

# Singing women's stories in Syriac tradition

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## Singing Women's Stories in Syriac Tradition

Susan Ashbrook Harvey

### I

Syriac is a form of Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke.<sup>1</sup> It has been a language used by Christians in the eastern Mediterranean world from earliest Christian times until now. For many centuries, Syriac was the language of churches in the regions now known as Syria, eastern Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Iran, Iraq, northern India, and along the Silk Road as far as China. Today, because of grave problems afflicting the Middle East, many Syriac Christians live in diaspora communities in Europe, Scandinavia, North America, and Australia. Their churches continue to use Syriac in their liturgies and as the living language of their cultures.

Throughout its history, Syriac has been a language used by a minority culture, always under political domination by more powerful state cultures, and always in multilingual, multicultural societies.<sup>2</sup> For ancient Christianity, those larger cultures were Semitic and Hellenic in their longer histories. Ancient Christians knew them as Roman (both Greek and Latin) and Persian. Unlike other “minority” Christian languages of the ancient world, Syriac blossomed gloriously for a thousand years and more. Well into the Middle Ages, it was known for its brilliant literature and its scholarly greatness. It was able not only to receive influence from the dominant cultures in which it lived, but also to influence them in return. Especially famed for its exquisite poetry, Syriac has left a memorable contribution to Christian history. The voices of women – sung, imagined, and remembered – are part of what has made Syriac Christianity unusually distinctive.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Martin George for making the occasion for this paper both possible and inspiring; and to Heleen Murre-van den Berg for the excellence of her own contribution and her generous and warm support. My thanks are also due to the Faculty of Theology at Bern University and especially to Angela Berlis and Urs von Arx. I will use the following abbreviation: Jacob of Serug, Hom. = *Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug/ Homiliae Selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis*, ed. Paul Bedjan, 2nd ed. Sebastian P. Brock (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 6 vols.

<sup>2</sup> David G. K. Taylor, ‘Bilingualism and Diglossia in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia,’ in: *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Text*, ed. James N. Adams et alii (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 298–334.

Over the first thousand years of its existence, Syriac Christianity produced an impressive array of women saints and martyrs, some historical, some legendary. Their stories enriched the cultures and lives of Christians far from the local churches that venerated their memories. Figures such as Pelagia, the famous prostitute of Antioch, who repented and lived out her life disguised as a monk on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem; or Febronia, the wise and learned nun of Nisibis, wretchedly executed by pagan Romans, found their way into the calendars of saints for all the great churches of Christendom.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, at least until the eighth century, we have compelling evidence for the active engagement of Syriac women in civic and domestic religious life.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as far as we know, no texts written by women from the ancient or medieval periods survive in Syriac. Whether by intention or the accidents of history, women seem to have left no records by their own hands; or at least, none have survived of which we can be certain.

But this apparent silence is deceptive. For in many respects, Syriac Christianity presents us with a history filled with women's voices. Syriac hagiographies (stories of saints and martyrs) often presented holy women like Pelagia or Febronia as revered spiritual teachers and guides for both women and men, of every social or ecclesiastical rank: from the poor to the rich, and for lay people, clergy or monastics. We have poignant reminiscences from writers like John of Ephesus in the sixth century, or Martyrius (Sahdona) in the seventh century, of holy women who had great personal impact on these men and their own families.<sup>5</sup> Religions (like societies) can always accommodate the charismatic individual. More intriguing, therefore, is the importance ancient Syriac Christians granted to an altogether different kind of holy woman. For over its first one thousand years, Syriac Christianity granted notable prominence to the women of the Bible. We see this especially in the liturgical poetry so beautifully crafted by ancient and medieval Syriac poets, sung in hymns by choirs and congregations, and chanted in the lyrical poetic sermons intoned by priests or bishops.

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<sup>3</sup> Translations of these texts and others are collected in: Sebastian P. Brock and Susan A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Susan A. Harvey, 'Women's Service in Ancient Syriac Christianity,' in: *Kanon* 16 (2001), pp. 226–241.

<sup>5</sup> Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women* [see note 3], Mary and Euphemia, Susan (John of Ephesus), pp. 122–141; Shirin (Martyrius [Sahdona]), pp. 177–182.

In hymns and verse homilies, ancient Syriac poets remembered and retold biblical stories. Their writings featured a surprising number of biblical women as favored exemplars of faith. In addition to Eve and the Virgin Mary, Syriac poets considered women such as Sarah the wife of Abraham or Tamar the daughter-in-law of Judah, Jephthah's Daughter or Susanna; the Sinful Woman who wept at the feet of Christ, the Samaritan Woman at the well, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and others. In song and chanted sermon, Syriac poets explored these and other biblical characters (male as well as female) at great length and with vivid imagination. They imagined their thoughts and feelings, their conversations and struggles both externally, with other characters, and internally in their own consciences.

Hymns and verse homilies (poetic sermons) hence presented the Christian congregation with the imagined voices of biblical women, filling out their stories far beyond the actual biblical texts. Such imaginative presentation was a practice common for the time, and one that flourished in all the religions of the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup> In the presentation of biblical women, however, Syriac poets were distinctive among others in two respects. First, they tended to portray the women as the true heroes of biblical stories, even where the biblical texts did not do so and even when other familiar interpretive traditions favored presenting the women in weaker terms. Secondly, Syriac churches from the fourth century onwards cultivated the liturgical participation of women's choirs, which often sang hymns that voiced the stories and the imagined words of biblical women. Such presentation added a heightened performative quality to the remembrance of these women. How might we understand this distinctive Syriac tradition of singing women's stories?

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<sup>6</sup> Jewish and Christian liturgical poets wrote such explorations of biblical characters in a variety of languages. Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin all provide lively examples, and often with considerable interaction both linguistic and cultural, demonstrating shared traditions of biblical commentaries and interpretation. See now Ophir Münz-Manor, 'Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East: A Comparative Approach,' in: *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1:3 (2010).

## II

In their establishment of women's liturgical choirs, Syriac churches seem to have been unusual and even unique among ancient Christians. During the fourth century, the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire led to rapid expansion of congregations as well as to increasingly elaborate liturgical celebrations. Choirs were part of the elaboration, although congregational singing continued to be important.<sup>7</sup> In Greek and Latin churches, however, women were often frankly discouraged even from congregational singing.<sup>8</sup> Choirs of nuns sang in the services of their convents, of course. They also sang at the celebrations of city cathedrals for important feast days (such as Easter), or for important funerals or saints festivals, at shrines or pilgrimage sites.<sup>9</sup> But their presence and participation was the mark of an exceptional occasion.

In the Syriac churches, by contrast, women's choirs emerged in local civic churches during the fourth century, when the hymns of Ephrem Syrus now and then made mention of their singing or even addressed them directly.<sup>10</sup> By the early fifth century, these choirs appear to have been standard in the local Syriac churches of town and countryside in both Roman and Persian territory. Church canon collections in both the West and East Syriac churches mandate their liturgical presence and regulate their participation. Comprised of consecrated virgins, these choirs continued into the medieval period.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent silence of sources does

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen G. Wilson, 'Early Christian Music,' in: *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder*, ed. Julian V. Hills (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), pp. 390–401.

<sup>8</sup> Johannes Quasten, 'The Liturgical Singing of Women in Christian Antiquity,' in: *Catholic Historical Review* 27 (1941), pp. 149–165; idem, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983), pp. 75–86.

<sup>9</sup> See the texts conveniently collected in: James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), e.g. pp. 73–74 (Gregory of Nyssa from the *Life of Macrina*, on the singing at her funeral); pp. 104–105 (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.19.1–4 on a convent choir in Antioch); pp. 112–117 (Egeria on the Jerusalem choirs); pp. 141–143 (Jerome on the nuns in Jerusalem).

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Ephrem, *Hymns on Nativity* 4:62b–63, 22:N23; Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 94, 183.

<sup>11</sup> See Susan A. Harvey, 'Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant: Women's Choirs and Sacred Song in Ancient Syriac Christianity,' in: *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 8.2 (July 2005) [<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol8No2/HV8N-2Harvey.html>]; eadem, 'Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition,' in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001), pp. 105–131.

not necessarily indicate their demise, however. The tradition remains a living one to this day. Syriac churches in the Middle East, Europe, and North America continue to utilize women's choirs in their liturgies and religious celebrations with great pride.

Sixth-century sources claim that St. Ephrem himself had founded the women's choirs, specifically to counteract the false teachings of heretics (who, in Syriac tradition, sang enticing hymns).<sup>12</sup> In fact, Syriac church canons of the fifth century and later designate that women's choirs were to sing the doctrinal hymns known as *madrashe*. These were stanzaic hymns of different meters, punctuated with a short refrain, through which the basic precepts of right faith were taught. They presented the major biblical stories about Jesus, his birth, ministry, passion and resurrection; stories about the Virgin Mary in relation to those events; or Old Testament stories that foretold or prefigured the work of Christ or the events with his mother. They taught Bible in terms that exemplified the theological understandings of the church.

In other words, when Syriac women's choirs sang their assigned hymns, they fulfilled a primary teaching ministry for the church. Deaconesses and nuns were also consecrated women who provided instruction for women in the Christian community. However, theirs was a ministry by women, for women.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the Syriac women's choirs performed their teaching task in the regular worship services of the church, in front of the entire population: at morning and evening offices, Sunday liturgies, and feast days. Jacob of Serug remarked on the unusual authority this granted to their singing: "Behold, the gatherings of the glorious (church) resound with their melodies," he extolled with wonder, "A new sight of women uttering the proclamation;/ and behold, they are called teachers among the congregations." Addressing the choir directly, he then declared,

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph P. Amar, 'A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Serug,' in: *Patrologia Orientalis* 47 (1995), pp. 5–76; idem, *The Syriac 'Vita' Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1988). See also Kathleen McVey, 'Ephrem the Kitharode and Proponent of Women: Jacob of Serug's Portrait of a Fourth-Century Churchman for the Sixth Century Viewer and its Significance for the Twenty-first Century Ecumenist,' in: *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology*, ed. Steven T. Kimbrough (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), pp. 229–253.

<sup>13</sup> See Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).

“Your teaching signifies an entirely new world; for yonder in the kingdom [of heaven], men and women are equal.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus the choirs taught more than the words they sang. They also taught by their performance as women. By their voices alone they heightened the gendered aspects of the stories they sang. For example, hymns for the feast of the Nativity often included verses representing the thoughts or words of the Virgin Mary as she marveled at the miraculous birth of her son; or they were sung as the lullabies of Mary to the newborn Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Sung by women’s choirs, these verses brought Mary’s voice into the midst of the church’s festive gathering with vivid if solemn immediacy.<sup>16</sup>

A favorite form of *madrashe* were the *soghyatha*, dialogue poems sung antiphonally by male and female choirs. Dialogue hymns often retold biblical stories through the voices of two characters in alternating verses.<sup>17</sup> The women’s choir could sing the part of the biblical woman, lending an element of drama (albeit, ritually formalized). In Syriac dialogue hymns, biblical men and women generally represented the conflict between faith and rationality. An example is the dialogue hymn between the Virgin Mary and Joseph, which tells the story of Joseph’s doubts about her pregnancy (Mt 1:18–22). Joseph’s verses argue in righteous anger and rigid judgment, refusing to believe Mary’s insistence on the divine miracle of her conception. Mary’s verses argue back that God makes possible what appears impossible to us.

Another is the dialogue hymn between the Sinful Woman and Satan, set at the point of her departure for the house of Simon the Pharisee where she will anoint the feet of Christ (Lk 7:38–50). In the hymn, Satan tries to discourage the Woman, upbraiding her for her immoral condition, claiming that Jesus will reject her, or that the twelve disciples will try to kill her

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob of Serug, Hom. Mar Ephrem, vv. 41–42; Amar, ‘Metrical Homily’ [see note 12], p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ephrem called his hymns on the Nativity “lullabies”; see McVey, *Ephrem* [see note 10], p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Nativity* 15:5; McVey, *Ephrem* [see note 10], p. 146.

<sup>17</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, ‘Dramatic Dialogue Poems,’ in: *Symposium Syriacum IV*, ed. Han J.W. Drijvers et alii, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 229 (Rome, 1987), pp. 135–147; idem, ‘Syriac Dispute Poems: The Various Types,’ in: *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literature*, ed. Gerritt J. Reinink and Herman L.J. Vanstiphout, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 42 (Leuven: Peeters, 1991), pp. 109–120.

for her impudence. But the Woman, in turn, insists with perfect faith that her Lord and Savior will receive her with mercy and compassion, and will render her holy.

Similarly poignant exchanges are presented in the dramatic narratives of Syriac verse homilies (*mimre*), chanted by priests or bishops.<sup>18</sup> In these poetic presentations, characters such as Sarah and Abraham or the Sinful Woman and Simon the Pharisee argue back and forth between the deceitful or blind obstinacy of social habit (the male characters) and the radiant power of faith (the female characters). Voiced by the presiding male authorities of the church, these homilies added gendered complexity to the stories they told. For they paradoxically affirmed the striking portrayal of biblical women that Syriac poets favored and Syriac women's choirs underscored by their liturgical participation. Gendered voices, real and imagined, played an important role in the instructional capacity of Syriac liturgy.

### III

Biblical women and women's choirs both came to prominence at the same historical moment, the time period of late antiquity (4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). During this period, Christianity grew rapidly and dramatically in numbers, wealth, and importance. Church officials found it necessary to teach large numbers of converts in an era when books were rare and few people could afford their own Bible. In this historical context, the liturgy became the church's school. Liturgical services included multiple readings from Scripture – in Syriac, as many as fifteen different readings in a service!<sup>19</sup> –, while homilies explicated and interpreted those readings. Hymns retold the stories, expressed their proper meanings, and portrayed the glories of Christian sacred history. The stories of biblical women, as of saints and martyrs, were part and parcel of this larger task.

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<sup>18</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, 'Dramatic Narrative Poems on Biblical Topics in Syriac,' in: *Studia Patristica* 45, ed. Jane R. Baun et alii (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), pp. 183–196.

<sup>19</sup> Francis C. Burkitt, 'The Early Syriac Lectionary System,' in: *Proceedings of the British Academy* 10 (1923), pp. 301–338.

Nor was the congregation's role passive. Liturgy was a form of ritual practice in which each participant had a designated and necessary role to play.<sup>20</sup> The congregation was to receive the church's teachings as the very Word of God. In turn, they offered their prayers, responses sung to the litanies, refrains sung to the hymns of the choir, processions, prostrations, and holy gestures (the sign of the cross, the kiss of peace). Their worship included the active learning of biblical teaching. More than simply learning the stories, this meant taking biblical characters as exemplars for Christian virtues and vices, to be imitated by men and women in the course of their daily lives. It meant understanding biblical stories typologically, as offering models for different forms of the life of faith. It meant believing that their lives, too, were an essential part of salvation history as God had planned it for the redemption of the human race.

Hence when Jacob of Serug summoned laypeople to the liturgy, he drew attention to the teaching of the choirs:

Pay heed to the hymns (sung) by the virgins with glorious voices  
that the Wisdom of the Most High has given to the congregations.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere, he spoke of the churches filled with "the pure voices of pious women", whose singing made "a joyful sound", "a serene sound" that filled the gatherings of the churches.<sup>22</sup> As he admonished, the beauty of their singing was not mere adornment to the worship process. Rather, it bespoke the universal truth of the Gospel message:

The voice of men singing glory with their tongues,  
the voice of women exalting him with their hymns.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I am strongly influenced by my reading of Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); see also Richard McCall, *Do This: Liturgy as Performance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). On the importance of giving the women's choir due attention, in particular, see Teresa Berger, *Women's Ways of Worship: Gender Analysis and Liturgical History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Jacob of Serug, 'Homily on the Partaking of the Holy Mysteries,' trans. Amir Harrak (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), ll. 131–132, at p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Jacob of Serug, Hom. Mar Ephrem, vv. 101, 59, 99, respectively; Amar, 'Metrical Homily' [see note 12], pp. 49, 39, 49.

<sup>23</sup> The couplet quoted begins a lengthy enumeration by Jacob of all the different human voices celebrating God's glory. *Adv. Iud.* 7:529–542, ed. and trans. Micheline Albert, 'Jacques de Saroug, Homélie contre les Juifs,' in: *Patrologia Orientalis* 38 (1976), pp. 216–217.

In late antiquity, then, liturgy was the place of Christian instruction and the means for its realization. While worship could be performed anywhere – at home, in church, at a shrine, in a monastery – yet late antique Christianity was governed by a strong commitment to liturgy in the public, civic domain. This has not always been the case for Christian churches. For ancient Christians, however, such an historical and ritual context meant that stories of holy women – women of the Bible, as well as saints and martyrs – were taught routinely to the gathered public male and female, and with great ritual authority. They were taught by bishops and priests in the voices and authorities of an ordained male clergy; and in Syriac liturgies (if not others), they were taught by women's choirs in female voices not only consecrated for the task, but canonically required for its fulfillment.

#### IV

Ephrem was another who called attention to the sound of women's singing in the liturgy: "the recesses of our ears are filled/ with the musical strains of virgins."<sup>24</sup> For him, women's choirs and the stories of biblical women they sang presented liturgical moments of notable celebration. The reason, he claimed, was that women's voices – and indeed their very history – signaled with acute clarity the fullness of God's salvific plan.

Let chaste women praise that pure Mary,  
Since in their mother Eve their disgrace was great,  
behold in Mary their sister their triumph was magnified.  
Blessed is He who shone forth from them!<sup>25</sup>

Ephrem was not alone in this view. The notion that women as a whole were imaged by the typology of Eve and Mary was commonplace in Syriac liturgical poetry, in terms that both acclaimed the work of women in God's providential plan and also called for women's voices as the singular mark of God's honor. Because of Eve, the logic went, women had earned a place of scorn throughout creation. But Mary's acceptance of God's call undid what Eve had done, raising women to a place of unique glory. In the words of one anonymous hymn:

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<sup>24</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Easter* 7:8, trans. Sidney Griffith in: McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* [see note 9], p. 93.

<sup>25</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Nativity* 22:N23; McVey, *Ephrem* [see note 10], p. 183.

In Mary there has come hope for the female sex:  
from the insults they have heard and the shame they have felt  
she has given them freedom; they are no longer subject to blame.

All married women today find joy,  
for like them she has borne the Fruit  
which has given to their own children life. Praise to His sender!<sup>26</sup>

The typology of Mary as the Second Eve followed from the paradigm suggested in Paul's reference to Christ as the Second Adam.<sup>27</sup> In the words of one Syriac hymn writer:

Two virgins have there been for humanity,  
one the source of life, the other the cause of death:  
in Eve death arose, but Life shone out through Mary.<sup>28</sup>

Because Eve had received the serpent in the Garden of Eden, at the moment of God's new creation, it must again be a woman who made a choice for all humankind. Another hymn explained:

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 man  
was appointed to repay the debt.  
Eve had incurred a debt to God,  
she had listened to the snake's advice:  
a young girl – only one day old – she had spurned God's command,  
and for this very reason it was through a young girl  
that salvation was sent to the world.<sup>29</sup>

For Syriac writers, the moment when Mary voiced her acceptance of God's call was the moment that changed humanity's condition. By her word, Mary repaid the debt Eve had incurred. Because Mary then glorified

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<sup>26</sup> Anon., Hymns on Mary 2:10–11; Sebastian P. Brock, *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Kottayam, Kerala: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994), p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Murray, 'Mary, the Second Eve in the Early Syriac Fathers,' in: *Eastern Christian Review* 3.4 (1971), pp. 372–384.

<sup>28</sup> Anon., Hymns on Mary 2:8; Brock, *Bride* [see note 26], p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Hymns on Mary, second series, 2:9–10; Brock, *Bride* [see note 26], p. 90.

her Lord in song with the Magnificat (Lk 1:46–55), so, too, was Eve called to sing her gladness. And thus, according to an anonymous hymnographer, did the women's choir sing in Mary's voice:

(Mary speaks) 'Let Eve, our aged mother, now hear and come as I speak;  
let her head, once bowed in her naked state  
in the Garden, be raised up.

'Let her reveal her face and sing to You,  
for shamefacedness has passed away in You;  
let her hear the message full of peace,  
for her daughter has repaid her debt.'<sup>30</sup>

In Syriac liturgy, then, the women's choir stood in Mary's place; it sang in Mary's voice. Just as the silence of Eve was replaced by Mary's voice – by Mary's song! – so, too, should the silence of women be changed to songs of praise. In this way, Jacob of Serug imagined Ephrem himself had invited women to become a choir:

Your silent mouth which your mother Eve closed,  
is now opened by Mary, your sister, to sing praise.

...

Until now, your gender was brought low because of Eve;  
but from now on, it is restored by Mary to sing Alleluia!<sup>31</sup>

Patristic writers often called for women to keep silence because Eve's words had led Adam astray in Eden. In Syriac liturgies, by contrast, the voices of women gave proof that Mary had reversed the power of women's word.

The typology of the choir as Mary's voice was carried further when Syriac poets reflected on the liturgy overall. Hence Jacob of Serug could celebrate the whole congregation in typological terms, each part validated by a different aspect of Christ's saving incarnation. Because Christ was the Ancient of Days, the elderly now come to sing praise. Because God became a child, children now offer their hosannas. Because Christ had a mother, mothers bring their husbands and babies. So, too, the choirs of virgins:

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<sup>30</sup> Anon., *Sogitha* 2:19–20; Brock, *Bride* [see note 26], pp. 77–78.

<sup>31</sup> Jacob of Serug, *Hom. on Ephrem*, vv. 108, 111; Amar, 'Metrical Homily' [see note 12], pp. 51–53.

A virgin conceived you, and so let the company of virgins be aroused;  
let them stir up praise with wonder to your Father on account of you.<sup>32</sup>

The whole of creation was called to sing praise, because each person and each part had a biblical counterpart in God's divine dispensation.

Herein lay the significance not only of the women's choirs, but of the women's stories they sang. As noted above, in late antiquity the liturgy was used above all as a place and a means for teaching Bible. Nor was the biblical instruction of the liturgical assembly like that of learned schools where the great commentators of the patristic era taught their students. In the liturgy everyone was present and hence, everyone could be taught. Indeed, as Jacob of Serug had indicated, there were stories for every gender, age, and social rank. And biblical stories were liturgically presented in just that way: as stories providing models by which people should order their lives. Biblical characters male and female were offered as models of virtues and vices. They were types through which to understand social roles or cultural conventions. Because women were part of the congregation, women's stories were important.<sup>33</sup>

In liturgy, biblical women were often clustered in types to demonstrate virtues or vices. Sarah the mother of Isaac, Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel, and Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist were types of the Barren Woman whose belated fruitfulness fulfilled divine promise.<sup>34</sup> The Widow of Sarepta demonstrated (humorously!) the obstinacy of righteous faith.<sup>35</sup>

The courageous outsider who declares true faith was imaged by the

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<sup>32</sup> The whole passage is from Jacob's Festal Homily 3 (On Nativity 3), Thomas Kollamparampil, *Jacob of Serugh: Select Festal Homilies* (Rome: Center for Indian and Inter-religious Studies, 1997), pp. 111–112; compare the same homily at its conclusion on p. 126, lines 342–371. In the same volume, see also Jacob's Festal Homily 4 (On Nativity 4), p. 135, and his Festal Homily 10 (On the Sunday of the Hosannas), pp. 259–260, lines 275–304.

<sup>33</sup> Consider Jacob of Serug on the presence at liturgy of women servants or widows instead of men, as well as his concern to address women directly: Hugh Connolly, 'A Homily of Mar Jacob of Serugh on the Memorial of the Departed and on the Eucharistic Loaf,' in: *Downside Review* 29, n.s.10 (1910), pp. 260–286.

<sup>34</sup> E.g. Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 15:1 (Elizabeth), 22:14–8 (Sarah, Elizabeth, Hanna); McVey, *Ephrem* [see note 10], pp. 325, 358–359.

<sup>35</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, 'A Syriac Verse Homily on Elijah and the Widow of Sarepta,' in: *Le Muséon* 102 (1989), pp. 93–113.

Samaritan Woman, the Canaanite Woman, or Pilate's wife.<sup>36</sup> Or again, that courage was shown through the righteous gentiles of the Old Testament Tamar the daughter-in-law of Judah, Ruth, or even Potiphar's Wife, who in Syriac was sometimes portrayed as repenting of her wrong-doing against Joseph and leading her husband to seek forgiveness and mercy.<sup>37</sup> Women were models for the power of faith to perform miracles in the stories of the Hemorrhaging Woman or the Widow of Nain.<sup>38</sup> Women demonstrated the perfection of discipleship in the stories of Mary and Martha of Bethany.<sup>39</sup> In stories of righteous women who suffered unjust persecution, women provided models of Christ himself – a typology Syriac writers did not fail to draw in their presentations of Tamar the daughter-in-law of Judah, Jephthah's Daughter, Susanna, or the Maccabean Mother.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 22:5-10; 23; 26:9, 14-15; 34:5-7; McVey, *Ephrem* [see note 10], pp. 356-357, 361-363, 379-381, 412-413.

<sup>37</sup> See Susan A. Harvey, 'Holy Impudence, Sacred Desire: The Women of Matthew 1:16 in Syriac Tradition,' in: *"If These Stones Could Speak...": Essays in Honor of Dennis Edward Groh*, ed. George Kalantzis and Thomas F. Martin (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), pp. 29-50. For Potiphar's wife, this revision is present in brief in Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*, sec. 35.7-9, in: Edward G. Mathews and Joseph P. Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, Fathers of the Church 91 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), pp. 67-205, at pp. 187-188. Its variations and expansions are treated in Kristian Heal, *Tradition and Transformation: Genesis 37 and 39 in Early Syriac Sources* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham 2006), pp. 235-257. For the more familiar view of the wife as the consummate temptress, see Sebastian P. Brock, 'Joseph and Potiphar's Wife (Genesis 39): Two Anonymous Dispute Poems,' in *Syriac Polemics: Studies in Honour of Gerrit Jan Reinink*, ed. Wout J. van Bakkum et alii (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 41-58.

<sup>38</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 26:6,10; 33:4-5; 34:1-3; McVey, *Ephrem* [see note 10], pp. 378, 380, 408, 411-412.

<sup>39</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 24:7-8; 26:2-3; 35:8-9; McVey, *Ephrem* [see note 10], pp. 367, 377, 418.

<sup>40</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 2:10-12, McVey, *Ephrem* [see note 10], pp. 268-269 (Susanna and Jephthah's Daughter); Sebastian P. Brock, 'Jacob of Serugh's Verse Homily on Tamar (Gen. 38),' in: *Le Muséon* 115 (2002), pp. 279-315; Jacob of Serug, Hom. 159, 'On Jephthah's Daughter,' vol. 5, pp. 306-330; trans. Susan A. Harvey and Ophir Münz-Manor (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010). See also Catherine Brown Tkacz, 'Women as types of Christ: Susanna and Jephthah's Daughter,' in: *Gregorianum* 85 (2004), pp. 278-311; and on the Maccabean mother in Syriac, Witold Witakowski, 'Mart(y) Shmuni, the Mother of the Maccabean Martyrs in Syriac Tradition,' in: *VI Symposium Syriacum 1992*, ed. René Lavenant, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 247 (Rome 1994), pp. 153-168.

Gender itself played an important role in how Syriac poets told these stories, whether through the verse homilies of bishops or priests, or the hymns sung by women's choirs. The accounts never failed to express astonishment that women could offer such perfect witness. For Christian writers, Eve provided the ever-present reminder that women's social and cultural status of inferiority to men was in fact a result of their weaker nature from the time of Creation. As a didactic strategy, the emphasis on women's weakness encouraged all people – men as well as women, children as well as adults – to believe that anyone and everyone had the capacity for such virtue. At the same time, the stress on gender highlighted the greatness of women's witness throughout the biblical past, and into the liturgical present of the congregation.

Syriac dialogue hymns articulated these contradictory messages in no uncertain terms. Sometimes the effect was humorous. In a dialogue hymn between Mary and Gabriel, the archangel grows increasingly frustrated by Mary's insistent questioning and refusal to accept his message without explanation. His verses declare his dismay, as he admonishes her over the course of their antiphonal exchange, "Do not answer back disputing this", or "It is appropriate that you should keep silence, and have faith too", or "Accept my words", or "Do not ask how".<sup>41</sup>

In a dialogue hymn between Mary and the Gardner, Mary spars unwittingly with her resurrected son whom she does not recognize.<sup>42</sup> While the Gardener (Christ) attempts to fend off her queries, Mary remains determined in her faith and continues to badger as the Gardner exclaims, "How you weary me with your talk/ how you vex me with what you say!"<sup>43</sup> But her perseverance soon yields his divine revelation. A verse homily on Elijah and the Widow of Sarepta recounts a similar holy exasperation, as the Widow finally succeeds in eliciting Elijah's miraculous powers – which, in the homily, even God had failed to do!<sup>44</sup>

The dialogic exchanges chanted in Syriac verse homilies or sung by choirs thus make use of common social conventions regarding women's appropriate behavior. In doing so, they blurred the line between biblical past and cultural present. Indeed, the work of religious ritual enables such

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<sup>41</sup> 'Mary and the Angel,' vv. 21, 25, 29, 33; Brock, *Bride* [see note 26], pp. 112–118.

<sup>42</sup> In Syriac tradition, the events of John 20 refer to Mary the mother of Christ, not Mary Magdalene.

<sup>43</sup> 'Mary and the Gardner,' v. 13; Brock, *Bride* [see note 26], p. 134.

<sup>44</sup> Brock, 'Elijah and the Widow of Sarepta' [see note 35].

interplay between sacred story (myth) and historical moment. By such didactic tools were people encouraged to take ideal models into their own lives.

One type of biblical woman received particular attention from Syriac liturgical poets: the sexually scandalous woman of perfect faith. Her renderings are indicative of the degree to which ritual, ritual performance, and moral exhortation negotiated social conventions and stereotypes regarding gender.

For the holy woman of scandal, Syriac poets utilized imagery of holy impudence, boldness, or brazen confidence to celebrate figures such as Tamar the daughter-in-law of Judah, Rahab the prostitute of Jericho, Ruth the Moabite, Leah, Rebecca and Rachel.<sup>45</sup> These were the mothers of the messianic genealogy, women whose pregnancies licit or illicit continued the messianic lineage until it bore fruit from Mary, herself the subject of scandal and doubt for those who did not believe in the virgin birth. In the hands of Ephrem or Jacob of Serug, these women were models of perfect faith, willing to undertake God's will even if it meant overturning every social convention or the authority of men. Their actions were vindicated, even rendered holy, by their fulfillment of God's purpose. For Ephrem and Jacob, the women's choirs represented a similar type, in that their liturgical singing appeared scandalous to society even as they sang, and represented fulfilled, God's glory.<sup>46</sup>

Also imaging holy impudence was the penitent harlot whose depth of compunction and contrition absolved her of every impiety. The image was archetypal for both Judaism and Christianity, rooted in imagery from the Hebrew Bible of Israel's unfaithfulness ("harlotry") to God and her redemption as bride of her Heavenly Bridegroom. Syriac poets sometimes portrayed Rahab in these terms, but their favorite such figure was the Sinful Woman of Luke 7:38–50. Similarly to other Christian traditions, Syriac writers dwelt on her as the model every Christian should seek to follow: a model of perpetual self-examination and penance, of holy tears, of

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<sup>45</sup> See Harvey, 'Holy Impudence' [see note 37].

<sup>46</sup> Ephrem makes this explicit e.g. in *Hymns on Nativity* 12 and 15; McVey, *Ephrem* [see note 10], pp. 133–135, 145–147. McVey has convincingly argued that the contested status of the women's choirs is what accounts for the Jacob of Serug's prolonged attention to the topic in his panegyrical homily on Ephrem; see McVey, 'Ephrem the Kitharode' [see note 12].

self-abasement in sorrow for one's sinful condition.<sup>47</sup> Ephrem and Jacob of Serug dramatically cast the Sinful Woman in priestly terms. Both portrayed her with bold sacramental imagery, bringing her offerings of fragrant oil, tears, and holy kisses reverently to her Lord, offering the pure sacrifice of her prayer. In return, Christ rendered her healed, whole, and holy – reward for her brazen faith in daring to approach him, despite her sinful state.<sup>48</sup>

The penitent harlot was also widely popular as a hagiographical motif.<sup>49</sup> The Syriac hagiography of Pelagia the courtesan of Antioch shows considerable influence from liturgical portrayals of the Sinful Woman. Similarly, two rare Syriac hymns survive about women saints, one for Mary, the Niece of Abraham of Qidun,<sup>50</sup> and the other a dialogue hymn between Marina and Satan.<sup>51</sup> Mary is cast both by imagery and by explicit statement in the mold of the Sinful Woman weeping at the feet of Christ:

Answer me, my Savior, as you did that Sinful Woman;  
receive my tears as you did hers, O Lord.<sup>52</sup>

In the hymn about Marina and Satan, the saint argues with Satan very much as the Sinful Woman of the dialogue hymns did, displaying the holy impudence of perfect faith. One exchange, again, raises echoes of gendered social conventions:

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<sup>47</sup> Consider the sense of personal identification in an exquisite liturgical prayer attributed to Ephrem, cited in Jean Gribomont, 'La Tradition liturgique des Hymnes Pascales de S. Éphrem,' in: *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973), pp. 191–246, at p. 219.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., Ephrem, 'Homily on Our Lord,' in: Mathews and Amar, *Ephrem: Selected Prose* [see note 37], pp. 273–334; and Jacob of Serug, Hom. 51, 'On the Sinful Woman,' vol. 2:401–428; trans. Scott Johnson, 'The Sinful Woman: A Memra by Jacob of Serugh,' in: *Sobornost/Eastern Church Review* 24 (2002), pp. 56–88.

<sup>49</sup> E.g., Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987).

<sup>50</sup> Anon., 'Lament of Mary, Niece of Abraham of Qidun,' trans. Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women* [see note 3], pp. 37–39.

<sup>51</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, 'St. Marina and Satan: A Syriac Dialogue Poem,' in: *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 5 (2008), pp. 35–57.

<sup>52</sup> 'Lament of Mary' [see note 50], p. 39.

Satan: It is pride that women love, and boasting is in their heart  
but in a little while they grow weak and are defeated: then tears start  
coming, flowing from their eyes.

Marina: Yes, women love pride – as you have said in your pride;  
but they are humble before their Lord, while it is you and your pride  
they will trample down.<sup>53</sup>

Syriac writers occasionally made a point of naming the various biblical women who provided negative models: those who had undermined God's course or the good efforts of holy men. Eve, Potiphar's Wife, Delilah, Jezebel, the daughter of Herodias and others were sometimes listed in such terms, and notorious as exemplars of women's deceitful nature.<sup>54</sup> Far more common, however, and far more liturgically influential, were the familiar names of biblical holy women such as I have discussed here. Syriac churches both west and east have preserved, and continue to use in various worship services, hymns and readings that provide long lists of such biblical women, all venerated for their perfection of faith and holy witness.<sup>55</sup>

Ephrem and Jacob of Serug both celebrated the gathering of the church in worship as a living icon of God's kingdom on earth. For the liturgy to be properly celebrated, the entire church was needed. Bishops, rulers, clergy, choirs male and female, the laity – men, women, and children – each had a place, a role, a purpose, without which the work of the worship ser-

<sup>53</sup> Brock, 'St. Marina and Satan' [see note 51], vv. 39, 40, at p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> Most famous among scholars are the lists in Aphrahat's Demonstration 6, 'On the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant', sec. 2–3, trans. John Gwynn, in: *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* II/13 (Oxford: Parker, 1898), pp. 362–375, at p. 365; and Narsai's notorious *memra* translated by Corrie Molenberg, 'Narsai's Memra on the reproof of Eve's daughters and the "tricks and devices" they perform,' in: *Le Muséon* 106 (1993), pp. 65–87.

<sup>55</sup> The most outstanding example is a hymn from the Church of the East, listing at least thirty-nine biblical women, and a roughly equal number of women saints and martyrs. Jean-Maurice Fiey, 'Une hymne nestorienne sur les saintes femmes,' in: *Analecta Bollandiana* 84 (1966), pp. 77–110. See also idem, 'Diptyques Nestoriens du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle,' in: *Analecta Bollandiana* 81 (1963), pp. 371–413. For the west Syriac tradition of the Book of Life, see R. Hugh Connolly, 'The Book of Life,' in: *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1912), pp. 580–594; Andrew Palmer, 'The Book of Life in the Syriac Liturgy: An Instrument of Social and Spiritual Survival,' in: *The Harp* 4 (1991), pp. 161–171.

vice could not be fulfilled. Both writers gloried in descriptions of the church assembled in just such array, in which the voices of women are noted and revered.<sup>56</sup>

But Jacob took the point and purpose of the women's choirs even further. For him, the singing of women was more than a typological image of humanity redeemed, the silence of Eve replaced by the voice of Mary. It was more than a glimpse of Heaven's fullness, a foretaste of the equality of men and women in the presence of God. Ultimately, as Jacob argued, women's choirs gave proof to the power of the sacraments themselves. As Jacob explained, Christians one and all received the same baptism, drank from the same chalice, partook of the same bread. One and the same salvation was true for all. What better way to image forth the redemption of humankind than for every voice, with consecrated authority, to sing the sacred history by which salvation had come to pass? Thus did Jacob imagine Ephrem had exhorted women:

Uncover your faces to sing praise without shame  
to the One who granted you freedom of speech by his birth.<sup>57</sup>

Without women's stories, without women's voices, the work of God was incomplete. Here was the lesson Syriac women's choirs taught as they sang their "sweet melodies." Whether in time or eternity, the witness of men was not enough. Women, too, must be heard.

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<sup>56</sup> E.g., Ephrem, *Hymns on Easter* 7:7–9, trans. Sidney Griffith in: McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* [see note 24], p. 93–94; Jacob of Serug, *Adv. Iud.* 7:529–542, in: Albert, 'Jacques de Saroug, Homélies contre les Juifs' [see note 23], pp. 216–217.

<sup>57</sup> Jacob of Serug, *Hom. on Ephrem*, v. 113; Amar, 'Metrical Homily' [see note 12], p. 53.

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### *Deutsche Zusammenfassung*

Das syrische Christentum unterschied sich von den anderen Kirchen des Altertums durch die Existenz von liturgischen Frauenchören. Im vierten Jahrhundert entstanden, sind sie auch heute noch eine lebendige syrische Tradition. Ihre Aufgabe war es, in den täglichen Gottesdiensten, in der sonntäglichen Liturgie und an Festtagen Lieder mit Themen zur Glaubenslehre zu singen. Dadurch übten sie ein äusserst wichtiges Lehramt aus, das nicht auf Frauen beschränkt blieb (wie im Fall der Diakoninnen), sondern sich an die ganze Gemeinde, Männer und Frauen, richtete. Im Unterschied dazu haben die Kirchen des griechischen und lateinischen Christentums Frauen, abgesehen von Ausnahmen, vom Singen abgehalten.

In der Zeit zwischen dem vierten und dem siebten Jahrhundert waren syrische Dichter liturgischer Texte besonders darauf bedacht, in ihren Liedern und strophenförmigen Homilien die Geschichten biblischer Frauen in lebhaften und kraftvollen Porträts nachzuerzählen, auch wenn diese sich vom ursprünglichen biblischen Bild entfernten. Die von Frauenchören gesungenen Lieder enthielten oft Reden und Gedanken, die biblischen Frauen wie der Jungfrau Maria, der Grossen Sünderin oder anderen in den Mund gelegt wurden. Die geschlechtsbezogene Darbietung erhöhte noch ihren Stellenwert. Syrische Dichter priesen die Frauenchöre für ihre typologische, ekklesiologische und soteriologische Bedeutung.