mary's model is openly identified and negotiated. Mary's speech is rendered safe by virtue of its *asocial* location: she speaks in solitary exchange with the angel; she speaks in the safety of "women's space" with Elizabeth; she speaks in the sheltered space of her husband's home.[65] Nonetheless, in hymns and homilies she speaks—and her words were voiced in the collective space of the ecclesial community, intoned by homilist and sung by women's choirs.

The Sinful Woman

The Sinful Woman who came to Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee, washed his feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and anointed them with fine ointment, was a favorite subject of Syriac hymnographers and homilists.[66] Syriac writers were careful to distinguish this Woman

64. Jacob of Serug, Homily 2, tr. Hansbury, *Jacob*, 61.

65. On the significance of the social, civic, or domestic spaces in which women may speak, compare McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, esp. 32–69.

66. Sebastian P. Brock, "The Sinful Woman and Satan: Two Syriac Dialogue Poems," OC 72 (1988): 21–62, includes a listing of the Syriac texts. See my forthcoming article, "Why the Perfume Mattered: The Sinful Woman in Syriac Exegetical Tradition," for further discussion.

from Mary Magdalene, and also from Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus who in John 12.1–8 had anointed Christ's head. While Syriac writers felt free to combine the parallels from Matthew 26.6–13 and Mark 14.3–9, most often they followed the episode as told in Luke 7.36–50.

Ephrem established the main exegetical patterns for the Lukan episode in his magnificent *Homily on Our Lord*.[67] There he presented the Woman as a figure of faith and action, whose silence in the presence of Christ contrasted with Simon's foolish and faithless words. For the Woman had recognized Christ as God, and confessed him as such not by words but by actions of worship before him and by her unequivocal faith in his capacity to heal her condition. Simon, by contrast, spoke much and understood nothing, seeing Christ merely as a fallible prophet who failed to consider the scandal of allowing such a disreputable figure into his presence. His words to Christ were evasive and false, where the Woman's actions were articulate and true.

Subsequent Syriac writers went further, granting the Woman not only words of her own—something none of the gospel versions nor Ephrem had done—but even a story of her own, again an omission of the gospels (and of Ephrem) which had simply described her arrival at the house of Simon and supplications at the feet of Christ. The treatment of the Sinful Woman thus differs from that of Sarah or Mary. Speech and dialogue were added for their presentation, but the assumed narrative context in each instance had followed the biblical accounts.

In the case of the Sinful Woman, however, Syriac writers provided her a past, a present, and a changed future—all the result of words they voiced in her name. A *mimra* wrongly attributed to Ephrem (but probably written soon after his death) proved immensely influential in this regard both for Syriac and Greek writers, and eventually medieval Latin.[68] The *mimra* opens with the news of Christ's visit to Simon reaching the Woman's ears.

67. Ed. and tr. Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers, Sermo de Domino Nostro*, CSCO 270, Scr. Syr. 116 (1966); English tr. in Amar and Matthews, *Ephrem Syrus: Selected Prose Works*, 269–332.

68. Sermon 4, ed. Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers, Sermones* II, CSCO 311, Scr. Syr. 134 (1970), 78–91; tr. idem, CSCO 312, Scr. Syr. 135, 99–109; English tr. John Gwynn, NPNF 13:336–41. The authenticity of these sermons in general, and this one in particular, remains problematic. Beck's discussion of this sermon, CSCO 312:x–xii, demonstrates the uncertainty; cf. Brock, "Dramatic Dialogue Poems," 142. For the Greek version, which has important differences in content, see CPG 3:3952; F. Halkin, *Novum auctarium bibliothecae hagiographicae graecae*, Subsidia Hagiographica 65 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1984) 1162d–e. On the medieval influence of this text, see A. C. Mahr, *Relations of Passion Plays to St. Ephrem the Syrian* (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1942); idem, *The*

Immediately she speaks, a plaintive soliloquy in which she laments her wretched condition and her life thus far, vowing to seek healing—salvation—from the only one who can truly grant it, Christ himself. Her words initiate her actions. Piece by piece she strips off the garments and adornments of harlotry, clothing herself instead in the garb of mourning. Then she takes up her gold, earned in perdition, with the prayer, "With this, O Lord, that I have gained from iniquity, will I purchase salvation for myself."[69]

From this point on, the *mimra* presents the Woman in a series of combative dialogues, verbal contests she must win in order to gain entry to Christ's presence. First she seeks out the Perfume Seller, from whom to buy the precious ointment with which to anoint her Lord. The Perfume Seller is astounded by her changed appearance and odd request: daily she had come to him in rich clothes to buy cheap perfume; now suddenly she is in "sordid weeds" seeking his most expensive scent. He does not understand. The Woman will not be deterred. Convincing him of her resolute need, she fills her alabaster flask and moves on. Satan then appears in the guise of a former lover. By turns pleading, wheedling, and upbraiding her, he threatens her that no one will believe her change in character. With blunt speech and fervent faith, the Woman perseveres. Satan then moves to Simon's house, instructing the Pharisee on the public scandal that will ensue if the Woman is allowed inside. The Woman must then do verbal battle with Simon, her final obstacle on the course. Finally she gains entry and her place at Christ's feet. The homily closes with Christ's parable of the two debtors and forgiveness of her sins.

Rich in drama and dialogue both, this story yielded an array of hymnographic and homiletic versions. Two *soghyatha*, dialogue poems, remain extant which focus on the contest between the Woman and Satan.[70] Their complicated manuscript transmission indicates both the logistical impact of antiphonal singing (some manuscripts have only the verses for one or the other character: half the dialogue!), as well as the flexibility of this

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Cyprus Passion Cycle (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1947), 36–38, 50–52. An abbreviated version of this pseudonymous homily "On the Sinful Woman" is still sung today by Syriac Orthodox Christians in the daily prayers (following the *Shehimto*, the ferial office) at the *Soutoro* ("Protection," or the office at the end of the day equivalent to Compline) for Monday. I am grateful to George Kiraz and Thomas Joseph for this reference.

69. "On the Sinful Woman," sec. 3, tr. NPNF 13:337 (adapted).

70. Ed. and tr. in Brock, "Sinful Woman and Satan." *Soghitha* I, preserved in West Syrian liturgical tradition, probably dates to between the mid-fifth and seventh centuries; *Soghitha* II is preserved in medieval East Syrian liturgical texts.

particular hymnographic form—in the simple meter and melodies that characterized the *soghyatha*, verses could easily be added or subtracted.[71] These were "open texts," stories without canonical versions,[72] and therefore able to be worked with by any local congregation. Perhaps there is a clue here to support the possibility of female authorship encountered in the anonymous verse homily on Sarah, cited above: such texts were produced by the communities that used them, enabling the participation of various members of the congregation, male and female, in their strophic versions.[73]

In the dialogue poems on the Sinful Woman, Satan plays the part of normative social views. He insists that everyone knows the Woman's reputation, that no one will believe she has changed her life, that in fact she cannot change her life; he warns that a God as just and righteous as Christ will have no mercy on one so sinful; he threatens that the disciples will try to kill her rather than allow the scandal of her presence with their Lord; he reminds her of what pleasures, wealth, and luxury she enjoyed in his company; he begs her to return to him. To each statement of Satan, the Woman replies in steadfast argument. Her faith is unshakable that she can in fact change her life, that Christ will indeed receive her, that he will freely show compassion and mercy, that he will heal her of her sins; he is now her only lover and she is his betrothed; she will not be turned from her purpose.

Consider the dialogic exchange that drives the action in these narratives, and that constitutes the sum of the action in these *soghyatha*. The voices of opposition to the Woman's course of action are all male; all speak as representatives of standard theological and social positions. They are the obstacles to her conversion; they are the normative voices of late antique society. The Woman acts, and acts most effectively through speech; not only does she voice the part of faith in opposition to their

71. See the discussion in Brock, "Sinful Woman and Satan."

72. On the notion of "open text," see, e.g., Christine Thomas, "Stories Without Texts and Without Authors: The Problem of Fluidity in Ancient Novelistic Texts and Early Christian Literature," in Hock, Chance, and Perkins, *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative*, 273–91.

73. Obivously there are parallels here with apocryphal literature. Scholars have sorely underestimated the importance of working with multiple versions of stories for which there simply was no "original" text. In addition to Christine Thomas, cited in n. 72, there are pertinent examples in Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 19–88; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Incense Offerings in the Syriac *Transitus Mariae:* Ritual and Knowledge in Ancient Christianity," in *The Early Church in its Context: Essays in Honor of Everett Ferguson*, ed. Abraham J. Malherbe, Frederick W. Norris, and James W. Thompson (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 175–91.

reason, she also voices the part of free will, of human agency in the salvation process. No heavenly messenger comes to guide her course; no divine power overshadows her to infuse her with strength beyond her own. There is no divine intervention to protect her. Christ is not present or active until she arrives at his feet, and she must arrive there by her own achievement. Each dialogic contest she confronts, then, becomes more than a test: these are battles she must fight and win to obtain her prize.

More than one Syriac homilist commented that, because of her harlotry, the Sinful Woman carried the stains of every evil of which humans are capable—every sin, every wrongdoing, every impiety.[74] The Sinful Woman was the greatest of sinners, and hence, once repentant, the greatest of converts: the most powerful measure of the miracle of redemption possible through faith. The penitent harlot was a favorite theme in late antique hagiographic and monastic literature throughout Christian territory. Not surprisingly, Syriac versions thereof, such as the *Life of Pelagia of Antioch*, bear close resemblance to the hymns and verse homilies on the Sinful Woman.[75] Hers was a character that exemplified the rhetoric of paradox so dear to the time.[76] In many respects, hers was a character more challenging to the social order than either the figures of Sarah or the Virgin Mary.

III. SPEECH PERFORMED

In the Syriac texts we have considered, gendered speech is employed for religious instruction. It is notable that, in the instances of these biblical women, female speech is employed to demonstrate right teaching, intelligent reflection, autonomy, agency, and free will; while male speech presents social convention, restrictive tradition, and normative social roles. Female speech argues the freedom of faith, male speech argues the constraining shackles of reason and habit. Yet, these constructed voices are not entirely divorced from social reality. Repeatedly, the characters in these texts, both male and female, identify, name, and negotiate female

74. E.g., J.-M. Sauget, "Une homélie syriaque sur la pécheresse attribuée à un évêque Jean," *Parole de l'Orient* 6–7 (1975–76): 159–94, sec. 34–38; Anom. Hom. 3, sec. 21–22. ed. and tr. F. Graffin, "Homélies anonymes du VIe siècle: Homélies sur la pécheresse I, II, III," *PO* 41 (1984): 449–527.

75. The theme is examined with important insights in Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), esp. 71–94.

76. On the rhetoric of paradox see Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, esp. 155–88.

speech as a problematic act. Female speech is used to present the moral lesson, but constrained in impact by its restriction to permissible topics which do not hinder male action (Sarah and Abraham), or to acceptable spaces (the Virgin Mary), or to stock social problems (prostitutes).

Nonetheless, these constructed voices engage in flagrant play with social conventions. Arguably, they flout those conventions to a greater degree than hagiographic portraits of women saints.[77] But biblical women were also surely safer subjects than women saints, whether legendary (like Febronia) or historical (like the Najran martyrs).[78] As biblical characters, they inhabited the biblical world and not the historical one—an imaginal world, fully fashioned in the ancient Christian (and Jewish) mind but one wholly Other from the mundane world in which daily life was enacted. What relation could that world have to the real world, and what authority did its voices carry?

We must return to where we began: what of the women's choirs who sang these words in the civic churches of the late antique Syrian Orient? In each of the texts considered, dialogue was the rhetorical process by which crisis was turned to divinely sanctioned change. In the performative context of the liturgy, that same process would be ritually replicated in the musical exchange of antiphonal choirs, or the responsorial interaction between clergy and congregation or chanter and choir. The dynamic interplay of voices allowed an inclusive representation of the gathered church to take place, as conflicts of gender as well as ecclesiastical (social) hierarchy were intoned in harmonious performance. Exchange, negotiation, and reconciliation were embodied by the participating voices, male and female, clerical and lay. What one heard was more than words.

Women's singing was not an uncontested event in Syriac Christianity.[79] Paul of Samosata had been disciplined for his use of women's choirs in Antioch late in the third century. Canonical manuals like the *Didascalia* were translated into Syriac and widely circulated from the third century onwards; they repeated the apostolic injunction against women teaching

77. The problem of representing female sanctity in relation to normative social concerns has received renewed interest with the discussions in Coon, *Sacred Fictions,* and Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), among other recent works.

78. The spectrum for Syriac hagiography is represented in Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*.

79. Johannes Quasten, "The Liturgical Singing of Women in Christian Antiquity," *CHR* 27 (1941): 149–65 remains very useful. See also idem, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, tr. Boniface Ramsey (Washington: National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983), 75–86.

and specified that doctrinal matters were especially forbidden.[80] The *Testament of Our Lord* restricted choirs (gender unspecified) to singing responses.[81]

But other Syriac canon collections, at least between the fifth and seventh centuries, accorded Daughters of the Covenant and deaconesses—consecrated women[82]—the task of liturgical singing in civic churches, and other literature provides occasional glimpses of these women's choirs at work.[83] Ephrem himself was credited with establishing the practice. In his

80. E.g., *Didascalia*, esp. chap. 15, ed. and tr. in Arthur Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac* I, CSCO 401–2, Scr. Syr. 175–76 (1979), and II, CSCO 407–8, Scr. Syr. 179–80 (1979). *Didascalia* 15 expressly forbids widows, laymen, and women from teaching on church doctrine. Ch. 16 declares that the instruction of women converts should be the responsibility of deaconesses. In general, those canonical sources which do treat circumstances in which widows or deaconesses may teach specify that such ministry is to be restricted to the instruction of women only. It would appear that women's convents sometimes provided teaching as well as spiritual instruction for laywomen and for converts, as described in the *Life of Febronia*, Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*, 150–76. See the discussion of these canons in Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Women's Service in Ancient Syriac Christianity," in *Women in Eastern Canon Law*, ed. Eva Synek, *Kanon* (2000) forthcoming.

81. *Testament of Our Lord*, <40>, ed. and tr. in Arthur Vööbus, *The Synodicon in the Western Syrian Tradition I*, CSCO 367–68, Scr. Syr. 191–92 (1975).

82. The consecrated office of Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, the *Bnay* and *Bnat Qyama*, was a distinctive feature of Syriac Christianity, although the women's ministry is clearly similar to that of the *kanonikae* to whom Basil of Caesarea wrote in his *Letter* 52. On the *kanonikae* and related groups of consecrated virgins see Susanna Elm, "*Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). Almost all scholarship on the Members of the Covenant has focused on the men because we have far more information on them than on the women. See, e.g., G. Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-speaking Church," *OCP* 39 (1973): 191–215, 419–44; and Sidney H. Griffith, "Monks, 'Singles,' and the 'Sons of the Covenant.' Reflections on Syriac Ascetic Terminology," *Eulogema: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft*, Studia Anselmiana 110 (Rome: S. Anselmo, 1993), 141–60. I have attempted to gather a broader array of sources on the Daughters of the Covenant than has previously been discussed in Harvey, "Women's Service." On deaconesses in the Syriac tradition, see esp. Sebastian P. Brock, "Deaconesses in the Syriac Tradition," in *Woman in Prism and Focus: Her Profile in Major World Religions and in Christian Traditions*, ed. Prasanna Vazheeparampil (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1996), 205–18; A. G. Martimort, *Les Diaconesses: Essai Historique*, Bibliotheca "Ephemerides Liturgicae Subsidia" (Rome: C.L.V. Edizioni Liturgiche, 1982), esp. at pp. 21–54, 165–70; and C. Robinson, *The Ministry of Deaconesses* (London: Methuen, 1898), esp. at 169–96.

83. As far as I can tell, the earliest text to assign Daughters of the Covenant the task of liturgical singing is the fifth-century Rabbula Canons for the Bnay and Bnat Qyama, canons 20 and 27. These are edited and translated in Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents*, 36–50. Sometimes Syriac hymns include a verse or stanza addressed to the women's choirs, referred to as "virgins," and therefore are indicative

panegyrical "Homily on St. Ephrem,"[84] Jacob of Serug claimed Ephrem had trained choirs of consecrated virgins to sing the *madrashe* in the liturgy explicitly for instructing the congregation in right doctrine.[85] Roughly contemporary with Jacob's discussion, the sixth-century Syriac *Life of Ephrem* described Ephrem convening the Daughters of the Covenant for morning and evening services in the church and at the memorial services of saints and martyrs.[86] Both depictions are striking for their emphasis on the instructional role these choirs played in educating the larger Christian community in matters of orthodoxy and heresy. According to the *Vita*, Ephrem trained these choirs to sing a variety of types of hymns in order to compete with the choirs of heretics, notably Bardaisanites.[87]

The importance of this situation, as well as its surprising nature, are addressed at length in Jacob of Serug's "Homily on St. Ephrem." At one point, Jacob rhetorically addresses Ephrem himself:

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of consecrated women assigned to this task: e.g., Brock, *Bride of Light*, Hymn 9 (Anon.), at p. 38; Ephrem, HNat 4.62b–63. The fifth-century canons from the East Syrian Synod of 410 convoked by Maruta of Maipherqat order the chorepiscopoi to see that every village set aside some children to be blessed and trained as Members of the Covenant to assist with the maintainence of devotional life in sparsely populated regions (canon 26); and further, that no town church should be without "the order (*taxis*) of sisters," particularly trained in psalmody (canon 41). These canons are edited and translated in Arthur Vööbus, *The Canons Ascribed to Maruta of Maipherqat and Related Sources*, CSCO 439–40, Scr. Syr. 191–92 (1982). An example of the situation these canons envision may be found in the sixth-century, west Syrian account of Simeon the Mountaineer by John of Ephesus in his *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ch. 16, ed. and tr. E. W. Brooks, *PO* 17 (1923): 229–47.

84. "A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug," ed. and tr. Joseph P. Amar, *PO* 47 (1995): 5–76.

85. The most important passages are quoted and discussed below. This homily presents a number of puzzles, for the quantity of lines devoted to the women's choirs is quite disproportionate to the homily's topic (praise for Ephrem) and balance. An important and cogent attempt to account for this emphasis will be found in Kathleen McVey, "Ephrem the Kitharode and Proponent of Women: Jacob's Portrait of a Fourth-Century Churchman for the Sixth-Century Viewer" (forthcoming). McVey argues for a polemical sixth-century context, in which the practice of women's choirs in Syriac churches was under attack because of heretical associations. I am grateful to Prof. McVey for allowing me to see this article prior to publication, and for discussion on this homily.

86. Joseph P. Amar, *The Syriac "Vita" Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1988), 158f. (Syriac), 298f. (trans.).

87. The text specifies these types: doctrinal hymns (*madrashe*), antiphons (*'ounyatha*), and other kinds of songs (*seblatha* and *qinatha*). Amar, *Syriac "Vita,"* 158f. (Syriac), 298f. (trans.).

> Our sisters also were strengthened by you to give praise;
> for women were not allowed to speak in church.
> Your instruction opened the closed mouths of the daughters of Eve;
> and behold, the gatherings of the glorious (church) resound with their melodies.
> A new sight of women uttering the proclamation (*karozuta*);
> and behold, [these women] are called teachers (*malpanyatha*) among the congregations.
> Your teaching signifies an entirely new world;
> for yonder in the kingdom, men and women are equal.
> You labored to devise two harps for two groups;
> you treated men and women as one to give praise.[88]

Jacob cites Mary the Second Eve as justification for women's liturgical singing, and also the typology of Moses having led the Hebrew women in song after the crossing of the Red Sea.[89] But he also ties this role to the redemptive meaning of the new dispensation brought by Christ. He portrays Ephrem addressing the women:

> You (women) put on glory from the midst of the (baptismal) waters like your brothers,
> render thanks with a loud voice like them also.
> You have partaken of a single forgiving body with your brothers,
> and from a single cup of new life you have been refreshed.
> A single salvation was yours and theirs (alike); why then
> have you not learned to sing praise with a loud voice?
> Your silent mouth which your mother Eve closed,
> is now opened by Mary, your sister, to sing praise.
> ...
> Uncover your faces to sing praise without shame
> to the One who granted you freedom of speech by his birth.[90]

Jacob's words from this homily are the boldest presentation we have in witness to the ancient participation of women in Syriac liturgical life. He may well have been defending the practice at a time of increasing hostility either to women's liturgical singing or to concerns about the use of doctrinal hymns as opposed to psalmody.[91] For Jacob sets constraints on

88. Jacob, "Homily on Ephrem," 40–45, tr. Amar, *PO* 47:35.

89. Jacob chooses to ignore the role of Miriam in this biblical episode; Exod 15.20–21.

90. Jacob, "Homily on Ephrem," 102–13, tr. Amar, *PO* 47:49–53.

91. On the possible polemical context, see above n. 85. After the sixth century, canonical references to women's liturgical singing become increasingly rare and constrained: gradually it would seem that the Daughters of the Covenant and deaconesses were restricted to psalmody and eventually, perhaps, to no liturgical

the picture. His homily stresses that the women chant Ephrem's hymns, and under Ephrem's authority. Jacob is writing first and foremost to glorify Ephrem, and only secondarily (even grudgingly) to acknowledge the worth of women's contribution to liturgical worship.[92] In Jacob's view, women's participation is sacramentally mandated: since all Christians must receive baptism and communion, all must demonstrate their ritually defined Christian identity as participants in God's salvific plan—a plan ritually enacted by the drama of the liturgy itself.

Nonetheless, I would suggest that the rhetorical voices Syriac writers granted to biblical women were significantly enhanced by the performative voices of women's choirs, and profoundly so in the ritual context of liturgical practice. The words accorded to biblical women created a narrative space in which powerful speech and deeds might be possible. So, too, did liturgical celebration establish a ritual space in which participants could speak and act in terms unlike those that governed their daily lives.[93] As was the case in ancient Mediterranean religions, it was in their sacred rituals that Christians negotiated the terms of their worldly existence, established order and sense to their lives and in their relations with one another.[94] Ritual practices granted each member of the community a necessary place and purpose; they validated each person's contribution as worthy. Such a sacred order challenged the social order as it existed, and

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singing at all. See the references in Harvey, "Women's Service." But an indication of the changing view of women's liturgical singing can be seen in the ninth-century liturgical commentary by the East Syrian writer Pseudo-George of Arbela. Here the women's singing is said to signify the Babylonian captivity, or the period of slavery in Egypt—in both instances, as a mark of the humiliation of the people of God! The passages are discussed in Juan Mateos, *Lelya-Sapra: Essai d'interpretation des Matines Chaldeennes*, OCA 156 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1959), 408–10. I am grateful to Sebastian Brock for this reference.

92. A point stressed by McVey, "Ephrem the Kitharode."

93. On the significance of ritual space and its distinction from that of mundane life, see above all Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. part 3, pp. 171–223; and Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 171–268. Bell's work influences the remainder of my discussion.

94. For critical models from pre-Christian Mediterranean religions see Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks*, tr. Paul Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Stanley K. Stowers, "Greeks Who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not: Towards an Anthropology of Greek Religion," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and Larry O. Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 293–333.

made possible other kinds of configurations. Women's voices could proclaim—and indeed embody—such possibilities. Yet the liturgy offered a bounded freedom.[95] In the end, it confirmed the world as it was.[96] Its space was not that of the civic community in its daily affairs, nor were its participants acting on the same terms available to them in their normal situations.

Christian sacred ritual, like other religious practices of the ancient world, needed to exercise social control over its participants for their larger community life. But it also needed to encourage them, to exhort their engagement in the works and devotional practices required for the flourishing of the church and the well-being of its members. Liturgy allowed a situation of social and cultural critique, wherein women's voices and their good works could be upheld as morally and theologically worthy.[97] At the same time, it negotiated the impact of that critique. As Jacob had intoned, equality existed "yonder in the Kingdom." Women's ritual voices and women's rhetorical voices could offer a view of that Kingdom. By that very offering, "yonder" was located elsewhere than "here." Were the two realms utterly disjunctive?

Now and again we have descriptions in Syriac literature of late antique holy women who were prominent in their public works but do not fit the standard picture we would expect of women whose representation had been literarily molded to fit normative social roles.[98] Euphemia of Amida, presented by John of Ephesus, and the village recluse Shirin, remembered by Martyrius (Sahdona), are two examples.[99] Neither came from a notable family or wealth. Euphemia was widowed early, left with a daughter to raise; Shirin lived alone. Neither is identified as holding an office in the church (widow, Daughter of the Covenant, deaconess, or nun); neither

95. I am indebted to Stanley Stowers for the phrase "bounded freedom," and indeed for discussion of this entire section.

96. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, esp. 109–24. See also Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), esp. at 64–65.

97. Compare the oft-quoted baptismal formula of Gal 3.28. This verse is frequently cited in hagiography of women saints to justify the writer's choice of holy women as worthy of praise.

98. E.g., Coon, *Sacred Fictions*; Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words."

99. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ch. 12, ed. and tr. E. W. Brooks, *PO* 17 (1923): 166–86; and Martyrius, *Book of Perfection*, 1.3.64, 69–79, ed. and tr. A. de Halleaux, *Martyrius (Sahdona), Oeuvres spirituelles I, Livre de Perfection*, CSCO 200–201, Scr. Syr. 86–87 (1960), text at CSCO 200:44–48. There are English translations of both in Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*, 122–33, 177–81; I follow this translation.

lived in a convent. Yet both attained tremendous stature in their civic communities on the authority gained from their ascetic practices, including their practice of sacred song. Euphemia ran the social service network in Amida on behalf of the poor and sick, and came to be "honored more than the bishops." When her daughter was young, Euphemia was criticized for leaving her alone all day while she went out to work among the poor, a case of "working mother syndrome" in the sixth century! But controversy of a sustained kind developed only late in her life (John says after thirty years of public ministry), because of her active involvement on behalf of the persecuted opponents to Chalcedonian orthodoxy, a situation in which doctrinal confession and not gender was the flashpoint. Shirin was sought out by all the villagers of northern Iraq for spiritual counsel, including the monks and abbots, as well as locals like Martyrius' own mother. In fact, Martyrius' mother often took him when a young boy to visit Shirin, holding the holy woman up as the exemplar and model her son should follow in his life—and in his *Book of Perfection*, Martyrius claims to have done exactly that. Despite their public prominence, neither Euphemia nor Shirin were presented as disruptive to the social order of their civic communities. On the contrary, both were presented as exceptional for their ascetic practices, but not socially problematic.[100]

In such cases, we may see the fruits of a liturgical participation inclusive of those whose own words were not preserved for us. The fashioned and performed women's voices of Syriac hymnography belonged to no women of the late antique Syrian Orient, yet women could use these voices. Sometimes, it would seem, these voices made a certain sense even in the midst of a mundane world. Sometimes, after all, even real women spoke.

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100. I have discussed this point further in Harvey, "Women's Service."