

MOTIONS OF LATE ANTIQUITY

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN
LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

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VOLUME 20

MOTIONS OF LATE ANTIQUITY

Essays on Religion, Politics, and Society
in Honour of Peter Brown

Edited by

Jamie Kreiner and Helmut Reimitz



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A party in Peter's honour, May 2011.

Back row, from left: Thomas Carlson, Dave (and Wills) Michelson, Christian Sahnner, Jamie Kreiner, Jack Tannous, Noel Lenski, Megan Williams, Kate Cooper, Marianne Sághy, Joel Walker, Michael Maas, Nancy Khalek, Philippa Townsend, Kutlu Akalin, Yannis Papadogiannakis.
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DISCOURSES OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE
AND CHRISTIAN CHARITY:
THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF SYRIA IN
JACOB OF SARUG'S *ON THE FALL OF THE IDOLS*

Daniel L. Schwartz*

The temples are lost in obscurity, the people avoid the pagan solemnities; the altars fall and the walls tumble in ruin. It is declared that, similar to a strong bellows, the cross has blown away all the miserable gods and has pushed them here and there like a pile of rubbish.¹ In this way Jacob of Sarug describes the state of paganism in his native Syria around the beginning of the sixth century. This declaration of pagan destruction and Christian supremacy joins a chorus of late antique Christian voices asserting similar triumphant interpretations. Indeed, one can hardly delve very deeply into the source material

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¹ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 181–85. This *memra* is number 101 and can be found in vol. III of *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, ed. by Bedjan. The text is also published along with a rather free French translation in 'Discours de Jacques de Saroug sur la chute des idoles', ed. by Martin. A German translation is also available in 'Gedicht über den Fall der Götzenbilder', trans. by Landersdorfer. The citations refer to the line numbers of the poem. I have used Martin's edition of the text, and the translations which appear are my own.

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relevant to the study of religion in Late Antiquity without encountering similar language of violence against cult sites and objects. From imperial decrees, legal codes, and archaeological remains, to sermons, saints' lives, and the acts of church councils, the theme recurs so often as to present almost a leitmotif of late Roman religion. Recent scholarship has given considerable attention to the phenomena of religious violence using a variety of sources and methodological approaches.² Nevertheless, significant difficulties remain when it comes to interpreting the rhetoric used in literary sources on religious violence.³ In particular, Christians often employed discourses of violence to project Christian supremacy rather than to describe or advocate acts of violence. The present essay contributes to the study of violence in Late Antiquity through analysing the discourse of religious violence in Jacob of Sarug's *memra* *On the Fall of the Idols*. Several scholars have used this sermon to connect religious violence to attempts at Christianizing late Roman Syria.⁴ This interpretation, however, fails to account for the fact that the final third of this sermon focuses exclusively on the moral reform of Jacob's Christian audience. A close reading of this sermon shows that Jacob employed depictions of graphic violence for rhetorical purposes. Rather than seek to describe or advocate acts of violence against pagan sites, Jacob sought to bring his believing congregation more into line with his Christian moral precepts, particularly charitable giving and the care of the poor.

Religious Violence in the Late Roman World

The expansion of Rome outside the Italian peninsula often took on religious overtones as the Empire asserted its supremacy by either suppressing or taking over regional cults. The imperial state co-opted numerous cults while others drew suspicion and earned the label *superstitio* which could result in active suppression. The deeply political nature of Roman religion makes sense of both of these responses to the religion of conquered people.⁵ When the Romans encountered rites they found efficacious they sought to attain benefit from

² From among this large body of literature, see in particular Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*; Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity*; Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ*; Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt*; Hahn, Emmel, and Gotter, *From Temple to Church*; Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*.

³ Hahn, Emmel, and Gotter, *From Temple to Church*, pp. 5–7.

⁴ Cramer, 'Irrtum und Lüge'; Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization*, II, 149–50.

⁵ Ando, *The Matter of the Gods*.

them. However, when foreign cults threatened the security and supremacy of the Empire, conflict resulted. Thus Jewish attempts to resist Roman control resulted in the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 CE. The Jews would also revolt against the Romans in the second century, once in the Diaspora and again in Palestine, and this in spite of the fact that the Romans granted certain privileges to Jews for the performance of their ancestral rites. Eventually Christians would come into conflict with the state over their religious beliefs and practices as well. Stories told by early Christians repeatedly presented the Church as the holy people of God, on the one hand persecuted by the pagan Roman state, and on the other forced to battle against the pernicious internal influences of heresy. Whatever the historical validity of these narratives, they certainly capture the self-perception of many early Christians who saw themselves, and in some ways even defined themselves, as a persecuted community facing religiously motivated attacks.⁶

With the conversion of the emperor Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century, the position of Christians began to change. Except for certain reversals during the reign of the emperor Julian, Christianity became increasingly associated with state power. Laws favouring Christians and marginalizing pagans and Jews became commonplace. Book XVI of the Theodosian Code contains numerous examples of imperial attempts to legislate the dominant position of the favoured Christian community.⁷ Such laws brought the coercive power of the state to bear upon those outside of an evolving religious mainstream. Christian bishops often showed a keen interest in exploiting the influence of their position as imperial power brokers.⁸ As Bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom exploited his connections to the imperial court in order to assist Porphyry, bishop of Gaza, in the closing of influential pagan temples there.⁹ These bishops sought imperial support before attempting such a dangerous and potentially disruptive course of action. We see similar concerns on the part of Chrysostom when he urged the destruction of temples in Phoenicia.¹⁰ The monks he commissioned could have easily been seen as vigilantes and denounced in the words of Libanius as merely a 'black-robed tribe, who eat

⁶ Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ*, pp. 29–67.

⁷ *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, trans. by Pharr. See also Caseau, 'The Fate of Rural Temples', pp. 128–29, and Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization*, 1, 94–97.

⁸ Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, pp. 264–66.

⁹ Fowden, 'Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire', pp. 72–73.

¹⁰ Chrysostom, *Letters* 123 and 126, ed. by Migne, pp. 676–78, 685–87.

more than elephants, and [...] hasten to attack temples, with sticks and stones and bars of iron, and in some cases, disdain[ing] these, with hands and feet [...]. After demolishing one, they scurry to another, and to a third, and trophy is piled on trophy, in contravention of the law'.¹¹ While Theodoret was careful to point out that Chrysostom 'armed them with imperial edicts' so as to make clear the legality of their activities, these practices nevertheless retained the air of injustice which Libanius had denounced.¹²

Along with legally sanctioned violence, we also find many examples of people tolerating and even encouraging extralegal violence against pagans and Jews, as well as Christians who diverted from the norms of the imperial Church. Unrestrained violence, however, could prove disruptive to the state, and Christian emperors often tried to walk a fine line of using their legislative power to tout their Christian credentials while also fostering considerable latitude with respect to religious differences.¹³ Sometimes the delicate nature of this balance went unappreciated, and zealous Christians perpetrated violent acts against pagans while thinking that they acted with the law on their sides. When Shenoute (d. 465) provocatively broke into the house of the governor Gesius in order to rid his home of idols and denounce him publicly as a pagan, he cited legal sanction and likely believed he had it even though this is highly doubtful.¹⁴ In other similar cases, Christians rushed into confrontational situations without any expectation of legal recourse. Such attempts to rid one's world of the demonic influence of paganism could prove deadly as many wealthy and influential Romans remained pagan along with sizeable groups of peasants. This situation created yet another Christian experience with religious violence. In such cases, Christians could dust off the old stories of persecution and apply the label 'martyr' to a sacrifice they wanted to portray as godly and even heroic.¹⁵ Rabbula of Edessa (d. 435) entered the pagan city of Heliopolis/Baalbek for the

¹¹ Libanius, *Oration* 30, 8, ed. by Norman, pp. 107–08.

¹² Theodoret, 'Historia Ecclesiastica', v.29, p. 152. The claim of injustice is part of the larger argument of *Oration* 30 in which Libanius suggests that the tacit approval of these activities has called into question the authority of the Emperor and indeed the civilizing influence of the whole Graeco-Roman tradition. Sizgorich, 'Not Easily Were Stones', pp. 87–90.

¹³ On the complexities of this balancing act, see Drake, 'Lambs into Lions'.

¹⁴ For the case of Shenoute and Gesius, see Emmel, 'Shenoute of Atripe and the Christian Destruction of Temples in Egypt', pp. 178–81. For more general accounts of the Christian understanding of imperial legislation, see Gotter, 'Rechtgläubige — Pagane — Häretiker' and Errington, 'Christian Accounts of the Religious Legislation of Theodosius I'.

¹⁵ For the application and rejection of the label martyr under these circumstances, see Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ*, pp. 170–79.

purpose of destroying idols. He hoped as a result of this action to be killed and gain his 'martyrdom'.¹⁶ That such a death was a far cry from what his second- and third-century forebears would have understood as martyrdom shows just how much things had changed for Christians during the fourth and fifth centuries. Nevertheless, martyrdom had played a powerful role in Christian self-perception, and the claim to the title remained meaningful even when the practice had changed significantly. Through these examples, we begin to see some of the ways in which the protracted Christian experience with violence in many different contexts produced a complex set of discourses dealing with violence and a wide range of rhetorical uses of violence available to Christians.

Jacob of Sarug's On the Fall of the Idols

The work of Jacob of Sarug contains another particularly striking example of the rhetoric of violence. Jacob was born in the village of Kurtam on the Euphrates around 451. After receiving his education in the school of Edessa he became a chorepiscopus in Sarug where he served a number of rural congregations. Two years before his death in 521 he became Bishop of Sarug. He is best known as a prolific author of metrical homilies, or *memre*. One of his *memre*, *On the Fall of the Idols*, describes in graphic detail the overthrow and destruction of pagan cult images. This sermon appears to offer a general call to Jacob's audience to engage in the type of violent and confrontational iconoclastic activity which Rabbula undertook in Heliopolis. Jacob describes a scene of Satan ruling over the whole earth with all of its inhabitants entirely taken with the worship of idols.¹⁷ Then Christ appears on Golgotha. Immediately the idols fall. 'The idols of the earth saw it [the cross] and collapsed out of terror, and the priests fled and hid themselves out of fear. As if a festival had been set up against the demons on a high hill, they were afraid and fled and gave up their deception'.¹⁸ The immediate fear and resulting flight of the demons foreshadows the violent scene which follows.

And the terrified demons wail with fearful quivering. The earth, from its very foundations, quaked beneath the gods, and they were shaken and they all fell down, covered with shame. Their statues trembled and fell, their columns were broken in pieces, their priests were ashamed, and stupefaction seized their worshippers.

¹⁶ *The Life of Rabbula*, ed. and trans. by Doran, pp. 74–75.

¹⁷ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 106–41.

¹⁸ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 143–46.

Their feasts vanished, and desolation fell upon their altars. Their temples became deserted, and porcupines nested in their palaces. Their walls crumbled and the vibration caused their columns to collapse. Their oblations ceased, and everyone fled from their midst. Their ornaments were laid waste, and their worshippers became a disgrace. Their congregations departed, and no one came to their feasts.¹⁹

Jacob elaborates on this scene in a similar tone for thirty more lines.²⁰ He adds insult to injury by painting a pitiful picture of Satan trying to contain the damage brought about by the mere presence of Christ on the cross.²¹ 'Satan stood dumbfounded and did not know what to do. While he was trying to pick up one [idol], another would fall before him. When he rushed to restore an idol from its ruin, the sound of other temples being pulled down came to him. While he was binding one broken divinity, the sound of another goddess falling reached him.'²² Jacob describes nothing short of the complete destruction of pagan worship, including temples, cult images, priesthoods, and worshippers.

As if the image of Satan frantically attempting to restore his idols were not enough, the humiliation of Satan continues. After fleeing the spectacle of Golgotha, Satan and his demons regroup. But instead of coming together to strike out at Christ and his cross from a position of strength, the demons turn on Satan and accuse him of weakness. They ridicule him because a man, a dying man even, overthrew his idols and destroyed his temples.²³ They make a mockery of Satan and his weakness, blaming him for the widespread destruction of his idols.

This description of chaos, humiliation, and devastation takes place within a sustained presentation of violence against religious cult images and temples. Jacob describes the physical devastation of idols and obliteration of temples in considerable detail. However, his description of satanic folly and Christian supremacy over the traditional cults of the Graeco-Roman and Mesopotamian world immediately begs the question of what, if anything at all, this *memra*

¹⁹ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 170–80.

²⁰ Compare Jacob of Sarug, *Letters* 12.4 and 13.4.

²¹ The theme of the cross recurs throughout this *memra*, and Jacob develops a similar idea in his *Letters* 37.4. While Jacob always refers here to the cross of the Crucifixion, it is significant in this context that the sign of the cross played an important role in the cleansing and consecration of pagan temples and other sites that were put to sacred Christian use. Moralee, 'The Stones of St. Theodore', p. 206, esp. n. 50; Foss, 'Late Antique and Byzantine Ankara'; and Marinescu, 'Transformations'.

²² Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 187–92.

²³ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 199–222.

has to do with the realities of life in northern Mesopotamia at the turn of the sixth century. As Jacob's chosen setting is highly theologized, he does little to encourage optimism in this respect. He does not discuss imperial religious policy, recount the fall of the idols at the hands of powerful bishops, or depict hoards of Christian monks razing pagan temples. In fact, none of these figures enters his account at all.²⁴ The Christian laity does not appear either, and even the pagan worshippers receive only the briefest mention. Instead, Jacob links this violence directly with Golgotha and makes Christ, Satan, and the demons the central actors. The association of the fall of the idols with Golgotha presents particular problems in this respect. Most obviously, it places the destruction of the idols in a rather distant, mythic past. Jacob did not present this act of Christian supremacy as an ongoing process which still occupied Christians, but rather a past activity centring on the work of Christ. Theodoret also made similar claims in his *Cure of Pagan Maladies*, suggesting that pagan temples and pagan practice already lay so firmly in the past that people no longer even remembered what their altars looked like.²⁵ These claims of Christian triumph require some explanation, not least of all because Jacob and Theodoret both made these claims while also giving plenty of indication that paganism indeed remained an ongoing reality in Syria and northern Mesopotamia.

Even if one could argue that Christianity had effectively overcome paganism by the late fifth century, a doubtful assumption to which we will return later, the attempt to place it at the beginning of the first century obviously bears no historical scrutiny. Nevertheless, despite an account of pagan and Christian interaction which does not aim at modern notions of historicity, various scholars have attempted to use this *memra* to isolate historical information on the state of paganism in northern Mesopotamia. Jacob began his *memra* in a way that offers a certain amount of promise in this respect. In the course of describing the supremacy of Satan upon the earth prior to the Crucifixion, he listed the deities present in cities throughout the Roman world. Satan had given Artemis to Ephesus and placed Jupiter over the city of Rome. Particularly relevant for our purposes here, he also associated Nebo and Bel with Edessa and detailed the presence of Sin, Ba'alšamên, Bar Nemrê, Mari, Tar'atha, and Gadlat

²⁴ Jacob did discuss the activities of the Apostles as they travelled throughout the world spreading the Christian message. However, he maintained an emphasis on their activities in opposing Satan as he sought to acquire a new stronghold for paganism. He did not discuss them as roving iconoclasts.

²⁵ Theodoret, *Thérapeutique des Maladies Helléniques*, 6, 87 and 8, 68, ed. by Canivet, pp. 285 and 335. On this subject, see also Caseau, 'Fate of Rural Temples', p. 118; and Kaegi, 'The Fifth-Century Twilight of Byzantine Paganism', p. 243.

in Harran.²⁶ These well-attested associations demonstrate what one would expect, that an itinerant chorepiscopus in this region would know a good deal about local cult practices and easily identify the prominent deities in various local cities.²⁷ As such, Tamara Green's study on Harran and Han Drijvers's on Edessa cite Jacob as evidence of continuing pagan observance in this region.²⁸ While Jacob does indeed corroborate a range of sources that tell us about the presence of these cults, he offers little detailed information to rectify the difficult problems associated with understanding the actual practice of traditional cults in this region or the interactions between the Christians and pagans living there.²⁹ Most of his account of pagan practice emphasizes highly derogatory tropes. He stresses the physicality of pagan idols. He harps on the idols as gods made by human hands and refers repeatedly to the value of the materials used to manufacture them: gold, silver, and gems for the wealthy and wood or terra cotta for the poor.³⁰ He seeks throughout this discussion to denigrate the traditional Mesopotamian cults. As such, Jacob's account corroborates certain things we already know about the pagan cults associated with the region, but it adds little to our knowledge of pagan worship in this region.

Interpreting Religious Violence

That Jacob describes certain aspects of religious life in Syria and gives an idealized picture of others makes attempts to derive substantive historical data

²⁶ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 47–54. For a further discussion of the deities discussed in this *memra*, see Vandenhoff, 'Die Götterliste des Mar Jakob von Sarug'. The connection of Nebo and Bel with Edessa is particularly interesting. The *Doctrina Addai* makes a strong case for Edessa as a profoundly, if not thoroughly, Christian city. Likewise, *The Syriac Julian Romance* goes to great lengths to emphasize the distinctively Christian nature of the city of Edessa in explicit distinction from Harran. Here Jacob takes a very different approach and asserts that even the city of Edessa has, or at least had, specific pagan connections. *The Chronicle of Ps. Joshua* 30, 46 also discusses pagan festivals held in Edessa. On the *Doctrina Addai*, both its early fifth-century date and its significance for Edessene self-perception, see Griffith, 'The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought'. On the relative treatment of Edessa and Harran in *The Syriac Julian Romance*, see Green, *The City of the Moon God*, p. 77, and Muraviev, 'The Syriac Julian Romance and its Place in the Literary History', pp. 196–97, 205.

²⁷ Cramer, 'Irrtum und Lüge,' p. 97.

²⁸ Green, *The City of the Moon God*, pp. 57–58; Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, pp. 37–38.

²⁹ Drijvers, 'The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria', p. 35.

³⁰ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 25–46.

from this *memra* rather problematic. Nevertheless, Frank Trombley cites Jacob's description of violence against pagan cult objects as evidence for the decline of paganism in northern Mesopotamia.³¹ This interpretation assumes that Jacob describes contemporary events while simply placing them in a theological context of conflict between Christ and Satan. While de-mythologizing a piece of theological poetry in this way may produce useful historical results, such a conclusion remains debatable and would require considerably more argument than Trombley provides. Winfrid Cramer offers a different interpretation of this material, challenging Jacob's depiction of a decisive Christian victory over paganism. He argues that Jacob's attempts to present the destruction of paganism as complete simply reflect the workings of the pious imagination of a theologian and poet.³² While Cramer draws attention to Jacob's discussion of local deities, he also relies heavily on other references to paganism in Jacob's writings, particularly those found in his *memra On the Spectacles of the Theatre*.³³ In this *memra* Jacob derides the theatre as a bastion of pagan activity full of stories of the gods and practices which he insists honour those gods. In contrast, his congregation saw no problem whatsoever with the theatre as a form of entertainment. Jacob even gave voice to their objection from the pulpit. "It is a game (i.e. a spectacle)", they say, "not paganism. What wilt thou lose if I laugh! And, since I deny the gods, I shall not lose through the stories concerning them".³⁴ Jacob still insisted that this theatre and its dances fostered zeal for paganism.³⁵ This charge joins a long-running Christian critique of the theatre as a place of falsehood, loose morals, and demonic activity.³⁶ Jacob's plea shows his attempt to mould his congregation's understanding of ethics and to exhort them to separate themselves from the taint of an ongoing paganism. That his attempt seems to have fallen on deaf ears only serves to highlight the tenacity of persistent modes of cultural expression which Jacob insisted on labelling pagan and denouncing.

There can be no doubt then that Jacob knew about ongoing pagan practices. He reflects this in his knowledge of local and empire-wide cults. He even

³¹ Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization*, II, 149.

³² Cramer, 'Irrtum und Lüge', p. 98.

³³ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Spectacles of the Theatre* is ed. and trans. by Moss as 'Jacob of Serugh's Homilies on the Spectacles of the Theatre'. Cramer, 'Irrtum und Lüge', pp. 101–05.

³⁴ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Spectacles of the Theatre*, p. 108.

³⁵ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Spectacles of the Theatre*, p. 106.

³⁶ Barnes, 'Christians and the Theater'. Lim, 'Consensus and Dissensus on Public Spectacles in Early Byzantium'.

shows that it had purchase among the Christian audiences he addressed in his preaching. In order to explain the difference between the reality surrounding Jacob and the image he presented in the *memra On the Fall of the Idols*, Cramer focuses on Jacob's theme of Satan, his demons, and his idols as sources of falsehood and deception.³⁷ Jacob indeed refers repeatedly throughout the *memra* to the unreality of the gods. He employed stock Christian accusations of pagan divinities as dumb idols and mere man-made objects with the intent of impugning pagan worship. At best, the gods of pagan cult amounted to nothing more than weak and empty creations of human hands made from rock, wood, and metal.³⁸ While Christians had made this argument against pagans for centuries, its repetition offered more than a slanderous truism for Christian insiders. Pagans often recognized a close relationship between cult images and the gods they made present before the eyes of the audience. An analogy can be drawn here to the images of the emperor which people customarily regarded with great reverence.³⁹ Priests further reinforced expectations of divine presence within a temple by employing paint, lighting effects, pyrotechnics, and automata. When Christians could, they exposed this artifice, but when they could not, they had easy recourse to an even more sinister interpretation.⁴⁰ Christian apologists regularly suggested that the pagan deities, as well as the *daimones* which inhabited pagan and Christian imagination alike, were simply demons.⁴¹ Thus the deceptive power of the idols found its root cause in the deception of Satan and his demons. Opinion in the ancient world on questions pertaining to the ontological and metaphysical status of cult images actually varied widely, even among those who venerated such images. Jacob, however, joined many other Christians in a strident critique of cult statues he saw as idols. Whether a Christian or a pagan saw cult images as profane, a tool for approaching the deity, or actually a supernatural object, Jacob placed them all firmly in the category of instruments of deception and satanic entanglement.

Cramer argues that this theme lies at the heart of Jacob's sermon, that he stressed the falsehood and deception of the idols in order to confirm that his audience did the right thing in maintaining their Christian belief and support-

³⁷ Cramer, 'Irrtum und Lüge', p. 99.

³⁸ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 25–35.

³⁹ McCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*, pp. 67–73.

⁴⁰ Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, pp. 136–37.

⁴¹ On the prevalence of belief in demons, see Drijvers, 'The Persistence of Pagan Cults and Practices in Christian Syria', p. 40.

ing the eradication of paganism.⁴² In other words, he suggests that this sermon effectively advocates the use of religiously motivated violence for the purpose of Christianizing society. While there is no question that the elaboration of violent themes in this *memra* would very likely serve to normalize and perhaps even glorify religious violence, we should be reluctant to see in this sermon an actual call to engage in religious violence as a means of advancing the Christian cause. Indeed such an interpretation presents several obstacles.

Violence, Persuasion, and the Nature of Christian Triumph

The most significant problem for interpreting this sermon as a call to religious violence appears when Jacob takes an abrupt turn in subject matter for the final third of the *memra*. Satan's defeat seems secured. His demons have turned on him. The disciples have thwarted his attempts to revive idolatry by travelling the known world in order to oppose him. He finds churches and monasteries dominating the landscape his temples used to occupy.⁴³ When it seems certain Satan has lost everything, he turns to a demon named Deceiver and formulates a new plan to ensnare the human race. In place of idols and the objects of pagan cult, Satan will attack Christians with the temptation of the love of money. Satan thus proposes avarice as the new idolatry.⁴⁴ In fact, he insists that mammon entices the Christian more powerfully than any idol could insofar as it contends with the true God for the devotion of people's hearts.⁴⁵ Jacob depicts Satan as attempting to continue his attack on those confessing Christ, even if they would never enter a temple or perform a sacrifice. Looking to money and loving it, those who had come to see the lies of Satan and reject his idolatry would still cling to him. They would trust in money rather than Christ and in so doing restore Satan's influence in the world. Jacob even goes so far as to say

⁴² Cramer, 'Irrtum und Lüge', pp. 99–100.

⁴³ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 297–310.

⁴⁴ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 451–52. At lines 515–16, Jacob links his teaching on avarice and idolatry to the teaching of the apostle Paul, likely developing this line of thought out of Colossians 3. 5. Jacob also discusses the love of money in *memre* 21, 66, 103, and 128. Particularly relevant for the present context, he develops an idea similar to the one seen here where he refers several times to the love of money as idolatrous and demonic, *memra* 103, Jacob of Sarug, *Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, ed. by Bedjan, III, 843–45, 851–52, 856.

⁴⁵ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 481–94.

that Satan no longer concerns himself with the neglect of idols so long as people love money.⁴⁶

With this shift of focus, Jacob engaged his audience with a discourse of charity that had become very common in late antique Christianity. Much of this discourse served the apologetic function of defending and reinforcing the wealth, power, and influence of prominent Christian power brokers who actively cultivated the image of themselves as lovers of the poor and in so doing acknowledged the claims of social subordinates to their resources.⁴⁷ These themes present themselves repeatedly in Christian biography and, by the fifth century, had become regular tropes in saints' lives.⁴⁸ Here we see an example of this paramount Christian virtue preached broadly to an entire congregation. To violate the precept of love for the poor and turn instead to care for oneself through avarice bears a serious charge as Jacob compares it directly to idolatry, arguing that it is indeed worse to love money than to worship the crass material idols and demonic images of severely weakened if not totally marginalized cults.

In order to access further the relationship between the destruction of idols and the love of money, we must return again to the violence suffered by the idols in the first half of the sermon. We saw there that the appearance of Christ on Golgotha offered the impetus for the destruction of the idols. In fact, a closer look at the description of the violence suffered by the idols and the temples that housed them indicates that rarely in this *memra* does anyone actually inflict harm upon the idols. Rather, Christ's presence on the cross brings about their downfall. 'At that moment, the cross showed itself upon Golgotha. The gods shattered and broke, the goddesses were demolished.'⁴⁹ Jacob emphasizes the passive nature of this violence again when Satan's demons complain that he has been conquered by 'a simple corpse'.⁵⁰

Other passages give more agency to Christ. At one point the voice of Christ on the cross terrorizes the demons.⁵¹ Jacob does not recount Christ's words at this point. He seems to refer here to the account found in the canonical Gospels of Mark and Matthew where Jesus cries out and as a result the veil of the temple tears in two, with Matthew adding that many tombs opened and the bodies of

⁴⁶ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 461–62.

⁴⁷ Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*.

⁴⁸ For a recently edited collection of such lives with particular relevance to this context, see *Stewards of the Poor*, ed. and trans. by Doran.

⁴⁹ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 141–42.

⁵⁰ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, line 210.

⁵¹ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, line 169.

saints rose from the dead.⁵² Jacob substitutes the fall of the idols for the outcome mentioned in the Gospels. However, one must note that he chooses to cite passages which depict Christ at his lowest. He does not appeal here to the triumphant moment of Christ's Resurrection. Rather, he focuses on the precise moment of Christ's death as the point at which he conquered the demons. Only one brief passage actually shows Christ engaged in violence. Even here Jacob places these acts within a context of reprisal rather than unprovoked rage. He describes Christ as 'Poor, humbled, lowly, despised, neglected, insulted, diminished, scorned, oppressed, dishonoured, silenced, mocked; stretched, beaten, bound, obscured, stripped, exposed, crucified, torn to pieces, pierced, blasphemed, and mauled; it is as if he were nothing'.⁵³ This figure, in one brief passage, turns the tables at the moment of his Resurrection and brings about the fall of the idols.

The sleeper awoke, overthrew the gods, and shattered the idols. He tore down the statues, broke the graven images, and defaced the painted idols. He scattered the cast images, destroyed the manufactured objects, and scorned the works of the forge. He was exalted among the worshippers, gathered the nations, called the people, built congregations, erected churches, consecrated altars, and won over worshippers.⁵⁴

This passage goes on to detail Christ's redemptive work and the spontaneous adoration directed towards him by those whom he has freed from the deceptive and tyrannical grip of Satan.

This contrast between Christ and Satan recurs throughout Jacob's *memra*. Even though Christ ultimately brings about the destruction of Satan's idols, Satan bears the image of the truly violent one whose worship entails bloody sacrifice and human deception.⁵⁵ By contrast Jacob depicts Christ as meek, lowly, and humble in his supremacy. Jacob's Satan declares, 'Therefore, he has deceived me. He was like a spy in the land and he humbly commenced a contest I was unaware of. He hid himself and concealed his essence, and they seized and crucified him. And then I only knew who it was by the cry which he

⁵² Mark 15. 37–38 and Matthew 27. 50–53. Alternatively, he could have in mind John 19. 30 where Jesus cries out 'It is finished', or Luke 23. 46 where Jesus declares, 'Into thy hands I commit my spirit'. Neither of these passages records any extraordinary effects of Jesus's last words, however.

⁵³ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 275–78.

⁵⁴ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 281–86.

⁵⁵ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 110–25.

advanced.⁵⁶ Jacob routinely places this sort of Christological declaration into the mouth of Satan, depicting Christ as the humble one who overcame the mighty Satan. 'And it is not on account of being great that he conquered, for he was not great, but by the manner in which he engaged in battle with the powerful. For if he had brought them low while manifestly great (which in truth he is), his wisdom would not have shined, but rather his strength.'⁵⁷ Jacob's sermon develops a similar theme elsewhere when he deals with the death and Resurrection of Christ. Christ's descent into hell to preach to the dead emerges as his favourite theme in this context.⁵⁸ Jacob depicts his conquering of sin and death as something that resides in the persuasive power of his teaching.

Jacob's constant concern for Christology ultimately unites the two parts of this *memra*.⁵⁹ The generally passive nature of the violence highlights an important point that Jacob wanted to make about Christ. He did not need to engage directly in acts of violence against Satan because he overcame Satan by his very nature. As the wisdom of God incarnate, he conquered Satan as a result of who he was. His ostensible weakness and humility actually offer signs of his inherent supremacy over Satan and what Satan offers. Furthermore, the emphasis on Christ's humility reinforces God's immanence through the 'condescension' of the son in the Incarnation. This Christological argument also lies at the heart of Jacob's treatment of the love of money. If the members of his congregation truly claim this Christ, Jacob wonders aloud how they could possibly turn back to a different kind of idolatry and allow the love of money to come between them and Christ. This Christ, who conquered sin and death, Satan and his demons, through little more than his humble existence, should be held in the highest esteem, along with his moral precepts.

⁵⁶ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 231–34.

⁵⁷ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 263–66.

⁵⁸ Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug*, II, 142–59. Jacob also takes up this theme in *Letters* 13.3 and 19.9, ed. by Albert, pp. 87–89 and 153–54. Christ's preaching to the dead and the so-called Harrowing of Hell are also important themes in the Syriac literature inherited by Jacob. See especially Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 35–68.

⁵⁹ I use the term 'Christology' here with a certain caution. I do not employ it to refer to the doctrine of what is commonly called the 'Christological controversy'. I use it here more generically to refer to Jacob's teaching regarding the person and work of Christ. For sustained discussions of Jacob's Christology and his relationship to the theology of the Council of Chalcedon, see the work of Bou Mansour, 'Die Christologie des Jakob von Sarug,' pp. 500–69; and *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug*, I, 1–113.

Nevertheless, Jacob gives the Church low marks regarding the sin of avarice. Furthermore, his harsh accusation comes without deference to a person's standing within the Church either.

The powerful of this age cling to [money] and are defiled by it, and it has brought about a blemish upon the teachers of the faith, and it pours out its filth upon the preachers of the Crucifixion. He who gives pardon also extorts money from the poor. He who lifts up the Eucharist also takes for himself gold without concern. The priest, who administers baptism and cleanses the impure, also invests money with merchants using contracts. The monk carries it in his sack along with his necessities, and in not taking pains to avoid being ensnared, he is overcome by it.⁶⁰

Elite Christians among clergy and laity alike have failed to love the poor and prefer instead the love of money. It is no mistake that this connection also appears as a part of the liturgical setting in which Jacob would have delivered this sermon. Jacob's discussion of temple destruction stressed Christ's humble supremacy over Satan and the importance of community solidarity entailed in the rejection of avarice and love for one's neighbour. Following the sermon, the congregation would have taken part in the kiss of peace where rich and poor would share the ritual enactment of forgiveness and love for one another.⁶¹ Jacob's plea to reject greed would have still hung in the air as he led his congregation in performing this rite. As sermon and ritual called the mighty to solidarity with the poor, the liturgy moved next to the Eucharist. Here the congregation memorialized the work of the incarnate Christ. The same humble victor who brought an end to the wicked idolatry with which Jacob began his *memra* offered his body and blood to all members of the Church in the elements of the liturgical meal.⁶² Christianization through moral transformation stands at the centre of this sermon, not Christianization through violent confrontation.

A comparison of *On the Fall of the Idols* and *On the Spectacles of the Theatre* further reinforces this interpretation. In the latter, where Jacob specifically took up the question of pagan survivals within society generally and the Church specifically, he never mentioned violence, let alone advocated it as a means of Christianization. The nature of the threat posed by the theatre might explain this fact. The offending stories denounced by Jacob all come from the Graeco-

⁶⁰ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 540–48.

⁶¹ Penn, *Kissing Christians*, pp. 26–56. See also Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, pp. 95–96.

⁶² Compare Jacob of Sarug, *memra* 103, in *Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, ed. by Bedjan, III, 847–51. Jacob attacks money-loving clergy who defile the sacraments through avarice and usury.

Roman tradition. The specific gods he associated with the cities of Edessa and Harran do not appear here at all. We know that these local cults existed alongside a set of Graeco-Roman beliefs with considerable influence.⁶³ Jacob's critique of the paganism of the theatre, however, ultimately falls upon the persistent cultural influence of Graeco-Roman *paideia* and its popular expression in the theatre. Perhaps one could argue that Jacob saw this as a watered-down paganism, something not worthy of violence but still worthy of condemnation. This possibility notwithstanding, it remains significant that Jacob focused on persuasion. He sought to convince his audience to agree with his preference for a thoroughly Christian set of cultural referents to replace those he insisted bore the taint of paganism. Once again, exhortation and persuasion mark his attempts at Christianization, rather than violence and coercion.

In this context it becomes clear that Jacob sought to call his audience to a level of Christian commitment and personal morality which he saw as flowing naturally from his Christological doctrine. This doctrine relates intimately to the foolishness, deception, and ultimately utter weakness of Satan and his idols when compared to Christ. Jacob offers their complete destruction in conjunction with his Crucifixion as evidence in support of his position. The significance for this particular *memra*, however, is that rather than advocating violence for the purpose of Christianizing the world outside the Church, Jacob aimed at the further Christianization of ethical norms within his own community. In doing so, Jacob knew that he made people uncomfortable. He even attempted to offer a defence of himself for this confrontational discourse. After claiming that he had no intention of discussing avarice, he tried to argue that his discussion of this sin came about almost by accident.

The subject of the *memra* drove me to this in the course of speaking, and whoever comprehends the point of the matter understands this. For I wanted to speak about the fall of the idols, but this discourse about the love of money, which is the real matter at hand, has compelled me. The idols are impotent and they are no longer worshipped, but the love of gold possesses the earth like a god.⁶⁴

Though Jacob rejected responsibility for the challenging message he brought, one cannot fail to note the facetious tone of this claim. The idea that he simply got carried away by his subject matter and moved unconsciously from discussing cult image to discussing idols held in the heart strains credibility. His very words give Jacob away, since the technical language of this poetry was

⁶³ Millar, 'Ethnic Identity in the Roman Near East', pp. 161–62.

⁶⁴ Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols*, lines 509–14.

very unlikely spontaneous. Rather Jacob carefully crafted the structure of this *memra* in advance leading to the conclusion that he intended to discuss the love of money as his real theme all along.

Conclusion

The connection between the description of religious violence contained in Jacob's *memra* and the practice or advocacy of such violence does not bear careful scrutiny. Jacob knew very well that the job of Christianizing society remained unfinished, even though the logic of this sermon throughout assumes that the influence of pagan cult had entirely disappeared. Had he sought to urge the violent completion of the project started by Christ, he would have preached a very different sermon. Rather, the logic of his *memra* assumed that his congregation had rejected idols. Jacob also assumed that whatever remained of pagan practice outside his congregation would be taken care of in due course.⁶⁵ That this by no means offered the only possible conclusion did not diminish his confidence in eventual Christian supremacy over paganism. However, the confidence of his opinion on this matter and the distasteful images of religious violence he used to assert it should not distract us from Jacob's keen observation which the subsequent history of Christianity bore out. Jacob saw that even with all the gains made by Christianity in many aspects of public and private life, the complete Christianization of the Church, as he understood what that meant, would demand continual vigilance and take longer than the marginalization of paganism and the ostensible Christianization of society. As such, Jacob's confidence in the inevitability of Christian triumph must not be confused in this context with the promotion of violence for the purpose of realizing that triumph. In fact, Jacob's rhetorical use of violence suggests something far more interesting than that. He emphasized the graphic nature of the religious violence he described in order to make a different point, a Christological point that aimed ultimately to impact his audience's understanding of charity and further the aims of Christianization within the believing community. The fact that he chose scenes of striking religious violence to make his Christological argument does highlight the real threat of religious violence in Jacob's world. However, it does so by providing the means for Jacob to create the tension that drives his homiletical appeal for Christian virtue. Jacob's *memra* comes no closer than

⁶⁵ Peter Brown argues that Jacob attempted to argue that the situation only called for a bit of 'mopping up' following the work Christ had done, even though he knew that paganism remained rather common. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred*, p. 118.

this to the actual religious violence which remained a feature of his society. His *memra* did not need to describe or advocate specific acts of violence for those acts to play a significant role. Rather his narrative of violence used that very real threat to animate his sermon and drive home an ethical imperative aimed at those within his congregation. In this way, Jacob's *On the Fall of the Idols* fits with persuasive and moral approaches to Christianization rather than the sensational narratives of violent Christianization which we have come to expect.

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