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The Exegetical Method of Jacob of Serugh in *Mimro* on Balaam and Balak

Abstract

The subject of this paper is an analysis of an exegetical method of Jacob of Serugh in “*Mimro* on Balaam and Balak”. In the introduction, the author provides a brief biography of Jacob of Serugh. The author also discusses his relation to the *mimro* genre, as well as influences on Jacob’s exegetical method. Then the author moves on to the *Mimro* at hand and provides an analysis structured around the *Mimro* itself. The author dwells on the passages which exemplify Jacob’s approach to this text. He then proceeds to discuss the importance of prayer, God’s assistance, and knowledge of the context for exegesis. The author also deals with



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the goal of exegesis, as well as with the exegetical method Jacob utilizes in dealing with some of the more difficult biblical passages. Finally, the author provides an explanation of Jacob's Christological reading of the biblical passage at hand.

Keywords

Jacob of Serugh, Mimro, Balaam, Balak, exegesis

1 Introduction

Jacob is one of the greatest poets to have written in Syriac and the third Christian preacher by the number of preserved homilies after John Chrysostom and Augustine. To this day, 380 of his verse homilies (*mimre*) have survived, and there is also a number of them attributed to him, whose authenticity is still under scrutiny.¹ “The testimonies of Barhebaes and Jacob of Edessa together speak of 763 such homilies.”² They all consist of stanzas with two verses each, consisting of 12 syllables grouped in three groups of four.³

¹ Sebastian Brock, „Ya'qub of Serugh (ca. 451–521) [Syr. Orth.]“, in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, edited by Brock, S. P., Aaron M. B., Kiraz, A. G., Van Rompay, L., New Jersey: Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute, 2011, p. 434.

² Khalid Dinno, “Jacob of Serugh, the Man Behind the Mimre”, in *Jacob of Serugh and His Times; Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity*, edited by George Anton Kiraz (Piscataway, NJ, USA: Gorgias press 2010), p. 52.

³ For more on the structure of Jacob's *mimro* see: Manolis Papoutsakis, “Formulaic Language in the Metrical Homilies of Jacob of Serugh”, in *Symposium syriacum VII, Uppsala University, Department of Asian and African Languages 11 – 14 August 1996*, edited by René Lavenant, col. *Orientalia Christiana Analecta 256*, Roma: Pontificato Istituto Orientale, 1998, pp. 445–451.

“Many of his biblical sermons, for example, seem addressed to any and every Christian, no matter their profession, vocation, age, gender, or social status. It is precisely this timeless – or even generic – a quality that caused Jacob’s homilies to be cherished and chanted over many centuries, recited in vigil services or daily offices with little concern for their relevance to any immediate context.”⁴

He was born in 451 and had spent most of his life as a chorbishop or a periodeut(es) of the Serugh region. “Jacob spent most of his career traveling throughout the district of Serugh preaching at vigils, serving daily offices and celebrating liturgies.”⁵ In 519, by the end of his life, he became the bishop of Batnan in the Serugh region, not far from Edessa. He died in 521.⁶ I would also add that “each of the Christian denominations in Asia, except the ‘Nestorians’, claimed his allegiance to its side.”⁷ His texts were used by Chalcedonians, such as Romanos the Melodist and a presbyter from Constantinople Timothy.⁸

⁴ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “To Whom Did Jacob Preach?”, in *Jacob of Serugh and His Times; Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity*, edited by George Anton Kiraz Piscataway, NJ, USA: Gorgias press 2010, p. 116.

⁵ Ashbrook Harvey, “To Whom Did Jacob Preach?”, p. 130.

⁶ Besides remembering him as one of the greatest Church preachers, tradition also remembers that he was taught virtue and guided towards priestly service from his youth, that miracles were an integral part of his life, as well as that he was considered an example of asceticism. Cf. Robert Anton Kitchen, “A Poetic Life: Metrical Vita of Jacob of Serug by Sa’id Bar Šabūnī”, in *Syriac Encounters*, Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium Duke University, 26-29 June 2011, edited by Maria Doerfler, Emanuel Fiano and Kyle Smith, col. *Eastern Christian Studies* 20, Leuven-Paris-Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2015, pp. 65–75)

⁷ Johns Abraham Konat, “Christological Insights in Jacob of Serugh’s Typology as Reflected in his Memre”, in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 77/1 (2001), p. 47.

⁸ Philip Michael Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East; A Study of Jacob of Serugh*, Oxford: University Press, 2018, p. 10.

For Jacob, *mimro* is not just a homiletic form. R. Kitchen describes Jacob's relation to *mimre* as follows:

“Jacob distinctively, if not uniquely, uses the personification of the units of literary genre – *mēmṛā*, *šarbā*, *tašī'ūtā*, at irregular interludes in a number of his *memrē* (1) as a means of giving pause for reflection in the performance of the narrative, (2) as a method of expressing the ineffability of the Word of God which must still be proclaimed in all-too-human words and phrases, and (3) as a demonstration of how a human being may express the truth of the divine Word and become a Flute of the Holy Spirit.”⁹

In the case of the *mimro* we deal with in this paper, the term “personification” is too strong. Instead, we can speak of a separate entity without elements of personification, but it is possible to find examples in Jacob's *mimre* in which the *mimro* is personified. R. Kitchen provides an example from Jacob's *mimro* on Jonah¹⁰, and in one of his other works on the *mimro* on Jonah, R. Kitchen writes the following:

„A curious feature throughout is Jacob referring to the *mēmṛā* in the third person as an actor in its own play. The *mēmṛā* has its own agenda, urging, pushing the story along. Jacob, perhaps with tongue in cheek, complains that all he can do is hang on for the ride, for the powerful physics of the *mēmṛā* are beyond his management as if the *mēmṛā* were alive. The

⁹ Robert A. Kitchen, “I, Mēmṛā: This Is the Story Talking Personification of Literary Genre in Jacob of Sarug”, unpublished, delivered at XII Symposium syriacum, Rome 2016, cited from https://www.academia.edu/36407265/I_Memra_This_is_the_Story_Talking_XII_Symposium_Syriacum_pdf (accessed 13. 12. 2020), p. 1.

¹⁰ Cf. Robert A. Kitchen, “I, Mēmṛā...”. Pay special attention to the verses on page 6;

effect is to endow the *mēm̄rā* with the qualities of the Gospel, the Word which shall not be silenced.”¹¹

2 On the influences on the exegesis of Jacob of Serugh

Jacob was acquainted with all of the exegetical traditions from his surroundings: Antiochian, Cappadocian, Ephremite, and Alexandrian, but he relied most heavily on Ephremite and Alexandrian traditions. He had a sort of repulsion towards the Antiochian exegetical tradition because diophysites depended on it.¹² B. Boulos Sony explains that Jacob had the need to explain in two of his works that in them, he was not using allegory, but realism instead. This implies that he was aware he was considered an (over) allegorist.¹³ On the other hand, this does not mean that he rejects the literal sense and grammatical analyses.¹⁴

¹¹ Robert A. Kitchen, “Jonah’s Oar Christian Typology in Jacob of Serugh’s *Mēm̄rā* 122 on Jonah”, in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, vol. 11.1 (2011), p. 41.

¹² Cf. Behnam A. Boulos Sony, “La Méthode Exegetique de Jacques de Saroug”, in *Parole de l’Orient : revue semestrielle des études syriaques et arabes chrétiennes : recherches orientales : revue d’études et de recherche sur les églises de la langue syriaque* 9 (1979-1980), p. 83.

¹³ Cf. Boulos Sony, “La Méthode Exegetique de Jacques de Saroug”, p. 86. One of those two places is Jacob’s 34th letter. Cf. *Iacobi Sarugensis, Epistulae quotquot supersunt*, edidit Gunnar Olinder, col. *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Syri, Series secunda, tomus XLV*, Parisiis: E typographeo reipublicae, 1937, pp. 250–257, and especially p. 254, and Micheline Albert, *Les Lettres de Jacques de Saroug*, traduction française, en reconnaissance au R. P. François Graffin, S.J. (†), *Patrimoine Syriaque* 3 Kaslik – Liban: Parole de l’Orient 2004, pp. 330–336.

¹⁴ Cf. Boulos Sony, “La Méthode Exegetique de Jacques de Saroug”, p. 88, as well as: Tanios Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug, Christologie, Trinité, Eschatologie, Méthode exégétique et théologique*, tome 2 (2^{ème} édition revue et corrigée) (Kaslik, Liban, 2000), 342, and especially pg. 350–354. For example, in his 23rd letter Jacob points out the

Speaking on Jacob's reliance on the science of his time, T. Bou Mansour says that Jacob relied on Ephrem not only in exegetical but also in scientific matters¹⁵, which illustrates more clearly Jacob's reliance on his great predecessor and the inspiration he drew from him.

Besides, T. Bou Mansour points out the term *pūššaqā* in Jacob's exegesis and defines it as a term Jacob uses to represent the explanation of mysteries, whose understanding requires a synergy of both man, and God.¹⁶ R. Kitchen translates the term *pūššaqā* with *interpretation* (verse 198) or *explanation* (verse 226).

3 *Mimro* on Balaam and Balak

The topic of the paper is one of Jacob's *mimro* in 442 verses, which interprets chapters 22–24 of the Book of Numbers, dealing with Balaam and Balak. While going briefly over the contents, I will dwell on the specific points that will illustrate the exegetical method Jacob of Serugh employed in this *mimro*. All quotes of the *mimro* are quoted from Robert Kitchen's translation, "Jacob of Serugh: The *Mimro* on Balaam and Balak."¹⁷

In the introduction of this translation, R. Kitchen states four more of Jacob's *mimre* in which the events of this biblical passage

textual differences of the Syrian and Greek text of "David's words". (Cf. Iacobi Sarugensis, *Epistulae quotquot supersunt*, edidit Gunnar Olinder, col. *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Syri, Series secunda, tomus XLV*, Parisiis: E typographeo reipublicae, 1937, 184, and Albert, Micheline, *Les Lettres de Jacques de Saroug*, traduction française, en reconnaissance au R. P. François Graffin, S.J. (†), *Patrimoine Syriaque* 3, Kaslik – Liban: Parole de l'Orient 2004, 238)

¹⁵ Cf. Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug, Création, Anthropologie, Eclésiologie et Sacrements*, tome 1 (Kaslik, Liban, 1993), 76.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 317.

¹⁷ The translation was published in the *Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Journal* 53 (2015), pp. 45–86.

are mentioned. Specifically, he deals with the prophecy of Balaam on the star coming out of Jacob (in one *mimro*) and God making the donkey speak (in three *mimre*).¹⁸ Further on, he provides a few of his remarks. Most importantly for us is his view of Jacob's exegetical approach in this *mimro*:

"Jacob of Serugh's *mīmrō* on the story of Balaam and Balak (Numbers 22–24) follows Jacob's typical literary approach in many of his *mīmrē*: the majority of the poem relates the Biblical story in canonical order with occasional interpretative comments. Jacob usually identifies an overarching theme he perceives working in the events of the Biblical narrative, and often this theme evolves into a Christological typology, especially in Old Testament narratives."¹⁹

Further, in the introduction, R. Kitchen makes a comparison of Jacob's exegesis of this biblical passage with those of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa and briefly mentions some of the interpretations written and preserved in Syriac. Among other things, he states that, according to Origen, it was a demon who appeared to Balaam in a dream, that he had idealized Balaam's donkey, as well as that "Balaam is an ancestor of the Magi."²⁰ Speaking about the interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa, R. Kitchen points out that according to this interpreter, it was also a demon that spoke to Balaam in a dream, but also that the donkey spoke by the force

¹⁸ Cf. Robert A. Kitchen, "Jacob of Serugh: The *Mīmrō* on Balaam and Balak", pp. 46–49. There is a *mimro* on this topic ascribed to Jacob, but it's not actually his. Cf. Nora Macabasag, "Jacob of Serugh's Memra on the Star Which Appeared to the Magi and on the Slaughter of Infants (Vat. Syr. 118)", in *Parole de l'Orient : revue semestrielle des études syriaques et arabes chrétiennes : recherches orientales : revue d'études et de recherche sur les églises de la langue syriaque* 43 (2017), pp. 237–301, especially pp. 243–244.

¹⁹ Robert A. Kitchen, "Jacob of Serugh: The *Mīmrō* on Balaam and Balak", p. 49.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 53–55.

of a demon.²¹ This understanding that a demon spoke to Balaam in a dream is present in other Syriac commentaries on Balaam and Balak as well.²²

4 Analysis

In the title of the *mimro* it was noted: “It is fitting to be read on the Nativity”, which indicates that we are not dealing simply with an exegesis of a Scriptural passage (“scholarly” or catechetical work), but something fitting for a worship service. Whether Jacob himself wrote this remark, and then it was preserved in the title, or whether it was added later is not of importance in this case. What matters is that the tradition preserved this remark, which shows what the reception of this *mimro* was.

As in his other *mimre*, the author dedicates the beginning to a prayer to God, calling on Him to aid him in presenting that which follows. Among other things, he says: “O Star which shone from the house of Jacob, grant me your epiphany, / I will become light by it and will proclaim to the world how much you are light.” (verses 3–4) Further on, he adds: “Your commandment made a donkey speak as well, / and that heathen while was not worthy to prophesy. / Therefore, grant me to your word to speak / with your love’s impulse, not like the pagan, but [neither] like his donkey.”²³ Another quote says: “On account of this *mimro* is difficult for whoever speaks it, / and hearing its word is difficult for whoever hears it. / [His word] requires great spiritual understanding / by which one who yearns for knowledge must apply himself”.²⁴ From these three excerpts, we can conclude that God’s assistance

²¹ Cf. Robert A. Kitchen, “Jacob of Serugh: The *Mīmro* on Balaam and Balak”, pp. 55–56.

²² Ibidem, pp. 56 – 58.

²³ Ibidem, pp. 27-30.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 51-54.

is necessary for creating the *mimro*. Jacob stresses that he does not give his view or interpretation, but rather that he is asking for a gift from God to address the given topic. The *mimro* appears to be a separate entity, it is a gift from God, and both the one delivering it and those receiving it need God's aid.²⁵ Jacob does not quote other exegetes or traditions. The authority of the *mimro* is the fact that it is a gift from God. The synergy of God and man is needed to achieve its goal, which he defines as follows: "Whoever speaks wishes to benefit the one who listens, / but if he does not benefit, whoever speaks must be silent".²⁶ In other words, if listeners have no use of the exegesis offered, the exegete better is silent.²⁷ As far as listeners are concerned, Jacob's advice to them is: "Be willing, o listener, to hear the word, and then you will accept [it], / for if you do not love, even if you hear, you will not profit."²⁸ One of the previous quotes says that Jacob prays that God, out of his love, will send His gift to him to be able to wrestle the weight of the *mimro*, and now Jacob emphasizes that listeners as well need love to be able to accept what is being told to

²⁵ For further explanation on the idea that to understand Scripture, man needs to ask for God's help and that it is the divine grace which reveals to him the hidden meaning see the beginning of Jacob's 23rd letter. (Cf. Iacobi Sarugensis, *Epistulae quotquot supersunt*, 168-169 and in Albert, *Les Lettres de Jacques de Saroug*, 220). Boulos Sony as well, points out one part of the letter's introduction, "La Méthode Exegetique de Jacques de Saroug", 67. This passage is also pointed out by T. Bou Mansour when he writes about the idea that an understanding of the text is a divine gift, but it also necessitates human engagement (Cf. Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug, Christologie...*, 317 - 318).

²⁶ Robert A. Kitchen, "Jacob of Serugh: The *Mimrō* on Balaam and Balak", pp. 35-36.

²⁷ The idea that the point of the *mimro* is to be beneficial to the hearers is common place for Jacob of Serugh. Cf. Boulos Sony, "La Méthode Exegetique de Jacques de Saroug", 85.

²⁸ Robert A. Kitchen, "Jacob of Serugh: The *Mimrō* on Balaam and Balak", pp. 57-58.

them.²⁹ In other words, the preacher asks for God's help in interpreting this passage because what he is saying comes from God Himself and His love towards mankind. For the listeners to profit from it, they need to respond with love.

Following these verses, Jacob provides a short introduction to the story's context by saying that this event was preceded by Israel's deliverance from Egypt and their migration to the Promised Land, emphasizing that they were very numerous.³⁰

²⁹ For more on how Jacob understands love and its role, its place in man's life, and on the idea that God does everything out of love and that man's response needs to be through love, see also: Elié Khalifé-Hachem, "Homélié Métrique de Jacques de Saroug sur l'Amour", in *Parole de l'Orient : revue semestrielle des études syriaques et arabes chrétiennes : recherches orientales : revue d'études et de recherché sur les églises de la langue syriaque* 1/2 (1970), 281–299; see Mary Hansbury, "Love as an Exegetical Principle in Jacob of Serug", in *The Harp* vol. XXVII (2011), 353–368.

In other places Jacob explains that besides prayer and love, faith is also necessary for understanding Scripture (cf. Boulos Sony, "La Méthode Exegetique de Jacques de Saroug", 84). T. Bou Mansour also writes about this and adds it is necessary that the souls wants to hear what is said to it. He also sees idol worshipping as something which prevents knowledge and understanding (cf. Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug, Création...*, 60). All of this brings us back to the topic of love and faith, with the addition of freedom, as evident in this *mimro* on Balaam and Balak.

³⁰ Robert A. Kitchen, "Jacob of Serugh: The *Mimrō* on Balaam and Balak", pp. 59–78. B. Boulos Sony as well, points out the matter of context as common place in Jacob's exegesis, "La Méthode Exegetique de Jacques de Saroug", 89–90., as also does T. Bou Mansour, quoting Jacob's words from the 24th letter. In this letter Jacob explains that when interpreting the words of Christ it is necessary to know how, to whom, why and when they were spoken, as well as the reason why he did it. (Cf. Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug, Christologie...*, 326 - on the usage of context as an unavoidable exegetical tool in Jacob's writings, Bou Mansour also speak on the pages to follow, and especially on the pages 344–346 -; cf. Iacobi Sarugensis, *Epistulae quotquot supersunt*, 207, and Albert, *Les Lettres de Jacques de Saroug*, 267–268).

The Bishop of Batnan further explains that it is precisely due to the number of Israelites and their previous victories that Balak, the king of Moab, realized he could not defeat them militarily. Hence, he asked Balaam to curse them. However, Jacob writes the following: “This deceptive cunning man Balaam / understood that the God of the sons of Jacob is great.”³¹ A few verses down, he adds: “He did not wish to reveal that he was really afraid of the Hebrews, / lest it becomes known that he is too weak to curse them.”³² And then: “For he thought he would be deceptive and say to them, / ‘The Lord has held me back, and because he has held me back I will not go.’”³³ In the eyes of our exegete, both king Balak and Balaam are afraid. Additionally, Balaam is a liar and a deceiver since he consciously deceives Balak’s messenger that God had told him not to go. However, God overturns this lie. Jacob explains: “The Lord came unexpectedly to the deceitful one, / and showed himself to the pagan during the night when he did not [expect]. / The revelation from God dawned upon the diviner, / and [God] told him not to go with the messengers.”³⁴ A similar thing happens with the second call from Balak, but this time Balaam is not lying, because he is afraid of God. God appears to him again “in a vision at night”³⁵ and tells him to go. “Because of the stirring of the lust of money and deception / in the soul, the Lord was angry against Balaam.”³⁶ Balaam thought he had been given God’s permission to curse the Israelites and that it would make him famous. These are the reasons God sends an angel to block his path. Through the struggle between Balaam

31 Robert A. Kitchen, “Jacob of Serugh: The *Mimrō* on Balaam and Balak”, pp 97-98.

32 *Ibidem*, pp. 105-106.

33 *Ibidem*, pp. 109-110.

34 *Ibidem*, pp. 117-120.

35 *Ibidem*, p. 145.

36 *Ibidem*, pp. 149-150.

and a donkey, Jacob shows once again that even a donkey was more reasonable than this diviner.³⁷ The repentance of Balaam, which followed, was caused by the fact that he saw a sword in the hands of the angel and not a change of heart.³⁸

Speaking of Balaam's request that seven altars be set up and that sacrifices be made on them, Jacob says that the passage is not easy to understand and leaves two possibilities of understanding as to what the altars were prepared for: sacrifices to the true God, or false gods? He then adds: "Whoever explains, let him call out to the Lord [who] reveals the mysteries, / so that with the most adequate explanation he shall make the Lord abound."³⁹ Staying true to himself, we see that here as well he relies on the help of "the Lord [who] reveals the mysteries." With the second quoted verse R. Kitchen adds a remark: "Note that the commentator believes he is able to 'enrich' the Lord by means of his explanation of the Biblical text."⁴⁰ This needs to be understood in the sense that human knowledge of God is enriched through the explanation of the biblical text because it is God himself who reveals to the interpreter the secret hidden in the text. In the verses which follow, he explains to whom the sacrifices were offered. He says that Balak did not offer them to the God of Israelites because he wanted to curse Israel. On the other hand, Balaam,

³⁷ Ibidem, pp. 143-196.. Speaking about Jacob's explanation of why God was angry at Balaam even though he was doing everything as he was told, R. A. Kitchen reminds: "The rationale for this divine shift of attitude is missing in the canonical text. Perceiving this incongruous gap, Jacob supplies the reason that God's anger was because of 'the stirring of the lust of money and deception' in Balaam's soul (I. 149-150)" (Robert A. Kitchen, "Jacob of Serugh: The *Mimrō* on Balaam and Balak", 50).

³⁸ Robert A. Kitchen, "Jacob of Serugh: The *Mimrō* on Balaam and Balak", pp. 197-216.

³⁹ Ibidem, pp. 225-226.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p., 80, note 77.

aware of the might of the God of Israel, and since he was afraid of Him, he distanced himself from the altar during sacrifices.⁴¹ When the time had come for Balaam to curse Israel, God ordered him to bless them instead. Jacob also examines why God ordered things this way and provides the following answer. God knew Israel would fall away from Him and that they would suffer as a consequence. Had Balaam cursed them, someone could have said they suffered because of that. Since Balaam blessed Israel, once their suffering came, everyone would know Balaam for the deceiver that he is: he blessed Israel, and yet they are suffering.⁴² By the end of the *mimro*, Jacob writes: "When he blessed instead of cursing, as we have said, / providence arranged to appoint him so that he would also prophesy. / The Lord took him out of that divination sect, / and made him a prophet for a while for a [particular] purpose."⁴³ "His soul became enlightened from the divine revelation, / and he began to speak of the Son of God in a loud voice. / He prophesied, 'A star will shine from the house of Jacob, / and a leader will assuredly rise up from Israel.'"⁴⁴ Further on, he asks why Balaam is the only one of the prophets who called Christ "the star." The answer is that Balaam is a pagan very well known in his people. They wrote down everything he said, and the prophecy was directed towards those who watched the stars.

As a consequence, we have the Magi who followed the star when Christ was born.⁴⁵ They preserved the prophecy of Balaam and

⁴¹ Ibidem, pp 227-250.

⁴² Ibidem, pp. 251-308.

⁴³ Ibidem, pp. 311-314.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, pp. 319-322.

⁴⁵ The root of this way of understanding the text is to be sought in Jacob's thesis that everything God does is for the salvation of humankind. That is why everything is related to Christ the Savior and in Him is the key for understanding of everything, including the choosing of Balaam (cf.

saw its fulfillment⁴⁶ Jacob writes: “The Nations did not reject the prophecy of this [person], / and when he prophesied they laced his word in their scriptures, / so that the word might be retained for its time and its realization; / and it might perform its work among the Nations who adhere to it.”⁴⁷

Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug, Christologie...*, 392–399) and his prophecy which was written in a special language. The language in question is the one which Magi will understand – „Magi, then, are members of the Persian religion, who at the same time are practicing astrology, or Zoroastrian astrology.” (Macabasag, “Jacob of Serugh’s Memra on the Star Which Appeared to the Magi...”, 238, note 7) In other words: “By a holistic vision of the entire Biblical history, Mor Jacob views the path of divine economy for redemption of humanity. His mimre reflect a profound conviction on the central position of Christ through the Bible, often displayed through images and types.” (Dinno, “Jacob of Serugh, the Man Behind the Mimre”, 53)

For more on the idea that Christ gives meaning to everything see also Jacob’s 23rd letter (cf. Iacobi Sarugensis, *Epistulae quotquot supersunt*, 173, and Albert, *Les Lettres de Jacques de Saroug*, 225–226), where he explains that the Old Testament revelations are akin to a bride, who is veiled until the arrival of the bridegroom, in this case Christ: “When Christ the Bridegroom revealed Himself, he also revealed the faces of prophecies.” (Iacobi Sarugensis, *Epistulae quotquot supersunt*, 173). In this case, one smaller part is mentioned in B. Boulos Sony work (cf. Boulos Sony, “La Méthode Exegetique de Jacques de Saroug”, 75).

On the idea that Jacob interprets one biblical text with another, see: Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug, Christologie...*, 334, and on the idea that the Old Testament is a type, symbol and shadow of the New Testament see also Boulos Sony, “La Méthode Exegetique de Jacques de Saroug”, 86–87 и 92–103.

⁴⁶ Robert A. Kitchen, “Jacob of Serugh: The *Mimrō* on Balaam and Balak”, pp. 309–364.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 365–368. Jacob’s statement that Magi read Balaam’s prophecies for T. Bou Mansour is one of the examples which he titles „La lecture hypothétique”, meaning that for certain passages in the Scripture Jacob does not give clear interpretations, but provides them as a hypothesis. (cf. Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug, Christologie...*, 348; T. Bou Mansour here calls upon Jacob’s *mimro* titled „The star seen by the Magi, and the slaughter of the innocents”).

After this, Jacob explains: “A borrowed word was given to that donkey, / and a borrowed prophesy was poured into Balaam. / God gave the word and prophesy to these ones, / and took it back, and they continued as they [originally] had been.”⁴⁸

As a final message, we are to find that God tries to direct people on the right path in a way attainable to a specific person.

5 Summary

To summarize, Jacob of Serugh holds the position that a plea for God’s assistance is necessary for an understanding of the biblical text since only He “reveals the mysteries.”⁴⁹ Both the exegete and the listener require this help. The exegete needs it in order to transfer the revealed meaning in a manner understandable to everyone and the listeners in order to benefit from it. For the listeners it is essential that they pray for the gift of understanding and that they approach the words with love since that is the only way they can understand what is being related to them. A synergy of all is needed to accomplish the goal of exegesis, which is the benefit of the listeners.

Before moving on to the passage in question, Jacob first provides the broader context of the story. Then he takes apart every difficult part of the passage and presents possible answers. He points to the most logical one, relying on the data present in the text, such as the interpretation of the question to which god Balak did offer sacrifices. To keep the attention of his listeners, Jacob utilizes rhetorical questions⁵⁰ and writes in a lively and dynamic style. He makes a conclusion that helps people understand why

⁴⁸ Robert A. Kitchen, “Jacob of Serugh: The *Mimrō* on Balaam and Balak”, pp. 421-424.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 225.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 127-128.

God acted through a pagan and points out the fact that God approaches everyone in a manner understandable to His addressee.

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